

*Sunday January 12, 2014*

## **The bling an elephant died for**

By Jim Taylor

A small news report this week noted that China had crushed six tons of confiscated elephant tusks and ivory carvings, last Monday.

It's a symbolic gesture. Six tons may seem like a lot, but it's a drop in the bucket of illegal trade in dead elephants. In 2012, some 22,000 African elephants were killed for their tusks; the year before, about 25,000.

Tragically, China is the world's biggest market for those elephants' tusks. Ivory has a wonderful feel, and can be carved into marvelously intricate art. Go into any market in China, and you'll find ivory for sale. It's considered a status symbol in China's growing middle class. Last year, according to the British *Guardian* newspaper, the street value of ivory sales was higher than either gold or heroin.

China's symbolic demolition follows a similar action by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services in November, using a rock crusher to pulverize the country's six-ton collection of tusks, carvings, and jewelry.

Kenya started it, back in 1989, burning 12 tons of tusks. Zambia leaped onto the bandwagon in 1992, with ten tons of ivory. Kenya burned another five tons in 2011, followed by Gabon in 2012 with five tons more. The Philippines became the first Asian nation, with five tons.

Total, about 50 tons of ivory. Worth, in raw form, some \$200 million. As works of art, priceless. Going up in smoke. Or becoming very expensive gravel.

## **Supply and demand**

My rudimentary understanding of economics wonders about the wisdom of destroying all that ivory. The price of anything, I gather, depends on supply and demand. It seems to me that if you reduce the supply without reducing the demand, the price goes up. Which would increase the incentive for poachers to kill elephants or mutilate them with chainsaws. Wouldn't it?

That has, in fact, been the effect of the international trade ban that came into effect after Kenya's first ivory burning. Like heroin and cocaine, the ivory traffic went underground. If anything, the killing increased.

Surely, a better solution is to reduce the demand. As the price falls, so should the incentive to murder elephants.

Yes, that's difficult. But it worked with tobacco. Far fewer people smoke cigarettes today than did in the 1960s.

Education is possible. When I came back from Africa in 1971, I brought with me several small ivory trinkets purchased in local markets. I gave one as a token present to a colleague at a company Christmas party. "Oh," she said, with distaste, "that's ivory."

Until then, it had never occurred to me that ivory could be anything but desirable. I have never bought ivory since.

## **Higher life form?**

I admit to a fondness for elephants that I don't have for, say, warthogs or whales. There's something almost sacred about a creature that can be so powerful and so intentionally gentle. Watching a mother elephant raise her newborn infant onto its tottering feet; watching a herd provide community care for its elderly matriarchs; watching a

domestic elephant's affectionate relationship with its human – I cannot help thinking sometimes that elephants may represent a higher form of life than we humans do.

The memories of elephants are legendary, their ability to communicate with each other over great distances baffles our understanding.

When South African conservationist Lawrence Anthony died a year ago, two herds of wild elephants travelled about 12 hours through the night to gather at his home, apparently to pay last respects to the man who had saved their lives years before. They stayed for two days, then quietly padded off into their reserves again.

Granted, elephant herds can be hugely destructive. A rogue elephant can kill a human in seconds. Roving herds of wild elephants can destroy a rural farmer's crops in minutes.

So poachers can still, as John Frederick Walker of the World Policy Institute wrote last May, "find recruits among impoverished rural villagers in elephant habitats for whom a modest bribe represents a fortune."

## **Funding for terrorism**

"What's different about today's elephant crisis," Walker went on, "is that poaching has gone professional. Increasingly, well-armed cadres...are using night-vision goggles, rocket launchers, even helicopters to mow down herds of elephants for their ivory.

"Now that militant groups like the Janjaweed in Sudan, the Lord's Resistance Army [in Uganda], and especially Somalia's al-Shabab are involved in ivory trafficking, protecting elephants could become wildlife conservation's version of the War on Drugs, a hugely expensive, dangerous exercise there'd be no hope of winning."

If we want to protect elephants – and I hope we do – the change must come from the consumer. Refuse to buy ivory. When you see someone wearing an ivory brooch or pin, using an ivory letter opener, displaying an ivory carving on her mantelpiece, say an audible prayer for the elephant who gave up its life for that piece of bling.

Make ivory a prized possession of elephants, not of humans.

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## **YOUR TURN**

Last week's column, which started off with a comment about New Year's Resolutions, drew this response from Bill Peterson: "A number of years ago I received a copy of my son's resolutions. I have placed a copy on my desk to remind me daily of their content:

I resolve to conduct myself as if this were the last day (or week or month) I have on this earth.

I resolve to make a significant difference in someone else's life.

I resolve to make a significant contribution to my community.

I resolve to be authentic and caring with the people around me.

I resolve to give something away with which it is difficult for me to part."

Then I went on to talk about charitable donations. Lurna Tallman brought a justice element into the conversation: "In regard to charitable giving, I think you have to take the vast economic and social changes in Canadian society into consideration. The charitable institutions that grew up and thrived in the post-war period skimmed some of the cream from an unprecedented and probably unique, i.e., not replicable, economic boom in human history. Thus far, no economic theory put into action has improved the economic outlook for everyone and not just for those few controlling the mega-companies in the economically successful nations. Furthermore, the lifestyle expectations that

have spread globally based on that peak are devastating the resources of the planet. The still-wealthy nation to the south continues to give the impression that philanthropy and charitable giving can fund anything and everything overlooked by governments; but, even there, terrible disparities are glaringly evident.

“Far more young people are forced to live at home, dependant on their parents, because jobs don't exist or because the ones that do exist are McJobs inadequately paid to support independence, let alone a family. If you add to that burden the costs of educating children beyond high school, inadequate disability provision, inadequate child-care facilities, and dozens of other gaps in the national social fabric, the parental financial burden is multiplied by tens of thousands of dollars per year. Meanwhile, as you pointed out a while ago, computerization and other ways of mechanizing human labour have reduced available jobs and undermined the tax base.

“Are people less generous? Or are they less well-paid. Are they spending disposable income charitably, if they have any, where it is desperately needed although they receive no income tax receipts for their giving?”

Tom Simper shares my uneasiness about some big charities: “I like your article. It helps me to feel better that I am considered a good giver of time and resources.

“However, I have a problem with being sure my giving is going to good use at the charity. I have great concern for the apparent high salaries that the CEOs of some of the charities are receiving . It would be valuable when making decisions to whom we send our dollars if we were more aware of how much goes to the actual charity work and how much goes to administration.”

Arlene Simmonds noted, “Just a little observation about charitable donations... It has been my experience that some of the most generous givers to charity are seniors on small fixed incomes. They, like my husband and me, do give generously but can't claim it on income tax because our income is too small. Just a thought -- there may be more unsung generous givers out there than we are aware of. “

Betty Schilling pointed out a difference in the way the U.S. and Canada treat charitable deductions: “In the US, if you do not give to a high level (like a certain % of your taxable income) you are better off taking the ‘standard deduction’ -- which would translate in your example as no charitable giving. This would twist your percentage of givers adversely.”

Fran Ota wrote that “booting around Japan” makes it hard to keep up with emails from Canada. So she's late with her “two cents on the pipeline.”

“I have friends who are well employed in the shipping industry for Ostensjo Rederi, the huge oil and gas producer in Norway,” Fran wrote, “but that won't stop me from speaking against it.... I found it interesting that Norway, while selling oil and gas elsewhere, isn't using it themselves. Electric cars and hybrids are more common, and ‘charge points’ available. (Their electricity is hydroelectric.) Here in Japan there are electric cars, hybrids, and ‘charge points’ appearing, even as Japan struggles with its nuclear issues (78% of population opposed. I wonder if there's a change happening -- that the oil and gas market is going to begin to shrink...) On a bit of a tangent, this week, Monsanto **\*gave up\*** trying to market and sell its GMO corn -- with the exception of Spain and Portugal (who will probably follow), it's out in the EU. There are brief bits of light on the horizon.”

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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