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Hong Kong must act now on total ivory trade ban, as delays would be deadly

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Erik Solheim

Erik Solheim says saving the elephant from poachers and extinction is hard when demand is so high, and it is high time destination markets like Hong Kong outlawed ivory sales

When poachers kill a mother elephant, the dependent babies left behind usually die. Rarely, lucky ones are rescued. A handful of orphanages at African elephant ranges see them rehabilitated, raised and released back into the wild. I recently visited one of these. Some of the babies had been stabbed or shot, but their wounds ran much deeper than the physical. Elephants are highly intelligent and social. Orphaned babies are often depressed and grieve for months or years. Some even die of despair.

Human beings are uniquely responsible for these tragedies. We have been condemning other species to death for centuries, but one of the reasons animals like elephants and rhinos are going extinct has to be the most unforgivable and indefensible: we are killing them for trinkets.

Somehow, these magnificent animals have survived this long in spite of our desire to carve up their body parts for jewellery, figurines and bogus "medicinal" remedies. Not much longer: in the past decade, elephant populations have fallen by almost one third. And, in 1970, there were around 70,000 black rhinos. There are now about 5,000.

At this rate, the only elephants and rhinos our grandchildren will see will be the few remaining in zoos. And their children will only read about them in textbooks.

Watch: Why elephants may go extinct in your lifetime

One of the reasons elephants ... are going extinct has to be the most indefensible: we are killing them for trinkets

Why Elephants May Go Extinct in Your Lifetime | National Geographic



There is an alternative: one where coming generations can enjoy seeing these incredible animals in the wild; where communities close by can enjoy the corresponding benefits of tourism and healthy ecosystems, instead of being wrenched apart by poaching; where illegal ivory trade does not fund organised crime.

This can be done, but we must act urgently. Countries in Africa, where most of the ivory originates, are working hard to stop the flow of ivory and prevent the slaughter.



World governments urge end to domestic ivory markets in 'landmark' vote [1]

But they can only do so much when demand is so high. An international ban on the trade is already in place. Destination markets [2] need to step in, align their legislation with the international ban and close domestic markets.

China has helped by declaring it will ban the ivory trade this year, and by embracing efforts to change minds and behaviour. We need all jurisdictions to follow suit.

Hong Kong has proposed legislative amendments that will see the ivory trade phased out [3] by 2021 – a welcome commitment. The Legislative Council has received hundreds of messages of support from the public for the ivory ban, and they far outweigh the opposing voices [4].

The Hong Kong government now has a mandate to make the change and outlaw ivory sales in Hong Kong once and for all.

Each year that we delay we are tens of thousands of animals closer to extinction. That's why a full ban needs to happen [5] now.

Erik Solheim is head of UN Environment

Topics: Ivory trade in Hong Kong and China

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[1] <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/2018366/world-governments-urge-end-domestic-ivory-markets-landmark-vote/>

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