

# New petition seeks to save elephants, end ivory importation in US

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Recent genomic research has prompted a petition that calls for the reclassification of African elephants from one threatened species to two endangered species to protect both from imminent extinction. Credit: US Fish and Wildlife Service National Digital Library.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has 90 days to respond to a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity at <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org>, a public interest environmental organization dedicated to the protection of native species and their habitats. The Center requests that the FWS recognize the forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) and savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) and list both species as endangered.

"The time for governments and conservation agencies to recognize two species of elephant in Africa is long past due, especially given that the African forest elephant is fast approaching extinction," said University of Illinois Animal Sciences Professor Alfred Roca, who authored many of the research studies cited in the petition. Roca is also affiliated with the Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology at Illinois.

For the second time in the past century, ivory demand has led to more poaching and a decline in African elephant populations. Today, the death rates of both species exceed birth rates. The difference is especially staggering for forest elephants that live where poaching is heaviest; they have lost 80 percent of their population in just two generations.

Right now, some could argue, the plight of the forest elephants is overlooked because the savannah elephant population is comparatively more stable. By recognizing two species, nations and conservationists can evaluate changes in populations and address the unique threats and needs of each.

About 15 years of genetic analyses by Roca and other experts support this petition. Scientists have definitely shown the existence of two

species, which are as genetically distinct as Asian elephants are from woolly mammoths. The two species of African elephants differ in their habitats, diet, vocalizations and size of social groups.

"There's now no question that African elephants are two distinct species that should be managed according to their distinct needs," said Tara Easter, a scientist at the Center said in a news release. "Both forest elephants and savannah elephants are vanishing quickly, so we must give them the stronger protections provided by endangered status or risk losing these intelligent and magnificent animals forever."

Classifying African [elephants](#) as threatened creates a regulatory loophole, allowing the U.S. to import some ivory and elephant parts that may have been sourced illegally. The U.S. has one of the largest domestic ivory markets but lacks internal mechanisms to ensure elephant products are from legal sources.

Reclassifying the two [species](#) as endangered would help stop illegal imports. It would also provide additional funding for [elephant conservation](#) and bring national and international attention to the current elephant crisis.

**More information:** [www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/petition/Petition\\_Petition.pdf](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/petition/Petition_Petition.pdf)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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