

Dear President Xi Jinping,

We write you today on behalf of global citizens to ask for your help in saving the elephants of Africa.

First, I would like to congratulate you on your leadership of one of the world's most influential and powerful nations, a position which gives you and China the capacity to shape the future of the world in ways that most other countries are not able to do. Because of this global position, the international community looks increasingly to China for leadership in many areas, including combating wildlife trafficking.

As you know, Africa's wildlife is in crisis, with the number of elephants lost to poaching higher than ever before, and with many other species being poached and trafficked in ever-escalating and unsustainable numbers. Recent scientific reports have determined that 100,000 elephants were killed over 3 years between 2010 and 2012. Fewer than 400,000 elephants survive in Africa, and the figure may be as low as 250,000. This is nothing short of catastrophic.

Many countries play a part in this tragedy. However, according to the United Nations CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora), most of the poached ivory finds its way to China, where the demand for ivory has soared in recent years as China's middle-class citizens become increasingly affluent. Unless urgent actions are taken by the international community and China in particular to stop this demand, the killing of elephants will continue unabated and may lead to their extinction in the wild within 10 years.

So there is very little time left for these remarkable creatures who share so many traits with our own species – a great intelligence, a deep emotional capacity, a long period of nurturing and educating their young, innate deference to their elders, and intense grieving when they lose a member of their family or herd. Furthermore, as a keystone species upon which many other animal and plant species depend, they fulfill a vital role in the ecological balance of the environment.

Now the world is looking to you, Mr. President, and to your great country, to take action to consider ending the ivory trade in China – to stop using elephant tusks in the carving factories (and move to alternative production such as stone or synthetic materials that are environmentally and ethically acceptable), to outlaw the buying and selling of ivory, and to educate your citizens about the true deadly cost of ivory.

You have already shown yourself to be an extraordinary and forward-thinking leader. In advancing the Chinese Dream, 中国梦, you lead a country that has shown astonishing progress in the past 30 years, the result of your people's capacity to embrace new ideas and actions that modify – and remove where necessary – old and outdated ways of thinking.

Ivory products are a luxury commodity that encourages extravagant and socially irresponsible spending, which runs counter to your austerity policies. It is time to consign ivory to the past.

China is now in the forefront of humanity's march into the 21st century, and it will earn greater respect in the world if it can bring to an end a traditional technique that is based on the brutal killing of tens of thousands of African elephants.

China has a long tradition of compassion and reverence for all forms of life and the natural world. It is no secret how ivory is obtained, and the long chain of killing, suffering, criminality and violence that characterize the ivory trade. The illegal ivory trade also exacerbates corruption and weak governance in Africa, and deprives the natural heritage and economic development that the local African communities depend on. If the Chinese people were to know of the terrible suffering of elephants who are butchered for their ivory, and the devastating social and economic impacts inflicted upon the African communities, they would feel anguish.

We believe your people, as well as the global community, would welcome your decision to ban the trade that perpetuates so much cruelty and a negative image of China.

Mr. President, you have been called to lead your country at this critical moment in its history – to lead your people into a new age of prosperity and national revitalization, and to show the world China's true greatness and potential. This greatness lies not only in the remarkable economic progress China has made in such a short time, but in the character of its people and in their compassion for the natural world.

Sir, we urge and implore you to act decisively to finally end China's domestic ivory trade (both legal and illegal), and to consider the many ways this will serve China's long-term political and economic interests. We ask that you make this historical decision and cement your lasting legacy as one of the truly enlightened leaders of our time – a leader whom future generations will speak of with respect, admiration and gratitude.

The elephants of Africa are dying in their tens of thousands every year to provide ivory for the carving factories in China and elsewhere in Asia. The world is anticipating your leadership in this global effort to rebuild human respect for the elephants and the natural world as a whole.