Call of the wild

Is the prohibition of trade saving wildlife, or endangering it?

TWIN dragons sit high above the bustle of Grant Street, marking the ceremonial entrance to San Francisco’s Chinatown. Up a steep hill, the cheap souvenirs give way to more exotic wares: antique figures carved in the Japanese netsuke style, statues of monkeys and roosters, delicate earrings and necklaces. They are ivory. There are lots of them. And they shouldn’t be there.

In 1989 the signatories of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) agreed to ban trade in ivory. Last year CITES, which now has 172 member countries, extended this ban for a further nine years, having sanctioned but two sales from stocks, of which only one has taken place. A stroll in Chinatown suggests that trade is thriving nonetheless. A forthcoming report by researchers for Care for the Wild, a British animal-welfare and conservation charity, says that around half the ivory in this market comes from illegally killed elephants. Other studies reveal similar stories elsewhere in the West.

A sharp increase in ivory seizures in recent years also points to a flourishing trade. Meanwhile, rising wealth in Asia is raising the returns from poaching. Prices have leapt from $200 a kilo in 2004 to $850-900. New ivory is appearing: you can encase your mobile phone in it if you like. Some scientists think poaching may be as prevalent as it was before the original ban.

Citing CITES

The ivory ban is frequently held up as a prime exhibit for CITES, which many conservationists consider a highly successful agreement. Elephant numbers, according to figures from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, have been rising by 4% a year in the well-protected populations of southern and east Africa, but in central and west Africa no one knows what is going on. Some countries, such as Botswana, home to a quarter of the African total, and South Africa, now have so many elephants that they would like to shoot more of them (and have asked CITES, without success, for permission to sell more ivory).

The only certainty is that the official figures do not reflect the extent of poaching. A huge haul of ivory in 2002, the result of the slaughter of between 5,000 and 6,500 beasts, probably came largely from elephants in Zambia. Yet Zambia had reported the illegal killing of only 135 animals in the previous ten years. Suppose, says Samuel Wasser of the University of Washington, in Seattle, that customs officers capture one-tenth of what is poached (a guess, but a fair guess). That implies that 7.8% of Africa’s elephants are killed every year, compared with 7% before the ban.

This is a continent-wide average: while pachyderm populations in Botswana and South Africa are booming, elephants elsewhere are faring badly.

In all, CITES bans trade in nearly 1,000 animal and plant species; trade in many more is limited by permits. In testimony to America’s House of Representatives on March 5th, William Clark, chairman of the Interpol working group on wildlife crime, said that there were clear signs that illegal trade was increasing. More frequent seizures, of larger volume, have been occurring, even though enforcement capacity has not changed much. The increased seizures, said Mr Clark, reflect larger, more frequent shipments by the sophisticated criminal gangs now involved in the trade.

If trade is on the rise, then the efficacy of trade bans as a conservation measure is at least debatable. To be sure, some bans have worked. Exports of wild birds from four of the five leading bird-exporting countries fell by more than two-thirds between the late 1980s and the late 1990s as a result of CITES-related trade measures, including an American import ban. Tanga-