HONG KONG, 2 June 2017 — Civic Exchange sent the following statement to the Legislative Council's Panel on Environmental Affairs, regarding the debate over a Government ivory ban.

Hong Kong is an international trading hub for ivory, a product which puts endangered elephants at risk of extinction, harms impoverished communities in Africa, and has been linked to illegal actions like smuggling. Hong Kong plays a key role in this harmful trade – and our decisions on this issue impact both animals and people across the world.

Civic Exchange, an independent and non-partisan public policy think-tank, supports the Hong

Kong Government's proposed three-step ban on the ivory trade and increased penalties for violators.

The Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants (Amendment) Bill 2017 would ban the import and re-export of all elephant hunting trophies to discourage "sport hunting." It would ban the import and re-export of most elephant ivory, except for genuinely antique art, jewellery or instruments pre-dating 1925. In addition, the amendment would allow for high penalties – of up to HK $10 million in fines and 10-years imprisonment – for the worst offenders. The punishment must be severe enough to have an effect on the global wildlife trade. If passed, the full ivory ban will be enacted in Hong Kong by the end of 2021.

Civic Exchange agrees with the Government's statement that "no compensation should be given to the ivory trade," in response to traders' demand that the Government "buy out" their ivory stock. Civic Exchange does not support the use of taxpayers' money for pay-outs, which could backfire and ironically lead to greater demand for ivory in the next few years.

We hope that the Legislative Council will take these broader implications into account when the issue is debated on 6 June, 2017.

The Situation in Hong Kong

Calls to ban the ivory trade date to at least 1990, when the Hong Kong Government funded the re-training of ivory carvers and traders into different vocations. The ivory industry has had at least 27 years of notice that their trade would eventually be phased out; there are now fewer than 100 ivory carvers left in the city.

The proposed ban would stop trade in "pre-Convention ivory," or ivory that was in circulation before 1975, which is currently legal under a licensing system administered by the Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). The proposed ban, first announced in December 2016, will not be fully enacted until December 2021. So traders currently holding stocks of legal ivory will have had a five-year grace period to sell it.

However, according to research by groups like WildAid and WWF, the trade in "legal" pre-1975 ivory is often used as a front for the laundering of illegal ivory from newly killed animals, especially given the cost and time needed to age-test each piece. According to the AFCD, 2,325 kilograms of smuggled ivory was seized by the Hong Kong authorities in the past four years. This amount, which may have cost the lives of 580 elephants, was likely only a fraction of the total volume traded on the black market. The proposed ban would put a stop to almost all elephant ivory trade, sourced either before or after 1975. According to the Government, the ban would "greatly help enforcement agencies."

The Situation Globally

The illegal killing of elephants has reached unprecedented levels in Africa, driven largely by demand in Asia. If nothing is done, wild African elephant populations could become extinct in our lifetime.

The ivory trade has dire social impacts. Illegal hunting in general is a violent business, and almost 600 Park Rangers were killed on the job from 2009 to 2016, according to The Thin Green Line Foundation. The demise of elephants also harms wildlife tourism in poor communities, which depend on that industry.

The 183 global signatories to The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), including Hong Kong, have been unified in closing domestic markets that contribute to poaching and illegal trade. None of those signatories has paid compensation to ivory traders. China will not pay compensation to ivory businesses when their own ban comes into force at the end of 2017.

Conclusion

Based on research and evidence from both NGOs and the Government itself, Civic Exchange strongly supports the proposed ivory ban and increase in penalties. Civic Exchange does not support any financial compensation to ivory traders, which may backfire by actually increasing ivory demand and price in the short-term.

The killing of endangered elephants – so that their tusks can be made into luxury products — is a brutal practice that harms both animals and human communities. Hong Kong should join in the international movement to stop this trade by passing a long-overdue ban.

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