

# Corruption raises doubts over ivory sales



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Arguments over whether to allow one-off sales of ivory stockpiles have dominated the opening stages of a two-week summit on trade in endangered species in Doha, Qatar. Opponents of the sales say that renewed trade in ivory would encourage elephant poaching. Backers say the proceeds could boost conservation and efforts to prevent poaching.

By 25 March, the 175 governments attending the [triennial meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) (CITES) must vote on the proposals, which Tanzania and Zambia are proposing. They must also decide whether to back a proposal from Kenya for a 20-year moratorium on all ivory trade.

CITES last week published two reports it had commissioned to assess whether the sales should be allowed. On balance, both backed the sales, infuriating conservationists.

The member nations of CITES agreed a global moratorium in 1989 but later voted to authorise "one-off" legal sales of stockpiles in 1999 and 2008. The ivory that is sold in these sales comes from elephants that have either died naturally or been killed in legal culls. Opponents say that illegal sales of ivory are now at an all-time high, stoked by these two earlier sales.

## Promoting poaching

Conservation bodies such as the [International Fund for Animal Welfare](#) argue that poachers see the one-off sales as an opportunity to sell more illegal ivory – because the volumes of legal ivory in circulation at the time of the sale makes illegal ivory less likely to be detected.

"Selling the stockpiles now, when trade is already out of hand, is ridiculous," says [Samuel Wasser](#) of the University of Washington in Seattle, the lead author of a letter signed by 27

conservationists in last week's issue of the journal *Science*. "There's no question that one-off sales promote poaching," says Wasser, citing data from a report prepared for CITES last November by Traffic, a wildlife trade monitoring organisation based in Cambridge, UK.

The two CITES reports disagree, arguing that Traffic's information on global ivory trade and seizures is inconclusive, with no clear-cut evidence that one-off sales spur poaching.

Both reports conclude that the sales "would be beneficial to the conservation of the elephant population", provided the proceeds were used to combat poaching and invested in community conservation and development programmes.

### **Serious misgivings**

But hidden within the reports are serious misgivings. [One report, on Tanzania](#) (PDF), for example, cites accusations of corruption within the country's Wildlife Department and collusion of anti-poaching staff in the illegal killing of elephants. It also reports a surge in seizures of illegal ivory from Tanzania and the involvement of international crime syndicates.

[The other report, on Zambia](#) (PDF), is far more complimentary, pointing out that no seizures of illegal ivory have been associated with that country since 2005.

Other researchers, as [Tom Milliken of Traffic argued in \*New Scientist\* last week](#), say that the sales are an unnecessary distraction from the main problem: the widespread lack of enforcement of the ivory ban, especially in west central Africa and Thailand.