

Botswana, boxed in by ivory ban, seeks to carve a way out

by CNN Interactive Writer
Richard Shumate

(CNN) -- Nearly a decade ago, alarmed by plunging populations of African elephants due to mass hunting by poachers, the United Nations Convention on Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) banned the international ivory trade.

The idea was to render ivory's market value moot with a total, well-enforced trading ban, providing little incentive for poachers to ply their trade. The decline in the elephant population would then, hopefully, level off.

It worked. In 1989, when the ban went into place, there were 625,000 African elephants, compared to 580,000 today. That's still a decline -- but a significant improvement from the previous decade, when the elephant population dropped by more than half, from 1.3 million.

But for [Botswana](#), where the elephant was never endangered in the first place, there has been a downside. The country is now awash in African elephants -- nearly 80,000 in a country which wildlife experts say can only support 33,000. And the population is growing by about 5 percent a year.

Officials say elephants have become a menace, trampling crops and frightening -- and in some rare instances, killing -- villagers. High voltage electric fences are now used to protect some villages, and drivers and tourists are warned to be aware of



Last June, Botswana and two of its neighbors, Zimbabwe and Namibia, convinced the U.N. to partially lift the ivory ban.

Botswana: At a Glance

Population: 1.5 million (1995)

Languages: English (official), Setswana

Capital: Gaborone

Ethnic divisions: Batswana 95%, Kalanga, Basarwa, and Kgalagadi 4%, white 1%

Religions: indigenous beliefs 50%, Christian 50%

Independence: 30 September 1966 (from UK)

Bordering countries: Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe

Life expectancy at birth: 46.01 years

Literacy: 74 percent (1994)

GDP per capita: U.S. \$3,130

Unemployment rate: 21% (1995 est.)

Ratio of people to a radio: One per person

Ratio of people to a television: One per 108 persons

Ratio of people to a telephone: One per 33 persons

Average daily newspaper circulation: 40,000 (1992)

Did you know?

Botswana is the fourth largest diamond producer in the world (in amount of carats produced), after Australia, Russia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

SOURCE: United Nations; U.S. Library of Congress; news reports

Test your knowledge:

Take our Africa quiz

the danger.

"The conflict between elephant and people has become so intense that it is becoming a major political issue," says George Kgoroba, Botswana's commerce and industry minister.

Last June, over the objections of conservationists in Europe and the United States, Botswana and two of its neighbors, Zimbabwe and Namibia, convinced CITES to partially lift the ivory ban.

They will now be able to sell their stockpiles of ivory -- seized from poachers and harvested from elephants who died naturally -- to customers in Japan, where there is a strong demand. Botswana and its neighbors will then use the proceeds to manage their elephant populations and aid villagers who have been affected by the elephants.

Right now, only the backlog of ivory will be sold, with no additional killing of elephants. But eventually, controlled culling of elephants could be allowed as part of efforts to limit populations in countries where the animals aren't endangered.

Critics say the limited sale is fraught with peril. Because the original source of ivory being sold is hard to trace, they fear that some unscrupulous ivory traders may try to renew shipments of the valuable commodity, disguising the sales as part of the legal quota CITES is allowing.

But Botswana and the other countries say safeguards will be in place to make sure sales of the backlogged ivory can be tracked. Any ivory from periodic culls of the elephant herds would be auctioned under tight controls.

And by limiting sales to a single country, the policing of shipments will be much easier. Japanese buyers have pledged that they will only use the ivory domestically and will not export it.

Many in Botswana and other Southern African nations see the opposition from the developed world to their request to a limited repeal of the ban as an example of "environmental colonialism."

They say Western countries aren't taking into account the real problems of elephant overpopulation, and the conservation measures already in place keep the elephant from becoming endangered.

[Reuters](#) contributed to this report.

Article from expired CNN website: www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1998/africa/botswana/

