

Members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council

30/08/17

Dear Members of LegCo

Firstly, we thank you for LegCo's important work on the elephant issue and on taking steps towards what will be a historic ban on domestic trade in ivory in Hong Kong.

The three co-signatories of this letter were pioneers in undercover wildlife investigations back in the 1980s and early 1990s and our work in east Asia, as well as in Africa and the middle east, helped to prove to the world that:

1. The CITES trade controls had not worked
2. Huge quantities of ivory from freshly-poached elephants were moving easily from Africa to east Asia
3. Hong Kong was at the very heart of this illegal trade

The information that we gathered included air waybills showing massive quantities of ivory being laundered en route from east Africa, through the United Arab Emirates and on to Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea. Hundreds of tonnes were moved along this route, much of it controlled from start to finish by a single, Hong Kong-based family.

Sadly, this family was never punished for what it had done to the elephant populations of east Africa. Indeed, family members used the vast profits made from dead elephants to set themselves up in the shark fin trade in Hong Kong, in addition to continuing to benefit from the ivory trade.

The evidence gathered in the 1980s - and in the years since - clearly demonstrates that the majority, and probably virtually all the 1990 stockpile had been taken from illegally slaughtered elephants, with tragic consequences. It was estimated in 1988 that around 94% of all ivory moving around the world had come from poached elephants.

We also know that CITES certificates were used and re-used time and again for illegal shipments until a shipment was actually inspected, allowing huge quantities of illegally sourced ivory to enter Hong Kong. In documented interviews conducted in 1988 and 1989, ivory traders in Dubai, Ajman, Singapore, Taiwan and South Africa stated that their poached ivory was destined for Hong Kong. Additionally, it was reported that fake CITES certificates could be purchased in Hong Kong for as little as five British pounds.

Given that most Customs agencies estimate a detection rate of around 10% for wildlife products, and given that Hong Kong has seized 35 tonnes of ivory since 2003, we can roughly estimate that 350 tonnes of illegal ivory have entered Hong Kong during that period. We also know that many traders have been more than happy to sell ivory to visitors from the mainland - who comprise around 90% of ivory buyers in Hong Kong - despite knowing full well that it is illegal to import it into the mainland.

We are therefore horrified at the traders' suggestion that they should be compensated for their "losses" when the ban takes effect, and we urge you not to concede on this issue.

The traders had 27 years to get rid of their stocks. Instead, many chose to replenish them by continuing to import poached ivory and sell it to tourists. All of this has been well documented in recent years.

We fully support the proposal to increase penalties for wildlife crime. For too long, serious crimes that have resulted in the suffering and death of wild animals, the despair of African governments struggling to cope with poaching and major losses of tourism revenue, have been treated as mere misdemeanours, and these abuses will continue as long as the perpetrators believe themselves to be immune from serious penalties.

We thank you for taking the time to read this, and we wish you the very best in your deliberations.

Sincerely,



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Co-founder  
Environmental Investigation Agency



Allan Thornton, OBE  
Environmental Investigation Agency



Susie Watts  
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