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The Elephant in the Room: Why “When the Buying Stops, the Killing Can Too” is Still Relevant to Ivory Consumption

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In 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) officially banned the cross-border exchange of ivory. Over the past decade more countries have endeavoured to enact the ban, however, approximately 100 African elephants are still poached every day. Consequently, by departing from the traditional supply-side literature and focusing on demand, the research investigates how to ameliorate the ban, looking specifically at the world’s largest ivory market – China.

Using data from CITES, the research attempts to illustrate the relationship between rising disposable incomes, ivory consumption, and poaching levels. Additionally, in a tragedy of the commons fashion, a game theoretic model is employed to describe the consumption pattern, whereby individuals feel their marginal consumption does not impact the original resource base.

Tonnes of stockpiled ivory have also been burned and crushed by governments, both as a demonstration and conservation strategy to eliminate demand for ivory. The paper thereby also intends to develop an index of “societal awareness” via social media metrics as a proxy indicator of the signalling effect of ivory burns and crushes within the international community.

With the seemingly ineffective international ban, the research hypothesises that demand for ivory fuels supply, and thus hopes to confirm that ivory burns and crushes do work in dispelling the propensity to consume ivory, providing guidance for optimal policy making moving forward. Curtailing the excessive killing of elephants is but another step towards the preservation of global biodiversity and ensuring this creature does not become a remnant of the past.