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WHAT'S CHANGED FOR ELEPHANTS

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It's the fifth annual World Elephant Day. What's happening in the elephant world, and has anything really changed for them? In 2012, the World Elephant Day campaign was created as a rallying point for elephant conservation organizations and individuals worldwide to come together to help spread the word—through unique grassroots events and initiatives—about the dire situation that elephants presently face all over the world. Those threats may pertain to the ongoing and seemingly unstoppable slaughter of elephants for their ivory, the abject circumstances that captive elephants constantly endure at the hands of the entertainment industry, or the sad life of a street elephant begging on the streets of Asia, to list only a few of the grim scenarios that may define their lives. Since inception in 2012, World Elephant Day and its outreach continues to grow exponentially, and annually we provide an update on what has transpired for our elephant friends. What follows are some of the highlights as to what has changed for elephants over the last year.



THE GOOD NEWS: CLOSING MARKETS

- The United States has implemented a [near total ban](#) on the domestic ivory trade.
- In terms of legislation passed in the United States on a state-by-state basis, currently there are ivory bans in place in:

New York	passed in 2014
New Jersey	passed in 2014
California	passed in October 2015, effective July 2016
Hawaii	passed in June 2016, effective January 2017
Washington State	passed in November 2015

Legislation is currently on the books in many other states.

- China has banned imports and by the end of 2016 will release a timeline to [close its legal trade](#). In China, the price of ivory [dropped by half](#) after the government pledge to ban ivory.
- Hong Kong has announced it will [close its market](#). This three-phase move will conclude in a [total ban in 2021](#).
- France has announced a [domestic ivory ban](#).
- Angola has announced a [domestic ivory ban](#), and has closed one of the largest ivory markets in the [southern part of Africa](#).
- BUT despite this success in Angola, forty elephants were [killed in July, 2016](#).

TO BURN, OR NOT TO BURN, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Ivory Burns and Crushes

Thailand, August 26, 2015	2,100 kg of ivory destroyed
Sri Lanka, January 26, 2016	1,500 kg of ivory destroyed
Malawi, March 14, 2016	2,600 kg of ivory destroyed
Italy, March 31, 2016	400 kg of ivory destroyed
Malaysia, April 14, 2016	9,550 kg of ivory destroyed
Cameroon, April 19, 2016	2,000 kg of ivory destroyed
Kenya, April 30, 2016	105,000 kg of ivory destroyed

This represents approximately 9,150 elephants

To give the recent burns and crushes context, since Kenya first destroyed its ivory in 1989 in the historical gesture that preceded the global ivory ban, almost thirty other similar events, in countries all over the world, have taken place. Currently, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) pegs the amount of current global stockpiles of ivory at over 1,000 tons.

There are many proponents of destroying ivory the world over, and many detractors of the practice. Some believe the practice itself may be flawed, and thus argue against it: given the level of general corruption embedded in the global ivory trade, it may be difficult to actually prove that the ivory that's said to be destroyed actually was. Another argument against it is the perception that if there is less ivory available, an uptick in demand and pricing of it on the black market may ensue and poaching may escalate.

Others, however, maintain that the effects of ivory destruction on poaching are difficult to determine.

Proponents of the practice maintain that if the ivory is *not* destroyed, it may find its way onto the black market, increasing trade. On top of this, maintaining stockpiled ivory can be a costly venture for cash-strapped countries and may be difficult to guard successfully. Other supporters maintain that burning or crushing ivory rightfully stigmatizes the issue of ivory trade and possession, and therefore has a perceptual effect that can only serve to help save the elephants from extinction. In line with rationale, New Jersey will be holding an ivory crush on World Elephant Day, 2016, supported by representatives of Germany, Gabon, and Kenya. This is the first public crush to invite members of the public to bring ivory to be destroyed.

On the other side of the issue, South Africa has recently taken a very firm stance to not destroy their ivory stockpiles and have refused to abide by international regulations and disclose the amount of ivory it holds. Instead, this nation wants to renew the ivory trade and be allowed to sell their stockpiled ivory next year. They are not alone on this. Other African nations are calling for the resumption of the legal trade, the proceeds of which they say will provide sorely needed funding for social programs in their developing nations, to include wildlife conservation initiatives. They also argue that the increase of ivory onto the market through the mechanism of legal trade would cause the price of it to drop and thereby reduce poaching, although other experts question the naivety of this assertion.

These pro-trade African countries are facing pushback from the African Elephant Coalition, an organization comprised of twenty-nine African countries that collectively argue for all domestic ivory markets to be shut down; for the exporting of live elephants to no longer be allowed; for the reinstatement of all African elephants to Appendix I status; efforts to be undertaken to destroy existing ivory stockpiles; and all conversations about legal ivory trade resumption should be terminated.

- Carl Safina, MacArthur fellow and author, talks about [why destroying elephant ivory is the right thing to do](#).

RETURNING ELEPHANTS TO THEIR NATIVE HABITATS

To our way of thinking, more attention needs to be drawn to the practice of returning elephants to the wild, once they have been habituated for this.

In Thailand, the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation (ERF) continues to demonstrate that rehabilitating captive elephants to the wild can be a successful conservation model in certain circumstances. Since 2002 they have employed this model, utilizing three protected forest habitats of Thailand. These habitats total over 500,000 acres (roughly 200,000 hectares), onto which 110 formerly captive elephants have been successfully reintroduced. To date, thirteen baby elephants have been born in the wild to these formerly captive elephants who have mated naturally and given birth there.

Wildlife Alliance continues to do outstanding work in this area as well. This World Elephant Day, it's celebrating its decade-long success in maintaining Zero Poaching of Asian elephants in the Cardamom Rainforest in Cambodia, a former hotbed of elephant and tiger poaching. This area comprises over 5,000,000 acres (2,000,000 hectares) of rainforest and includes a critical feature: the South West Elephant Corridor, as well as the newly created Southern Cardamom National Park, which is made up of approximately 1 million acres (roughly 400,000 hectares). Wildlife Alliance has achieved this by working with the government of Cambodia to ensure the employment of law enforcement and patrolling of the area. This landscape supports one of Cambodia's two remaining elephant populations, which underscores how critical this work is.

THE BAD NEWS: THE ROAD AHEAD

Before we continue to detail how *some* things are improving for elephants, we must call your attention to one particular issue that pertains to the long-term outlook for these elephants. This is an issue that will be a hot-button topic at the CITES Conference in South Africa, which is held September 24 to October 5, 2016.

As many people know, most of Africa's elephants are listed as Appendix I by CITES, with the exception being the elephants of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, which are Appendix II. An Appendix I listing affords elephants the highest possible protection under international law. When all elephants in Africa were listed under Appendix I in 1990, the ensuing ivory ban caused a decrease in the price of ivory, and the numbers of elephants killed dropped dramatically.

[The African Elephant Coalition](#), whose members are made up of twenty-nine African countries, is putting forth at CITES this year a package of proposals designed, in part, to change the listing of Africa's Appendix II elephants back to Appendix I. This would be a vital step in helping to ensure the survival of the African elephant. However, for this to be accomplished, a two-thirds majority vote of all 182 Parties participating in the CITES conference is necessary. The countries that comprise the EU voting block at CITES have tremendous clout but to date, under the influence of the European Commission, have not been supportive of the proposal. While the support of the EU voting block cannot be guaranteed, it is crucial.

Want to read more about this situation? Check out a few articles at these news sources:

- [Environment New Service](#)
- [The Guardian](#)
- [European Commission](#)

In any event, it's important that CITES representatives from *every* nation who are attending the CITES Conference this year **hear from you on this issue**. Please email your CITES reps to let them know that the elephants of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe should be relisted as Appendix I. You may find your rep(s) here: <https://www.cites.org/eng/cms/index.php/component/cp>.

It is also worth emailing the representatives who attended the 2013 conference in Bangkok. You may find their names here: <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/16/OfficialListofParticipants.pdf>.

We also wanted to bring attention to the situation in Canada, given that we don't hear very frequently about Canada as it pertains to the ivory trade. Briefly stated, Canada is a signatory to CITES, and as such abides by its rules through the implementation of a law known as the Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act, which came into force in 1996. Essentially, the law details a list of those species that are regulated, including which species trade is prohibited in. Penalties for trading in illegal species are defined, including penalties for the illegal importation and exportation of prohibited species. Generally, Appendix I species are not open for trade except if the animals that the product is derived from were captive animals or the product is derived from an animal that pre-dated when the CITES Convention came into effect (1975) or that animal was not classified at the time the animal was taken from the wild, then trade may be considered legal pending the correct documentation and proof of age of the specimen. Both of these latter proofs enable a fair amount of gray area that may be exploited by those seeking to launder illegal ivory as legal, as has been the case in a few instances recently in major Canadian markets (Toronto and Vancouver). For more information, please see: http://www.ec.gc.ca/CITES/default.asp?lang=En&n=990E5322-1#_01_17

CRIMES AGAINST ELEPHANTS DON'T STOP THERE

- In March 2016, Swaziland, claiming drought conditions in their country, sedated and flew eighteen elephants—three males and fifteen females, ranging in age from six to twenty-five—to the United States. These elephants will be split among three zoos—the Dallas zoo, Sedgwick County Zoo in Kansas, and Henry Doorly Zoo in Nebraska—where they will be put on exhibit and used for breeding purposes. [Animal rights groups have been protesting](#) this action taken by Swaziland.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF ELEPHANT POACHING

- Paul Allen's [Great Elephant Census](#) has completed the bulk of its two-year research endeavor and is analyzing the results. Populations in 18 nations have been assessed, with two more—South Sudan and the Central African Republic—now under way.
- Elephant poaching is [increasing in South Africa](#) in 2016.
- Poaching is [on the rise in Angola](#).
- Poaching is [on the rise for captive Asian elephants in India](#).

STIFFER FINES FOR POACHERS IN THE FUTURE?

- In Kenya, repeat ivory trafficking offender [Feisal Mohammed was sentenced to twenty years](#) in jail after he was found guilty of having 44 million shillings (\$434,000) worth of ivory in his possession.

WHAT ABOUT THE TOURIST TRADE?

We are starting to see some focus on the use and abuse of elephants in the fields of entertainment and tourism, with some organizations coming together to develop more ethical elephant tourism practices in countries like Thailand where it's big business. There is much more work to be done in this area regarding the care and welfare practices for elephants used in tourism but at least the conversation has begun.

Here are some other milestones:

- In May of 2016, Feld Entertainment, the production company behind Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Circus, retired its elephant herd and [discontinued the act](#). This is a **great victory** for captive elephants used in the entertainment business.
- The [banning of bullhooks](#) in Rhode Island.
- In Cambodia in April, a female Asian elephant named Sambo [died outside of Angkor Wat](#) after giving rides in extreme heat. This [renewed the cry for regulations](#) to protect elephants being used in the entertainment industry in Asia.
- In May of this year in Indonesia, a [critically endangered captive elephant's death](#) in one of Indonesia's poorly maintained zoos caused an understandable outcry from elephant activists.
- Meanwhile, in South Africa, the [prohibition of elephant rides](#) begins.

THE RELIGION FACTOR

- [Pope Francis speaks out in Nairobi](#) against ivory trafficking.
- Elephants continue to be treated abusively when used for religious purposes as demonstrated by a [new film that reveals the brutalization](#) of temple elephants in India.
- Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka [harbors baby elephant illegally](#).

THE HUMAN TOLL

- There are 355 national parks in Africa, which employ a total of approximately 22,000 rangers and volunteers. In 2015, twenty-seven rangers were killed, according to the [International Game Rangers Federation](#), which has monitored ranger mortality since the year 2000. In March of 2016, two rangers were killed in DRC's Virunga National Park by rebels, pushing the death toll of rangers killed in this park to [over 150 in the last ten years](#).

Elephant Pressures and Solutions in India

- There are only approximately 45,000 Asian elephants remaining in the wild and the majority of them are in India. There are important elephant conservation initiatives going on there, as well as in neighboring Sri Lanka, but in these countries, as in elsewhere in Asia, human elephant conflict is a severe and ongoing problem. In India, this has resulted in the creation of the [Indian Elephant Corridors Appeal](#), an initiative of the Wildlife Trust of India and the World Land Trust, which are working together to establish viable elephant corridors in India to enable elephants to follow their traditional migratory routes with a minimum of human-elephant conflict.

Hopeful Developments

- NEWSFLASH! Can Elephants Cure Cancer? The fact that they have a [cancer-suppressing gene](#) in abundance may mean the answer is yes!

. . . And Tech to the Rescue!

- The public has been [recruited to help](#) bring perpetrators of wildlife crime to justice. Conservationists have developed a Smartphone app that can take photos of products that are suspect.
- [Camera-traps](#) have been installed in forests to track elephants in efforts to reduce human/elephant interaction.



There is elephant news every day and issues continually evolve, so we may not have mentioned all of the developments here—good or bad. Hopefully, we *have* shed light on the main points. And we hope to continue moving forward in a more positive direction as World Elephant Day continues to bring the world together to help elephants, putting public focus on these issues and what we can do to save these highly sentient creatures, their habitat, and all the other creatures that live in those habitats, too. For elephants are keystone species, and as such are stewards of their environment, as we humans are also—or are *supposed* to be. At this stage, we're not doing a very good job in this role. But there is hope. By working to save elephants, we are doing one of the most significant things we can do as stewards of our common home. Without elephants, the world will lose a large dollop of its sparkle and wonder, not to mention the extraordinary biodiversity they are magnificent caretakers of. If we lose our elephant friends, the world's rich biodiversity is imperiled, and with that, the future of the human family will be ever so much bleaker and imperiled, too.