

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
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August 12, 2015

Dear President Obama,

As scientists deeply concerned with the wildlife poaching crisis, we write to commend you on your recent steps to greatly enhance legal controls on U.S. commercial trade in elephant ivory.

Over the past 30 years, Africa's elephant population has been reduced from around 1.2 million to 420,000.¹ Scientists overwhelmingly agree that the illegal killing of elephants for their ivory is a primary cause of these declines. Central Africa's elephants are being poached at a shocking and unsustainable rate of 9% per year. This is based on a new analysis indicating that between 2002 and 2013, 65% of the region's forest elephants – 200,000 individuals – were killed, which amounts to one every twenty minutes.² The continental totals are much higher, as even this disturbing figure does not account for the savannah elephants of Eastern and Southern Africa or the forest elephants of West Africa. While exact numbers are notoriously difficult to gauge, mounting evidence points to annual African elephant losses of 35,000 or possibly higher, all slaughtered to meet the rising international demand for ivory.³ Elephants are iconic, awe-inspiring animals and perform critical ecological roles in the forests and savannahs they inhabit.⁴ Yet, unless this poaching trend is reversed, African elephants will be wiped out across large areas of their range within our lifetime.⁵

Consumer demand, stimulated by the presence of legal domestic markets, is elevating the price of ivory and driving elephant poaching.⁶ Elephants are not the only ones to bear the costs of this trade. Brave park rangers are sacrificing their lives as they attempt to defend wildlife against groups of militarized poachers, some of whom have helicopters, night vision goggles, and automatic weapons.⁷ Transnational criminal networks are now behind much of the trafficking and likely participate in other illicit activities, including dealing in narcotics and weapons.⁸ Weak governance in many range, transit, and consumer countries provides the enabling environment for these criminals to thrive; and the illegal ivory trade, in turn, exacerbates conflict, corruption, and poverty in countries that are already struggling to defend their economic and national security.⁹

In spite of the dire situation, hope is not lost. We commend your Administration for developing a National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking, which identifies a multi-faceted approach to strengthen site-based enforcement, reduce trafficking and demand, and expand international cooperation. A critical component of the National Strategy is the decision to strengthen regulatory controls on U.S. imports, exports, and domestic commercial trade in elephant ivory. While the international commercial trade in ivory has been banned since 1990, individual countries, including the U.S., have maintained varying levels of legal domestic ivory trade.¹⁰ Studies of trade in elephant ivory indicate that legal markets provide a cover for trade in illegal products and render enforcement extremely difficult.¹¹ This is the case in the U.S. ivory market – one of the largest in the world – where traffickers exploit regulatory loopholes in order to misrepresent illegal ivory as legal ivory.¹² Given the scale of the current elephant poaching crisis across Africa, and the modus operandi of the trade, the U.S. must eliminate its parallel legal and illegal markets and the resulting opportunities for laundering illegal ivory.

The improved regulations will help guarantee that the U.S. is not contributing to the global demand for elephant ivory. The actions also send important signals to other consumer countries: the protection of the earth's wildlife is a global obligation that we all share, and wildlife crime is a serious transnational

crime. The scientific community is eager to aid in implementing the goals of the National Strategy. We, once again, thank you for your leadership in helping to ensure that wild elephants will continue to inspire generations to come.

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¹¹ Andrew Lemieux and Ronald Clarke, "The International Ban on Ivory Sales and Its Effects on Elephant Poaching in Africa," *The British Journal of Criminology* 49(4), 2009, available at <http://bjc.oxfordjournals.org/content/49/4/451.full.pdf+html?sid=e62953ae-e11d-468f-b909-c3d818429660>.

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