

Savannah

What to do

Elephants without teeth

Equally important is the problem of elephants, hunted for their ivory tusks. The tusks are the upper incisors, which in old males can reach 2-3 metres long and are used by the pachyderms to strip the bark off trees or dig up roots and in social gatherings are exhibited as a sign of power and used as weapons. Ivory is also used to make jewels and other items, which are much sought-after and sold all over the world. Since the Seventies, the CITES has been successfully protecting Asian elephants and since 1990 African elephants as well. The situation has improved so much that sometimes it causes overpopulation, so that entire families of elephants have to be moved to less crowded areas instead of killing them. Many elephants are moved, for instance, to Angola, whose Government after decades of wars and poaching is trying to reintroduce the Big Five, the five big African mammals: elephants, leopards, buffaloes, lions and rhinoceroses.

Vegetal ivory

Vegetal ivory (*Phytelphas* sp.) is a substance that can be used to replace animal ivory that for years has seriously endangered elephants and threatened them with extinction. Vegetal ivory nuts are extremely hard and can be carved to produce a number of items as well as powerful abrasives and phytochemicals. In addition, this substance, before being hardened, has a creamy texture and is quite tasty. The leaves of this plant are also used to make packaging straw. This substance was most commonly used in 1929 and Ecuador was the greatest exporter. In 1941 the trade of this substance slumped and exports dropped to one quarter. Today, however, the trade of vegetal ivory has recovered thanks to the increased "ecological awareness", even if it is very expensive: a button of vegetal ivory costs 25% more than a plastic one. Today, Ecuador produces approximately 2,300 kg which are mostly exported to Italy, Japan and Germany.