

African leaders call on EU to shut ivory trade

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The savannah elephant population is down to about 352,000 from 1.3 million in 1979

Thirty-two African countries on Friday called on the European Union to stop its ivory trade at a conference in Botswana aimed at saving African elephants.

Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Ali Bongo of Gabon and host Ian Khama of Botswana wrote a petition along with representatives of 29 other countries calling on the "EU to close its [ivory](#) market".

According to global advocacy group Avaaz, the EU is the world's biggest exporter of legal ivory but that is thought to fuel poaching.

There is a huge demand for ivory in Asia, notably in China.

"What we see is that Europe has become both a destination and transit hub for [illegal ivory](#)," Avaaz campaign director Bert Wander said..

"It's crucial that this [trade](#) is shut down if we're going to protect these magnificent animals".

Wander said EU officials had told the campaign organisers that "they couldn't ban ivory because not enough African leaders wanted them to".

"The rest of the world is turning its back on ivory trade. Why not Europe?"

Botswana's environment minister, Tshekedi Khama, said "the reason the EU must close the trade is because China has closed that avenue".

"If the EU as a bloc.. would do the right thing by doing the same, then we have two avenues out of Africa closed. If we can close the main exit areas then we are going to be a lot more succesful than we are," he said.

Britain accounts for the most ivory exported from the EU, according to Avaaz.

"I can't say more than say to the UK ... just do the right thing, close [ivory trade](#)," said Khama.

According to the first ever pan-African survey of savanna elephants in 2016, the present population is about 352,000, down from 1.3 million in 1979.

International rules still allow countries to legally export ivory when it is certified as having been "worked" or "carved" before 1976.

Antique ivory products manufactured before 1947 – such as billiard balls, piano keys and chess pieces - are also legal and do not need a certificate, providing their age can be established. But activists say this creates a loophole allowing for "blood ivory" to enter the legal market.

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