

by Duan Biggs

Track The Impact Of Kenya's Ivory Burn

Kenya's government delivered a powerful message against elephant poaching and the illegal ivory trade on 30 April by burning 105 tons of ivory, worth up to US\$220 million. With stockpile destruction on the rise, it is important to evaluate the impact of this strategy on elephant populations.

Since 1989, 21 countries have burned or crushed 263 tons of ivory — most of it (86%) in the past 5 years (see go.nature.com/ivory). However, there is no published evidence so far that these events reduce poaching. Destroying ivory stockpiles risks a perverse outcome: ivory becomes rarer, fetching higher prices and increasing poaching and illegal stockpiling (see M. 't Sas-Rolfes et al. *Pachyderm* 55, 62-77; 2014).

This has prompted calls by some for a highly controlled legal ivory trade to secure elephant populations (J. F. Walker and D. Stiles *Science* 328, 1633-1634; 2010) — an option that ivory destruction removes. It is therefore crucial to track the effects of Kenya's largest-ever ivory burn. Time is short and the stakes are high. "Why would you run an experiment and decide not to collect any data?" The experiment would seem to have two possible goals, intimately entwined with each other: a) to slow down the rate of poaching; b) to increase resources to those opposing the ivory trade.

It may well be that "no data was collected on the rate at which poaching declined", but there are considerable available on the improving financial and resource base of those opposing trade. This raises an interesting issue. If there are no test on the extent to which hypothesis 1 was correct ... why do it again" If there were test supporting hypothesis 2 it would make obvious sense to repeat it.

Note: Please also refer to The Guardian article dated 8th June "Is burning poached ivory good for elephants? Conservationists raise serious questions about the widespread incineration of ivory stockpiles confiscated from poachers" and to J. F. Walker's blog

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