LIFE HACKS

Researchers Pioneer a Way to Use DNA from Elephant Tusks to Catch Poachers

By bestfolkmedicine · 22/02/2022 · 2 min read



A team of researchers from the University of Washington created a method of using DNA from the tusks of elephants to resolve the mysteries around poaching and ensure animal traffickers get what they deserve.

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Unfortunately, estimates show that at least 10,000 African elephants are killed yearly and then the ivory is packed into containers and transported to ports across Africa.

A Promising Method to Catch Elephant Tusk Poachers

According to Samuel Wasser from the University of Washington who's been tracking the shipments for more than ten years, when some of these containers are opened up, they're often full of cover load, something the poachers use to cover the ivory.

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This may be timber or coffee. Sometimes, it's also plastic waste.

Several years back, he and his team sequenced the DNA of the seized ivory and this helped them link it to shipments from three larger cartels that smuggle ivory.

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Today, their scope is expanded and they're studying DNA of more than 4000 tusks in 49 big seizures of ivory.

Wasser notes that the connectivity they got from the individual transnational criminal organizations to seizures was unbelievable. Some of them were associated with 30 distinct seizures, he added.

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Their newest analysis has been published in the *Nature Human Behavior* journal.

When these connections are made and associate one to another seizure, it's information for the law enforcement that the physical data they have can be linked and made into a bigger whole.

This will help strengthen the investigation.

This analysis's co-author, Special Agent John Brown III of the Department of Homeland Security says that the DNA evidence may also be of aid in the collaboration of governments in the prosecution of these criminal organizations.

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He explains that when this connectivity is seen, one can reach out to other jurisdictions and tell them about a connection to some of their seizures.

Their work has already been helpful in making an arrest of two ivory traffickers in Seattle last year. When you stop traffickers, Wasser explains, the link between poachers and buyers overseas is

damaged.

The Importance of Management & Conservation of the Resources

The Kenyan-based ecologist Benson Okita from *Save the Elephant*s wasn't part of the study, but explains the importance of the DNA work and says that there are additional obstacles to be taken into consideration.

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Okita notes that if there's corruption in some of these parts where illegal trafficking occurs, it's harder to arrest culprits or make successful prosecutions.

According to Okita, another problem was economic and making sure the local communities benefit from the conservation of elephants.

The future has to include people who understand that this resource can still be useful with proper conservation and management.

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This will brighten up the future for the 400,000 African elephants remaining today.

Sources:

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