

Comment

Imagine Africa without elephants

It was a horrible and unexpected sight. I was at Jamba, deep in southern Angola's dense bush country, visiting Dr. Jonas Savimbi, leader of the anti-communist UNITA guerrilla army. About me were the instruments of war: Artillery pieces, machineguns, mortars and munitions.

We entered one of UNITA's metal workshops where captured Soviet weapons were being refurbished. In one corner I noticed a five-foot high pile of what appeared to be wood. Looking closer, I gasped. Before me were the tusks of hundreds of elephants, adults and young alike.

In a neighboring workshop I observed UNITA soldiers working the rough ivory into souvenir curios, including a lamp, boxes and pendants. Somehow, this mute evidence of slaughtered elephants moved me even more than the wounded soldiers I had just seen in Jamba's fly-infested field hospital. The soldiers could fight or not fight; the elephants had no choice — they were simply machinegunned from Jeeps.

At the beginning of this century there were some 10 million elephants in Africa. By 1980, according to a study by the British scientist Douglas-Hamilton, there were only 1.3 million left in 35 African countries. Elephants were being slaughtered at the rate of 100,000 per year, far faster than they could reproduce. Kenya's elephant population has fallen by 50% over the past decade; that of war-torn Uganda by 85%.

Rhinos are also nearing extinction. Ten years ago Kenya had 10,000; today there are under 2,000 left.

Elephants are being massacred across Africa because the price of ivory has risen over the past 15 years from \$2.50 U.S. to more than \$75 U.S. per pound. Soar-



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ing prices are the result of growing demand by women for ivory ornaments. Ivory necklaces, bracelets and pendants are chic, and are causing the destruction of one of nature's treasures.

Only South Africa and a few black African governments even make an attempt to halt this appalling slaughter. Elephants roam far and wide and cannot easily be fenced into policed reserves. Even when they are enclosed, poachers far outnumber game wardens. The tusks of one elephant can make a man rich by African standards.

Most African nations just turn their backs on the massive killing of Africa's once abundant wildlife. For many black Africans, elephants and other big game are pests and nuisances to be gunned down — just as our western ranchers regard wolves and coyotes.

Being up close to elephants in the wild is a daunting experience. In nature, elephants are hardly cuddly Babars. One night in southern Angola's bush, our Jeeps were chased by calving female elephants, testy giants who did not like being disturbed.

Another time, I was afoot inside the wilds of Kruger National Park. We heard a great crash to our left. I asked my guide what we should do. "If it's a water

buffalo, climb a tree. If it's an elephant run for your life — it will put you out of a tree and stomp you."

Elephants may not be always friendly, but anyone who has ever seen an elephant in the wild cannot help but be deeply moved by this majestic animal. But unless we do something quickly, at the present rate of killing, Africa may have no more elephants outside of captivity within a decade.

There is only one way to stop the massacre of nature's most noble and splendid creature, an animal whose intelligence and community spirit are not much inferior to many peoples of Africa. And that is for women everywhere to stop buying ivory. Ivory is beautiful, lustrous, and possessed of an inner warmth. Yet every woman, before she buys a bauble of ivory, should see the body of an elephant freshly killed, the great, gaping, bloody holes where its tusks have been cut out, the motherless infants left crying in terror and sorrow.

In our age of high technology, destroying nature's irreplaceable creatures for the sake of adornment or fashion is barbarous. Ivory and furs, no matter how beautiful or alluring, belong to an age of cruelty that we should long ago have outgrown.

An English lady, watching a wretched donkey being beaten on a Cairo street, observed to me that a nation's level of civilization could be judged by how it treated its animals. I agree. Standing before the pile of blood-stained tusks that day in Jamba I shuddered. Each time I see ivory gracing a lady's wrist or neck, I think of those splendid creatures being cut up by machinegun bullets.

One day soon there will be no more elephants, just old ivory to remind us of our cruelty.