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OPINION HOME

EDITORIAL

Ban ivory, rhino horn sales

Oregon can put pressure on poachers

APRIL 7, 2015

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Thirty-five years ago there were 1.2 million elephants in Africa. Now there are about one-third that number, and in two decades they could all be gone. Poaching is a primary reason for the decline — bandits kill elephants for their tusks, and sell them into the billion-dollar global ivory market. The same thing is happening to the rhinoceros, whose horn is prized as a folk remedy. Oregon can do its small but important part to shut down this trade by banning the sale of ivory and rhino horn.

Oregonians may be surprised to learn that commerce in these items is not illegal already. Some confusion is forgivable, because the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service bans the importation of elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn. The service tightened its ivory ban last year, prohibiting interstate trade in ivory items less than 100 years old and sales within states of ivory items produced after 1990. That's the year the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), a treaty signed by 180 nations, prohibited most international trade in ivory.



Yet items made of ivory — jewelry, chess sets, figurines and the like — can still be found for sale. The sellers can usually vouch that the items were made before 1990, and therefore qualify for the CITES exception. The trouble is, the age and source of ivory is hard to establish without sophisticated testing, so newer, illegally imported pieces of ivory can be marketed as legitimate. This has allowed the United States to remain the world's No. 2 market for African ivory, second only to China. Old rhino horns, mostly hunting trophies, can also be sold legally in Oregon, and often end up being illegally exported to buyers in Asia.

Senate Bill 913 in the Oregon Legislature would ban ivory sales, with a few exceptions such as firearms with ivory inlay and certain musical instruments. It would also impose a no-exceptions ban on the sale of rhino horn. The bill asks Oregonians to shut down the sale of some legitimately acquired items as the price for stopping the trade in illicit ivory. The tradeoff is well worth it, and becomes more so every 15 minutes — that's how often poachers kill an African elephant.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service encourages states to pass laws like SB 913, and at least two already have done so. Testifying before a New York state legislative committee, the service's chief enforcement officer said "We believe a substantial amount of elephant ivory is illegally imported and enters the domestic market. It is extremely difficult to differentiate legally acquired ivory from ivory derived from elephant poaching. Our criminal investigations and anti-smuggling efforts have clearly shown that legal ivory trade can serve as a cover for illegal trade." He concluded that laws such as SB 913 would make it "more difficult to launder illegal ivory into the market and thus reduce the threat of poaching to imperiled elephant populations."

SB 913 would not make it illegal to own something made of ivory — no one from the state would come to confiscate grandpa's ivory cribbage board. Gifts and bequests among family members would still be allowed. But selling ivory would generally be illegal, eliminating the need for guesswork about whether poaching was involved.

Maybe in 20 years the African elephant and the rhinoceros will be extinct in the wild. Then the world could stop worrying about where ivory and rhino horn came from. Legal trade in ivory knickknacks could resume, and people could use the dwindling supply of rhino horn for whatever purposes they imagine it serves. But for now, any chance to slow or stop the slaughter of elephants and rhinos should be seized upon. SB 913 deserves approval.

