



ADVOCATES FOR ELEPHANTS

KIDS ON DIFFERENT CONTINENTS ARE WORKING TO PROTECT PACHYDERMS.

▲ Kids' voices can be powerful. Just ask Nellie Shute. In 2011, the then-11-year-old was horrified to learn that tens of thousands of elephants were being killed for their ivory tusks, which were carved into statues, jewelry, and other trinkets or used to show off wealth.

Because one-third of the tusk is inside the animal's skull, to get it, poachers had to kill the elephant.

Historically, ivory was valued in cultures across Asia, including Hong Kong, where Nellie lived. International trade in ivory had long been banned. But, at that time, Hong Kong allowed it to be sold—as long as it was inside the country and with a permit. Yet there were many loopholes. People often bought it in Hong Kong and smuggled it out of the country. The scale was massive. Hong Kong authorities had taken possession of 33 tons (30 metric tons) of illegal ivory by 2013—about the weight of 60 grizzly bears. That's why Nellie wanted to stop it.

She gave a presentation at school. Her classmates were shocked and talked to their parents, who owned ivory. That was the start of Nellie's "Say No to Ivory" message.

► Nellie's efforts grew when ivory was displayed at her school. In 2012 the government had starting lending confiscated ivory to schools for "education" about the illegal trade. But Nellie thought it made people want ivory.

"Kids were walking past and saying 'Wow, that's so cool,'" she says. "It wasn't cool at all. An elephant was killed and had its face ripped off so that those tusks could be there."

Nellie wanted the display gone, so she talked to classmates, teachers, and administrators. Many had never thought about the origin of that ivory, but once they learned they agreed with Nellie. A short time later, the school shipped the ivory back, along with a petition organized by Nellie with more than 500 signatures that explained why.



▲ Two friends from different schools joined Nellie in her mammoth mission. Together they formed a club, the Elephant Angels, in 2013.

Then-9-year-old Christina Seigrist had learned about elephants from her parents, who worked in conservation. She says, "I was worried that if we didn't do anything, I wouldn't be able to see elephants in real life when I grow up."

Then-11-year-old Lucy Lan Skrine felt the same way. Vacationing in Thailand, she had met an elephant close up. "Knowing these friendly, harmless animals could be extinct in 10 to 15 years made me want to help," she explains.

The Elephant Angels created an online petition to ask the government to destroy its stockpile of confiscated ivory. To them, Hong Kong's stockpile signaled that it was OK to want and keep ivory—like the display in Nellie's school. The petition soon earned 18,000 signatures, greatly surpassing their goal, and on January 22, 2014 they delivered it to authorities. While many factors played a role in the decision, one day later the Hong Kong government announced it would destroy most of its stockpile.

CHINESE 中藝 ARTS & CRAFTS



▲ Despite that success, elephant poaching was still rampant, and shops still sold ivory. The Elephant Angels wanted to do more, so they protested outside of Hong Kong's largest ivory shop, Chinese Arts & Crafts. On February 15, 2014, they spent hours holding up signs, handing out leaflets, and talking to shoppers.

"I was able to tell kids my age that were visiting from mainland China that elephants were being killed for their ivory," Christina says. "They were shocked and horrified and immediately told their parents right there not to buy the ivory."

After the story made the local news, more kids joined the fight. Sixth graders at Hong Kong's Clearwater Bay School were already concerned after doing a school project on the illegal ivory trade. They staged another protest outside that same store—adding to a growing call to stop the ivory trade.

Three days later, Chinese Arts & Crafts announced it would stop selling ivory.

Nellie was ecstatic. "If it's not in the shops, people can't buy it. An elephant's life is not something that can just be bought and sold."



▲ The girls thanked Hong Kong officials with cards that read "Thank you 11,000 times"—the number of elephants represented by the stockpile.

"It's a way of putting their memory to rest," Nellie says.



▲ Over the next year, Hong Kong schoolchildren, including the Elephant Angels, targeted other ivory shops, organized more protests and public events, and started another online petition. This one called for a total ivory ban and garnered more than 60,000 signatures.



◀ Meanwhile in Vermont in the northeastern United States, kids like Taegen Yardley were also trying to save elephants. In 2013, then-11-year-old Taegen Yardley organized a bake sale for attendees of a screening and panel discussion of the National Geographic documentary *Battle for the Elephants* held at the University of Vermont. With each elephant-decorated cupcake or cookie sold, they raised money to donate to Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya for orphaned elephants. They also raised awareness.



▲ Taegen stayed committed to protecting elephants. In the spring of 2015, Vermont legislators were considering a law to ban the sales of ivory in the state, so Taegen wrote a letter to support it. Later, she testified before the state's House Committee on Fish, Wildlife & Water Resources—cheered on by her entire class in the gallery.

▶ A short time later, Taegen helped lead a group of 10 Vermont students from three different schools in a video call with 10 similar-aged students from Hong Kong's Clearwater Bay School. Nobody minded the 12-hour time difference as they eagerly shared experiences.

Bolstered by the success of the student protests in Hong Kong, the Vermont kids decided to plan a similar march for elephants in Burlington, the state's largest city, as a way to educate people and build support for passage of the state bill.





◀ In preparation for the march, Taegen and her friends mobilized kids at more than a dozen schools around the state. Many did presentations on elephants at school assemblies to encourage people to join. Dozens made papier-mâché “tusks” out of pool noodles to hand out and pile up at the march. Taegen also organized an event at a local art studio for kids to paint their own T-shirts to wear at the march.

▶ When Burlington, Vermont, held a March for Elephants on October 4, 2015, more than 300 people attended.

Since then, the fight for elephants has continued.

With help from teacher Mark Cline Lucey at the Vermont Commons School, Taegen and her classmates made a mini-documentary, called *Kids Battle for A World with Elephants*, that they released in February 2016. The film has since been translated into Chinese. Taegen followed that up with several more films.

Fellow Vermonter Sara DiGuglielmo was also inspired. As a third-grader in 2018, Sara focused her school project on elephants. Then in fourth grade she motivated her class to raise money to sponsor an orphaned elephant.



▲ In 2019, Sara spoke at her school assembly. She and art teacher Peter Boardman helped second- and third-graders with an elephant art project to support another proposed state law to ban sales of ivory and other wildlife products, which still had not passed. Sara and her classmates then testified at a committee hearing and delivered more than 180 handmade art prints and letters to legislators.

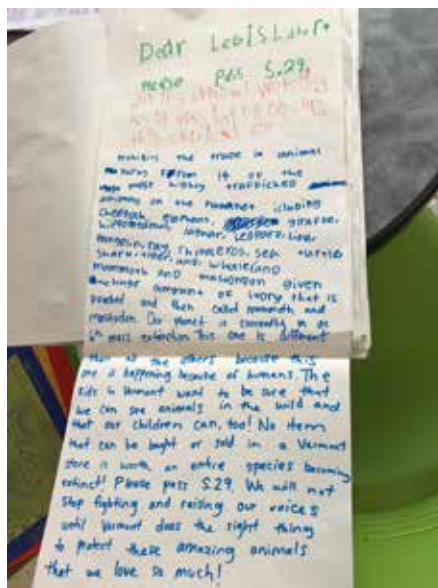


“ I was worried that if we didn’t do anything, I wouldn’t be able to see elephants in real life when I grow up.”

— Christina Seigris



As Nellie, Christina, Lucy, Taegen, Sara, and the others show, young voices can be especially powerful. Often, adults listen to what kids say with an open mind. These stories prove that whether the actions are big or small—a conversation at school or dinner, a school project, a post on social media, a letter to the newspaper, a march or protest—young voices do make a big difference.



Laurel Neme contributes regularly to *National Geographic* and *Mongabay.com* and is the author of three books so far—*The Elephant’s New Shoe*, *Orangutan Houdini*, and *Animal Investigators: How the World’s First Wildlife Forensics Lab Is Solving Crimes and Saving Endangered Species*.

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