

Burning ivory won't help saving elephants

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Many commentators have celebrated the burning of Kenya's ivory as a great day for conservation in Africa. As someone who has spent many years researching the economics of biodiversity conservation and conservation finance I couldn't disagree more. The lively enthusiasm is rather naive, uninformed and not based on practical experience or scientific evidence. The burning of ivory is an extremely expensive PR exercise with little impact on conservation. Considering the millions of dollars gone up in flames I would rather call it another sad day for conservation. If sold, the ivory could have been put to good use, such as funding innovative community conservation and anti-poaching projects.

Part of the problem is that the Kenyan conservation discourse is still dominated by western animal welfare NGOs and elitist conservationist groups with their own, misguided agenda. Those people who face the harsh reality of having to make a living in marginal African rangelands have no say. The loss of precious wildlife and natural habitat needs to be stopped, but Kenya's outdated approach to conservation won't help. In fact, it is largely to be blamed for the dramatic loss of wildlife outside protected areas because it does not reach out to local communities. The new conservancy movement and the few private ranches in Laikipia working with their immediate communities are a step in the right direction, but are only a drop in the ocean. The heart of the problem is the country's wildlife policy that fails to protect natural habitat outside protected areas. Kenya does not need celebrity PR events, but a paradigm shift towards a modern pro-wildlife and pro-people conservation policy.

Here is some food for thought:

1) The demand and supply debate: President Uhuru Kenyatta and Richard Leakey are talking about the need "to stop the demand for ivory" or "to destroy the market for ivory". Economists would oppose such statements and argue that not a single prohibition has ever succeeded in destroying the illegal drugs market. The same applies to ivory. The truth of the matter is that if demand cannot be satisfied by legal means an illegal market will develop. Leakey and his peers have a point, as the price of ivory dropped briefly after the burning of ivory in 1989. This singular example can be explained in this particular case: firstly, many illegal traders flooded the market after the burning in 1989 by selling their stockpiles of ivory. The increased supply led to a short-lived drop of the ivory price. Secondly, an international anti-ivory publicity campaign did partly succeed in reducing the demand for ivory, but only in the western world! Demand in Asia remained strong and is still a key driver for Africa's poaching

problem. The pro-ivory-burning lobby believes that it will work again, but I am afraid they will be proven wrong. Such PR campaigns are mainly preaching to the converted and are unlikely to have an impact on the level of demand in Asia. The truth of the matter is that there will always be some level of demand and if it cannot be satisfied through some form of sustainable, highly controlled legal trade, it will fuel an illegal market and will lead to poaching. Widespread poverty and corruption in Africa will cause local communities to turn a blind eye to poachers or provides incentives to actively participate in poaching.

The sad news is that the burning of ivory could result in a spike in ivory prices, which could further increase poaching.

2) It takes two to tango: Asian ivory syndicates would have a hard time without the support of corrupt African officials. Quite a few "big names" in Kenya and Tanzania have benefitted directly or indirectly from the illegal sale of ivory. Not to mention the so-called "cattle barons", a group of wealthy families storing their ill-gotten gains in large cattle herds and using their influence to graze their cattle in protected areas and other environmentally sensitive rangelands. Pro-conservation publicity campaigns should name and shame the perpetrators of such environmental crimes. Why does the pro-ivory-burning lobby remain silent here? Some critics claim that the group enjoys political support from influential individuals allegedly associated with such environmental crimes.

3) It's not just poaching that should worry us: Did you know that poaching for ivory is not the biggest threat for elephant conservation? An even greater challenge is the dramatic loss of natural habitat to human settlements and agriculture. Elephants are threatened by an ever-decreasing habitat. Due to population growth, human/wildlife conflict is on the rise. Protected areas alone will not be sufficient to save our elephants. The survival of our living giants will ultimately depend on conservation models that succeed in maintaining elephants and their natural habitat inside as well as outside protected areas. This however can only be achieved with the support of local communities. Which leads me to the next critical point:

4) Why are cattle, goats and chickens not endangered? Have you ever thought about this? There is a huge demand for cattle, goat and chicken meat and we have more and more of them every year. The reason is that domestic animals are of value to local farmers. Elephants are unfortunately not. To the contrary, elephants are a nuisance to rural communities because they are dangerous, they compete for scarce water and grazing resources and they destroy crops. As long as elephant conservation is only supported by foreigners and affluent urban elites, local communities living with elephants will have no incentives to protect them. A paradigm change in conservation means that we need to create conservation models that will place an economic value on elephants and other wildlife to allow rural communities to benefit from conservation as a form of sustainable land use. If local farmers

would stand to benefit from elephants they would create mechanisms to protect them just as they are protecting their livestock. Examples from Southern Africa show that it can work. Kenya and South Africa had roughly the same number of animals some 40 years ago. Today Kenya, which has followed a protectionist policy, has lost almost 80% of its wildlife. In contrast, South Africa, where wildlife has become a valuable commodity, boasts a multi-million dollar wildlife industry with up to 20 times more wildlife than its Kenyan counterpart.

5) Let's create markets supporting conservation: If we cannot destroy markets, we need to make them work for conservation. Ideally, those who want to protect elephants should pay those who have to bear the costs of living with elephants. With the exception of a few great projects allowing for such a trade, this is wishful thinking, as those who want to preserve elephants are unable or unwilling to pay the full price. The other alternative is to turn conservation into an economic activity benefitting local communities. Tourism is one example but doesn't work everywhere. The message is that we need innovative conservation models in Kenya that allow placing an economic value on wildlife otherwise the loss will continue.

Big publicity events such as last week's ivory burning won't help the elephants unless they bring serious cash to the table for local communities, anti-poaching measures and habitat conservation throughout the country. If this is not the case such events run the risk of only comforting the egos of so-called conservation celebrities and achieving little for the environment. Rural communities in marginal African rangelands will ultimately decide on the fate of elephants. So let's make conservation work for them!