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US follows Gabon's lead in fight against ivory traffickers

Libreville, Gabon (14 November 2013)

The United States on Thursday publicly destroyed six tons of confiscated elephant ivory tusks, following a precedent set by Gabon when the country's president Ali Bongo personally set fire to its seized ivory stock in June 2012.

"Gabon was the first country, to send a clear and loud signal that it is determined to put an end to wildlife criminality by destroying its entire ivory stockpile," according to Lee White, head of Gabon's National Parks Agency.

"We congratulate the United States for sending the same signal, which we hope will be heard around the world."

"We also encourage other states to do the same and fully audit and publicly destroy their seized ivory stocks," White added.

Rising demand for ivory – especially in East Asia – has led to an epidemic of elephant poaching across the whole African continent, including in Central Africa, where nearly two thirds of its forest elephants were massacred between 2002 and 2012.

So serious is the crisis that in May of this year United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said that poaching and illegal wildlife trade – with the associated proliferation of weapons, armed gangs and criminal syndicates – poses a threat to peace and security in the Congo Basin.

Gabon's elephants are also being targeted by poachers. And, although it only represents 13 percent of the forests of Central Africa, it is believed to be the home of half of the Congo Basin's remaining forest elephants.

"International law currently bans ivory trade across borders, and ivory originating from seizures or of unknown sources has been and always will be illegal. Also, since domestic ivory trade is illegal in all Central African countries, ivory has no legal market value," according to Bas Huijbregts, head of WWF's campaign against illegal wildlife trade in Central Africa.

"Destroying seized ivory therefore not only raises awareness about the crisis, but ensures that it will be kept out of the illegal ivory market."

"Illegal wildlife trade, is one of the most lucrative illicit international trades. Valued at between $7.8 and $10 billion, behind counterfitting, drugs, weapons, oil and human trafficking," Huijbregts concluded.

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WWF is campaigning for greater protection of threatened species such as rhinos, tigers and elephants. In order to save endangered animals, source, transit and demand countries must all improve law enforcement, customs controls and judicial systems. WWF is also urging governments in consumer countries to undertake demand reduction efforts to curb the use of endangered species products.

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