Statement by His Holiness, the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa
Ogyen Trinley Dorje, Head of the Karma Kagyu School of
Tibetan Buddhism, Against the Illegal Trade in Ivory

The discoveries of modern science have shown us that humans are simply one of
many millions of species who share this planet. Whether we acknowledge it or not, it
has become self-evident that we are part of an interdependent web of life whose
parts work together to mutually support each other. Each ecosystem is comprised of
myriad life-forms intricately interconnected and together they form the biosphere in
which we are able to exist; if the balance is disturbed in any way, the consequences
impact every species.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, farmers were encouraged by the
authorities to kill the sparrows because the perception at that time was that the birds
ate the seed and thus damaged the crops. Once the sparrows were gone, insects
multiplied unchecked and devoured the crops that everyone was trying to protect. In
the end, the loss and suffering were much greater. We presume that we are more
intelligent and wiser than other species and yet we are unable to predict the
consequences of species loss. It seems a matter of common sense to preserve
biodiversity, irrespective of our beliefs or philosophies, yet many people fail to
understand this basic principle of inter-connectedness. Instead, we humans
irresponsibly follow our own desires, unable or unwilling to differentiate between
what we want and what we need.

I recently learned that several thousand African elephants were killed last year in
cruel and horrific ways, simply to feed the insatiable greed for ivory. Some argue
that the use of ivory and other animal parts to make religious artifacts, decorative
objects or medicine is an intrinsic part of their cultural tradition. This may be true but
the historical use of ivory in former times had a limited impact on the species
involved. Nowadays, the organized nature of wildlife killing and trade however
means that the use of modern firearms and technology creates immense damage and
great suffering and ancient cultural values have been lost and replaced by big
business and profit.

As a Buddhist, I am familiar with one of the Jataka tales which tells how Sakyamuni
Buddha was once born as a pure white elephant. Moreover, the Buddha’s mother,
Queen Mayawati had a dream that a white elephant with six tusks pierced her
womb, thus heralding his birth. These are just two examples of how elephants are
used as a metaphor for Lord Buddha in Buddhist tradition. Elephants are therefore
precious to us and should be treated with special affection. As Buddhists, we should
do everything we can to protect this species, not least because elephants clearly
demonstrate compassion and caring to one another.

From an ethical standpoint, it seems to me that every sentient being has the right to
be happy and to be free from suffering. I believe that in the depths of our hearts each of us has the capacity for natural compassion: when we see other sentient beings suffer, we empathize, and we recognize the wish of other sentient beings to be happy and to avoid suffering. I humbly request you, therefore, not to act thoughtlessly. Do not cause the deaths of elephants, or indeed other wild animals such as rhinos, and tigers, in order to satisfy your own desires, and please avoid the use of illegal wildlife products in any form.