

News story: We must end the shameful ivory trade now

The African Elephant is a species apart – a beautiful animal that inspires awe in any who see it. Safeguarding the future of this amazing animal is a mission our species cannot shirk. And the need for action is urgent because numbers are declining dramatically, driven by human greed for ivory.

Long prized for ornaments and jewellery, ivory is increasingly seen as a symbol of wealth and social status, particularly in East Asia. And in recent decades, poaching has reached devastating levels.

The numbers are stark – about 20,000 elephants are killed every year, which equals about 55 every single day.

The unthinkable could happen – unless we take action to stop poaching today future generations will be deprived of one of the world's most majestic and inspirational creatures.

Africa leaders have called for an international response to this global problem. The Presidents of Botswana, Uganda, Gabon and Kenya have made a joint plea for the European Union to shut down ivory markets, arguing that if we want to tackle poaching we must remove the opportunity for criminals to profit from their sickening activities.

That is why we will ban the sale of ivory in the UK. The ban will cover ivory items of all ages and once it has been approved by Parliament, it will be the toughest ivory ban in Europe and one of the toughest in the world. A ban of this kind is the only way to demonstrate that ivory – and the elephant – is not a commodity for sale.

In line with the approach taken by other countries, there will be carefully-defined and narrowly-targeted exemptions for items that do not contribute directly or indirectly to the poaching of elephants. The exemptions have been narrowed since consulting conservation groups and the antiques trade. They are balanced and proportionate – and crucially they will not undermine the ban or provide loopholes that could continue to fuel elephant poaching.

All exempted items will have to be registered and the police and other enforcement agencies will pursue illegal sales with new powers. Anyone found breaching the ban could face an unlimited fine or up to five years in jail.

When it is passed, this ban will confirm the UK's place at the forefront of global efforts to end the shameful trade in one of our most beautiful natural treasures. We will continue to work with international partners to tackle illegal wildlife trade – the world's fourth most profitable criminal enterprise, worth up to £17 billion annually. Our global leadership is essential to show the world that we cannot go on as we are – we must end this trade.

The fact that ivory is still bought and sold for financial gain and status shames our generation. We need decisive action to end this abhorrent trade and take on the smugglers and poachers who are depriving some of the poorest countries in the world of their valuable natural capital. Only then will we be able to claim we have protected this iconic species for future generations.