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Hon. Tanya Chan
Chair of the Panel on Environmental Affairs
Hong Kong Legislative Council
1 Legislative Council Road
Central, Hong Kong

panel_ea@legco.gov.hk

June 2017

Dear Madam Chair,

Proposals to end the Hong Kong ivory trade

The Born Free Foundation is a UK-based international wildlife protection charity dedicated to promoting compassionate conservation to enhance the survival of threatened species in the wild, protect natural habitats, and safeguard the welfare of individual animals.

On behalf of the Born Free Foundation I would like to express my strong support for the Hong Kong Government's proposal to ban the import, re-export and possession of pre-Convention ivory for commercial purposes, and to increase penalties for wildlife crime. I would also urge the Hong Kong Government not to support proposals to compensate ivory traders from the public purse.

As you will be aware, Africa's elephants are in serious crisis. Status reports¹ released in September last year by the African Elephant Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) revealed devastating declines in both forest and savannah elephant numbers across much of the African continent, in large part because of poaching for their ivory.

There are currently less than 500,000 elephants across Africa, and more than 20,000 are being slaughtered each year by poachers to supply ivory to illegal markets. Elephant poaching and ivory trafficking is a lucrative business coordinated by organised criminal networks which undermines the rule of law, disrupts local economies, and threatens social and political stability in some of the most vulnerable communities in Africa.

Since the international community agreed to list African elephants on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1989, populations in Namibia, Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe have been 'downlisted' to Appendix II, primarily to allow two 'one-off sales' of stockpiled ivory to Japan and China in 1999 and 2008.

Born Free Foundation
Broadlands Business Campus
Langhurstwood Road
Horsham
West Sussex
RH12 4QP
United Kingdom

T 01403 240170
E wildlife@bornfree.org.uk
www.bornfree.org.uk

PRESIDENT

Will Travers OBE

FOUNDER

Virginia McKenna OBE
Hon Dr of Science

FOUNDER PATRON

Joanna Lumley OBE

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While the impacts of these legal one-off sales on elephant poaching are the subject of contention, there is no doubt that ivory poaching has increased substantially since 2008, with an estimated 100,000 elephants being slaughtered across Africa between 2010 and 2012 alone². Elephant populations across West, Central and parts of East Africa have been worst affected, although recent reports suggest that the killing is rising significantly in southern African countries where elephant populations were previously thought to be relatively secure. Recent efforts by some southern African countries to secure international agreement for further one-off ivory sales have been roundly rejected, and the international community agreed to shelve the development of a mechanism by which future ivory trade proposals might be considered, at the Conference of the Parties to CITES in 2016³.

It is our contention that any legal trade in ivory from any source, including ivory obtained from elephants that have died naturally, threatens the future of Africa's elephants by perpetuating demand and serving as a cover for illegal trade. A number of countries have destroyed their ivory stockpiles in recognition that the anticipation of future trade that the very existence of such stockpiles might invoke could incentivise further poaching.

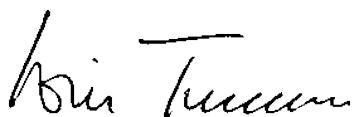
Last year the United States introduced a near-total ban on ivory trade, and China has begun a process of shutting down its domestic ivory trade which it is committed to completing by the end of this year. These actions are hugely important, given that both China and the USA are major markets for both legal and illegal ivory. It is vital that Hong Kong, widely regarded as the hub for ivory trade and trafficking in Asia, follows suit.

Ivory traders across Hong Kong have had many years to prepare for the closure of ivory markets, and the proposals on the table gives them an additional 5 year grace period once the legislation comes into force. No other country has provided compensation to ivory traders, and China will not do so when their ban comes into force at the end of this year. The offer of compensation can also have perverse impacts, including the acquisition and stockpiling of illegally-sourced ivory in anticipation of future compensation payments. We therefore urge the Hong Kong Government not to consider providing any compensation to ivory traders.

I hope and trust that you will take these comments into account when deliberating on this important matter, and stand ready to provide you with clarification or further information should you require it.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Will Travers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'W' and a long, sweeping underline.

Will Travers OBE, President, Born Free Foundation

¹ <https://www.iucn.org/ssc-groups/mammals/african-elephant-specialist-group>

² <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140818-elephants-africa-poaching-cites-census/>

³ <http://ens-newswire.com/2016/09/27/legal-ivory-trade-rejected-in-heated-debate/>

A copy of this letter has been forwarded to:

- Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (info@dab.org.hk)
- The Democratic Party (dphk@dphk.org)
- Business and Professionals Alliance for Hong Kong (bpa@bpahk.org)
- Civic Party (contact@civicparty.hk)
- Liberal Party (liberal@liberal.org.hk)
- New Territories Association of Societies (info@ntas.org)
- New People's Party (info@npp.org.hk)
- Professional Commons (info@procommons.org.hk)
- Neighbourhood and Worker's Service Centre (kwaichung@nwsc.org.hk)
- Labour Party (info@labour.org.hk)
- Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions (flucsb@hkflu.org.hk)
- League of Social Democrats (lsd@lsd.org.hk)
- Demosisto (info@demosisto.hk)
- New Century Forum (info@ncforum.org.hk)