

Near-total ban on sending wild elephants to zoos agreed

August 27 2019, by Nina Larson



The CITES decision bans transporting African elephants in the wild to zoos

The regulator of global wildlife trade decided Tuesday to impose a near-total ban on sending African elephants captured from the wild to zoos, in a decision hailed by conservationists as "momentous".

Following a heated debate at a meeting of parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Geneva, the member countries approved a proposed text after a revision by the European Union included some exceptions to the ban.

The decision met with strong opposition from Zimbabwe in particular, which along with Botswana is the main provider of wild African elephants to zoos outside of the continent and tried in vain to block the vote.

But with 87 in favour, 29 against and 25 abstaining, the vote for the amended text secured the two-thirds majority needed to pass.

"This is a momentous CITES decision for Africa's elephants," said Audrey Delsink, the wildlife director at Humane Society International (HSI)'s Africa division.

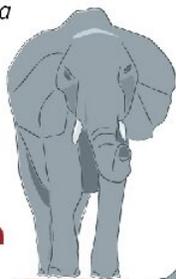
The vote in plenary altered slightly a decision taken at the start of the 12-day conference—set to wrap up Wednesday—prohibiting the transfer of all African elephants caught in the wild to so-called captive facilities.

The decision only impacts African elephants. Asian elephants already enjoy more protection against international trade.

African elephant

Loxodonta africana

Threatened with extinction
IUCN Red List



- Main threats
- Poaching for ivory
 - Habitat loss

1979
Population stands at **1.3m**

1989
All international ivory trade is banned after population plummets to **600,000**

1990s
Some regional populations show signs of recovery

1997, 2000
Botswana, Namibia, S. Africa and Zimbabwe win exemptions from the ivory trade ban

2002
One-off sale of southern African ivory stockpile to Japan

2008
One-off ivory stockpile sale to Japan and China

2009
Illegal ivory seizures soar

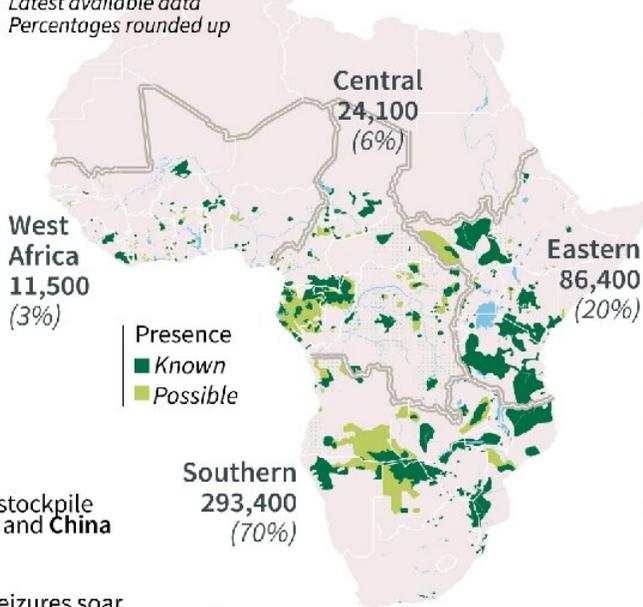
2010
Elephant killings soar, exceeding population growth

2015
Population stands at just **415,000**, a 68% drop on 1979

Sources: African Elephant Status Report 2016, Great Elephant Census, CITES, TRAFFIC, IUCN

Regional population estimates 2015

Latest available data
Percentages rounded up



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Map of Africa's elephant populations, with chronology of species protection measures, the ivory trade ban and poaching

Loophole

The initial CITES vote was to limit trade in live wild African elephants to conservation in their natural habitats, basically ending the practice of capturing elephants and sending them to zoos and entertainment venues around the world.

The EU, which for technical reasons had been unable to cast its 28 votes during the first committee vote on August 18, had hinted it might join the United States and others in flatly opposing the text.

This prompted outcry, with a number of public figures including Jane Goodall, Pamela Anderson and Brigitte Bardot sending a letter to EU Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker asking that the EU back the ban.

In the end, the EU drafted an amended text, adding a loophole, saying the elephants should remain in their "natural and historical range in Africa, except in exceptional circumstances where ... it is considered that a transfer to ex-situ locations will provide demonstrable in-situ conservation benefits for African elephants".

In such case decisions should only be made in consultation with the CITES Animals Committee, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) elephant specialist group.

The EU amendment also made clear that African elephants caught in the wild and already in zoos could be transferred to other facilities outside of Africa.



Elephants like these in Kenya's Amboseli National Park, will enjoy more protection from being taken to Western zoos

Delsink told AFP HSI was "disappointed that there was a compromise", but she hailed that CITES and IUCN would have oversight over any decisions to take advantage of the "loopholes".

"It adds a layer of transparency, which is critical so that these situations can be very, very clearly evaluated by definitions produced by these bodies," she said.

'Certainly a start'

DJ Schubert, a wildlife biologist with the Animal Wildlife Institute, agreed on the need to watch the implementation of the EU caveats "very closely."

Overall though, he told AFP the text agreed Tuesday "is certainly a start."

"It is a signal I think to the world that it is time to move beyond the idea that it is appropriate to keep elephants in captivity."

While elephants in western, central and eastern Africa have long been listed among the species in need of most protection under CITES, and thus banned from all trade, some trade has been permitted in southern Africa, where elephant populations are healthier.

Zimbabwe has for instance captured and exported more than 100 baby elephants to Chinese zoos since 2012, according to the Humane Society International.

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