

RESEARCH

Recent findings on the ivory and rhino-horn trade in Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Abstract

Although all trade in rhino and elephant products, both international and domestic, is forbidden in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), regulations are rarely enforced. This situation is resulting in a growing international ivory trade with ivory, both raw and worked, passing through and into Lao PDR, which acts as a transit country, particularly from Africa to China, for raw ivory. There is also an increasing retail market in ivory items, many smuggled in from southern China, especially newly carved African ivory from illegal sources. In March 2013, I counted 1,929 ivory pieces on display for retail sale in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, excluding the many ivory small Buddha amulets, which are easily confused with bone amulets. The numbers of Chinese in Lao PDR are increasing, and they are the main buyers of the ivory items I counted. Many were priced in US dollars, some in Chinese script and Chinese renminbi. Lao PDR is also home to major illegal wildlife traders, who have been responsible for much of the illegal rhino-horn trade from South Africa via Lao PDR to Vietnam since 2008. These illegal wildlife traders also recently bought all the real Asian rhino horns in the Vientiane markets to sell in Vietnam. Many counterfeit Asian rhino horns are for sale in the souvenir and jewellery shops and at the Hmong tribal medicine stalls, and some outlets are also now displaying fake African rhino horns resembling a hunting trophy with two horns attached to a base, aimed for the growing tourist market. They are apparently made in Vietnam and have been for sale to foreigners in Lao PDR since about 2010. Growing numbers of Vietnamese and Chinese now live in Lao PDR and some consume real African rhino horn. Lao prefer Asian rhino horns, revering them for worship on their family altars to bring them good luck in wealth. With more Chinese and Vietnamese coming to live, work and visit Lao PDR, however, the demand in ivory and rhino horn originating from Africa is increasing.

Résumé

Bien que tous les échanges des produits issus des rhinocéros et des éléphants soient interdits en République démocratique populaire du Laos aux niveaux international et national, les règlements sont rarement appliqués. Cette situation se traduit par une croissance du commerce international de l'ivoire où l'ivoire, brut et travaillé, passe par la RDP du Laos, qui sert de pays de transit pour l'ivoire brut, surtout en provenance de l'Afrique vers la Chine. Il y a aussi un marché de détail croissant des articles en ivoire dont la plupart entrent en contrebande du sud de la Chine, surtout l'ivoire africain nouvellement sculpté provenant des sources illégales. En mars 2013, j'ai compté 1 929 pièces d'ivoire exposées pour la vente au détail à Vientiane et Luang Prabang, à l'exclusion des nombreuses petites amulettes en ivoire du Bouddha, qu'on confond facilement avec des amulettes en os. Le nombre des Chinois au Laos augmente, et ce sont les principaux acheteurs des objets en ivoire que j'ai comptés. La plupart étaient libellés en dollars américains, certains en caractères chinois et en chinois

renminbi. De grands commerçants de la faune illégale, qui sont en grande partie responsables du commerce illégal des cornes de rhinocéros venant d’Afrique du Sud via le Laos vers le Vietnam depuis 2008 habitent en RDP du Laos. Ces commerçants illicites d’espèces sauvages ont récemment acheté toutes les vraies cornes de rhinocéros d’Asie dans les marchés de Vientiane pour les vendre au Vietnam. Beaucoup de contrefaçons de cornes de rhinocéros asiatiques sont en vente dans les boutiques de souvenirs, les bijouteries et les étalages de médecine traditionnelle de Hmong, et certains points de vente affichent aussi maintenant de fausses cornes de rhinocéros d’Afrique qui ressemblent à un trophée de chasse avec deux cornes attachées à une base, visant le marché touristique croissant. Elles sont apparemment fabriquées au Vietnam et sont mises en vente aux étrangers au Laos depuis environ 2010. Un nombre croissant de Vietnamiens et de Chinois vivent maintenant au Laos et certains consomment des cornes de rhinocéros réelles venant d’Afrique. Les Laos préfèrent des cornes de rhinocéros d’Asie, les vénérant pour le culte sur leurs autels familiaux pour leur apporter la chance en richesse. Cependant, avec plus de Chinois et de Vietnamiens venant vivre, travailler et visiter la RDP du Laos, la demande pour l’ivoire et la corne de rhinocéros provenant de l’Afrique est en augmentation.

Introduction

Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) covers 236,800 km², nearly the size of the UK. It is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, bordering China, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. After the Communist take-over in 1975, many educated elite left the country. By 1985 a new class of wealthy elite emerged, embracing a much higher standard of living (Stuart-Fox 1986). The division between rich and poor in Lao PDR continues.

Much of the country is mountainous and forested, especially the northern region, and it remains one of the last bastions in Southeast Asia for wildlife. Forest is being steadily cut down through slash-and-burn to grow cash crops, and wild animals are killed, usually for food. Several hill tribes inhabit this northern region. Many from the Hmong tribe used to grow opium illegally in the high mountains undetected, until the government encouraged them to move down into the valleys. But these people maintain their hunting culture and sell meat illegally to vendors along the roadside and at markets or to other traders.

A growing population of Vietnamese and Chinese live in Lao PDR or travel through the country for work, and the growth in tourists is huge: from 14,400 in 1990 to over a million a year today. Illegal trade in endangered wildlife products, from elephants, tigers and pangolins, has increased, with more foreigners in the country buying these products. Lao PDR is also a major entrepot for international illegal wildlife trade (Vigne 2013). Insufficient enforcement of wildlife trade law has enabled a network of criminal Lao wildlife traders to evolve. Large amounts of ivory and rhino horn from Africa have been moving through



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Long beaded necklaces with pendants are popular new ivory jewellery items for sale in Lao PDR.

Lao PDR to China, Thailand and Vietnam (Nijman and Shepherd 2012; Rademeyer 2012).

Ivory

In the late 1980s there were between 2,000 and 3,000 wild elephants in Lao PDR and about 1,332 domesticated elephants; in 2011 estimates were 600 to 800 wild and 864 domesticated elephants (Khounboline 2011). Lao elephants are ‘totally protected’ and all trade in their products is forbidden (Nash 1997). Asian elephants have been on CITES Appendix I since 1975, and African elephants since 1990. Lao PDR became a Party to CITES in 2004 so all international ivory trade is banned. All domestic ivory trade from African as well as Asian ivory is forbidden in Lao PDR, the same as for neighbouring Vietnam and Cambodia, but Thailand and Myanmar allow a domestic trade from captive Asian elephants, and China allows regulated trade in ivory of African origin that has official documentation and identification (Martin and Vigne 2011). Until recently, nearly all ivory for sale

in Lao PDR was from Asian elephants. From 1988 to 1990 the wholesale price of good-quality raw ivory doubled to about USD 200 a kilogram because of increased demand from foreigners, especially Thais (Martin 1992); much ivory for carving continued to be smuggled into Thailand through the 1990s, while a little supplied the small local ivory amulet-carving industry (Nash 1997).

In a survey in Lao PDR conducted in 2001, 1,424 ivory items were counted in 63 outlets in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, but the great majority of these were the very small 34-cm Buddha amulets. Numbers of active ivory carvers fell from at least 12 in 1990 to perhaps 5 in 2001, including 2 Vietnamese carvers in Vientiane, the capital, working for a Vietnamese-owned outlet (Martin and Stiles 2002). Surveys conducted in 2002 and 2011 showed a large jump in that decade in the variety of ivory items for sale, but vendors indicated most ivory still originated from Lao PDR in 2011. In 2011, 2,493 ivory items were counted in 24 outlets in Vientiane, Huay Xai and Boten (Nijman and Shepherd 2012). The main buyers of ivory items were Chinese and Japanese in the early 2000s (Martin and Stiles 2002) and predominantly Chinese by 2011 (Nijman and Shepherd 2012).

Rhino horn

Both Javan and Sumatran rhino species used to inhabit Lao PDR until perhaps a few decades ago. Until very recently, rhino horns from these animals were illegally for sale in the Morning Market of Vientiane in the jewellery shops. During a survey in 1992 most were said to be from the Sumatran species. The main buyers were Chinese from Thailand who used them for traditional medicine. The average retail price then was USD 16,594/kg, which was about 30% less than in Bangkok at the time (Martin 1992). Most of the rare Asian rhino horns seen for sale at that time were recognizably fakes made of wood, other horn or bone, and this continued to be the case into the 2000s.

Methods

From 15 to 25 March 2013, I visited Lao PDR following the Bangkok CITES Conference, at which the country was heavily criticized as a major transit country for wildlife products, especially rhino horn (Martin and Vigne 2012). I concentrated my time in the northern part of the country, looking at the trade

in wildlife products, especially ivory and rhino horn. I collected information from informers, traditional hunters, vendors and illegal traders who have first-hand experience in dealing with ivory and rhino horn, and I spoke to conservationists and expatriates in the country. I planned also to follow up with Xaysavang Trading Export-Import Co Ltd, but the director, Vixay Keosavang, had been exposed in the press just before my visit, with his photograph on a front cover article of the *International Herald Tribune* (Amatatham 2013), so the company was taking no calls nor having meetings at that time. I surveyed the retail markets and counted, priced and photographed ivory, fake rhino horns, and other wildlife products seen for sale in Vientiane and also in the famous World Heritage Site town of Luang Prabang. I also examined stalls with wildlife for sale along the roadside northwards to the Chinese border, a tarmac road used by lorry drivers, traders and wealthier travellers. I visited Luang Nam Tha, a city that was developed in the 1970s in the infamous golden triangle area and is a growing destination for eco-tourism. I surveyed the morning markets, night markets, hotel shops, traditional medicine stalls, souvenir outlets, and jewellery shops, and visited a large, recently developed, Chinese shopping centre in Vientiane.

Results

Ivory

SOURCES AND PRICES OF RAW IVORY AND OTHER ELEPHANT PRODUCTS

Lao elephant ivory is obtained from both domesticated and wild elephants in the country. In 2001 a Lao elephant tusk sold for USD 275/kg (Martin and Stiles 2002). Prices have increased considerably since then: in 2013 a cut piece of tusk from a domesticated Lao elephant was selling for 40,000 baht/kg wholesale (USD 1,282/kg), and a whole tusk from a dead Lao elephant was selling for 50,000 baht/kg wholesale (USD 1,600/kg). Lao traders prefer to get elephant products from dead domesticated elephants as they are cheaper than so-called jungle elephants. They smoke the meat and pretend it is from the jungle elephant to sell to Vietnamese for better prices. They sell smoked blocks of elephant meat (30 cm across) with the skin attached wholesale for 2,000 baht/kg (USD 66/kg) and elephant bones wholesale for USD 100/kg. Traders



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IVORY WORKSHOPS, PRODUCTION AND USES

In Luang Prabang I visited one of the last remaining ivory-carving families at their workshop. In the 1980s, the master carver knew about 20 families carving ivory, but from 1991 to 1993 the demand fell and most carvers moved to furniture and door carving; only two or three families carve ivory in the region today, if they receive it, he said. The carvers are provided with small pieces of ivory from jewellery and souvenir shop owners who commission them to carve Buddha amulets and rings to sell in their shops. The 50-year-old master carver learned to carve ivory from his father and improved his techniques during eight years as a monk at a temple. He and his son usually carve rosewood into Buddha figures that are used for worship at shrines, while his wife assists in the finishing sandpapering and in quality control. Their 25-year-old son started carving when he was 18. Both father and son use only traditional hand tools for all their work. The carvers prefer to carve ivory as it is softer than bone, but most of their work is now in wood.

This former master ivory carver and his son craft nowadays mostly rosewood into Buddha figurines, but will carve by hand very small ivory amulets and rings, if little pieces of ivory are supplied to them, on commission.

often sell the tusks to Vietnamese who sell them with the other elephant products to Vietnam. Elephant teeth (molars) are sometimes sold in Lao PDR in souvenir shops and retail for up to USD 390 each, toenails for about USD 32 each, and small finger-size pieces of Asian elephant skin for about USD 2.5 each at the Hmong traditional medicine pavement stalls in Vientiane.

African ivory tusks were not seen for sale during the survey, although seizures in other countries indicate that African raw ivory has been going to Lao PDR: 16 tusks via Kenya were intercepted in 2009, 239 tusks via Dubai and Bangkok in early 2010 and 435 kg of African ivory via Bangkok in late 2010, for example (Nijman and Shepherd 2012). Lao PDR, however, has never submitted a single ivory seizure record to ETIS over the 25-year period the database covers. Tom Milliken, who records the ETIS data, has not been informed of any ivory seizures in the country (Milliken, TRAFFIC Southern Africa, pers. comm., January 2014).

Lao people do not generally choose ivory for jewellery, utilitarian objects or ornaments. They traditionally prefer whole Asian elephant tusks, keeping them on their altars, and will only carve ivory if it is broken. They like the beautiful curved shape of Asian tusks rather than African tusks. Some families keep a tusk in case they need to sell it for urgent money. The poorer Lao (and by far the majority) may buy an ivory amulet, but more commonly a bone amulet, often worn around their necks, especially by small children, to ward off evil spirits.

It is the Chinese in the country who are encouraging the upsurge in demand for new Chinese-carved ivory items. Most ivory items for sale in Lao PDR are today being crafted by Chinese carvers, according to some vendors. One vendor, who has started a new shop selling worked ivory and is married to a Chinese man, said she has Chinese ivory carvers working for her in the country, but time did not enable me to verify this. Many items are smuggled out of southern China across the border into Lao PDR. The Lao master carver I interviewed said he knew of no Chinese ivory carvers in Lao PDR and that Chinese-style ivory items seen for sale, such as Kwan Yin pendants (commonly for sale in China's ivory retail shops) come in from China.

RETAIL OUTLETS AND PRICES FOR WORKED IVORY

In March 2013 I counted 1,929 ivory items on display for sale, excluding ivory Buddha amulets, in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, but I saw no ivory for sale in Luang Nam Tha. There were perhaps hundreds of ivory amulets, sometimes within gold or silver types of casing, in jewellery outlets that were not included in the count as they are often mixed with bone amulets and are almost impossible to tell apart. Of the larger ivory items counted, 1,868 were in Vientiane in 11 outlets: 7 souvenir and jewellery shops in the Morning Market, 3 luxury hotel shops and 1 new ivory specialty shop selling by far the most items to Chinese customers. Prices were highest in the luxury hotel outlets where overheads are high. In Luang Prabang I counted 61 ivory pieces for sale in 3 large souvenir shops, including a shop selling 6 Lao tusks. Two large jewellery shops also had 9 Lao tusks not for sale, 6 behind glass in their altars. The most expensive item seen in the country was a 30-cm recently carved Buddha figure selling for USD 9,000 and the cheapest items were rings for USD 20 each (see Table 1). Only a handful of old ivory items were seen for sale, such as Hmong ear-plugs, combs and hair clips selling for USD 500–700 each in a hotel

shop for tourists. A number of outlets were closed in Vientiane's Morning Market and elsewhere as it was the season for weddings and several vendors had gone home, so the numbers of outlets and ivory counted were minimum figures. The main ivory buyers were said to be Chinese, Japanese, South Koreans, Thai and Vietnamese.



Fake African rhino horns with two horns attached to fake skin and small fake elephant tusks are common items for sale at some of the souvenir stalls and Hmong traditional medicine stalls for tourists to buy in Vientiane.

Table 1. Retail prices for recently crafted popular ivory items for sale in Lao PDR in March 2013

Item	Size (cm)	Price range (USD)	Average USD price
<i>Jewellery</i>			
Bangle	1–2	200–1,800	588
Bangle carved	2–3	1,800–2600	2,350
Bracelet, beaded	0.5–1.5/bead	120–500	238
Necklace, beaded	0.5–1.5/bead	80–800	332
Necklace, pendant		300–900	520
Pendant	5–6	50–490	171
Ring	0.25–1 wide	20–300	90
<i>Figurines</i>			
Animal	1–5	80–380	230
	5–10	550–844	697
Human/religious	1–5	70–519	369
	5–10	380–2,200	1,290
	20–30	5,000–9,000	6,500
<i>Miscellaneous</i>			
Cigarette holder	10	420	420
Chopsticks, pair	25	250–490	382

A 20% discount was possible with bargaining, or 30% if 10 items were bought.

USD 1 = 7,700 Lao kip

USD 1 = 31 Thai baht

IVORY SUBSTITUTES

The ivory-carving family interviewed in Luang Prabang said they often carve elephant bone (that they obtain directly from mahouts for USD 64/kg) into amulets. They also make fake tusks for display for Lao people who cannot afford ivory, crafting cow bone tibias (which they obtain free). After ivory, the master carver I interviewed prefers to carve elephant bone, and secondly cow bone. He does not carve water buffalo bone as it is too hard. He explained that to prepare bones for carving he removes the marrow, cleans and slices the bone, adds a leaf to whiten it and cooks it like a soup. When the amulets are carved, they are usually sold by shop vendors as ivory amulets, he admitted. As well as bone, resin (which resembles ivory) is also used for amulets. Bone carvings and synthetic ivory jewellery from China were also for sale in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. These items are inexpensive and not normally displayed behind glass, as are real ivory items. At a large number of souvenir stalls and Hmong traditional medicine stalls, especially in Vientiane, were bones shaped to resemble a pair of small tusks selling for about USD 65 a pair to tourists.

VENDORS' VIEWS AND THE FUTURE OF THE IVORY TRADE

Vendors did not want their ivory items photographed



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This ivory bangle with distinctive cross-hatching was for sale in Luang Prabang for USD 780 in a souvenir shop, although the vendor pretended it was made of fake ivory imported from China.

as they are aware the ivory trade is illegal. They are unconcerned about inspections as they simply say to officials their ivory is fake. Vendors do not warn customers that it is illegal to buy and take ivory out of the country and there are no signs to this effect. Most vendors were typically friendly and cooperative, but occasionally they lied about their products, pretending they were bone or fake ivory from China, despite the high prices, even though typical ivory cross-hatching was clearly visible. Some vendors with new ivory items said to my translator they were Chinese carved and had been smuggled in from China. They had no hesitation admitting there is a growing demand for ivory in Lao PDR to meet increasing Chinese demand, and that this is the reason they have recently opened their retail businesses in the country. The fact that the ivory trade is forbidden was of no concern as the law is not enforced. At the Vientiane international airport was a display cabinet of confiscated wildlife products warning traffickers that the products displayed were illegal, but ivory was not among them as only inexpensive products or fakes (but no fake ivory) were on display.

Rhino horn

USE AND SALE OF RHINO HORN

Lao people traditionally worship Asian rhino horns on their family altars in their houses as they believe they bring *kham khoum*, meaning good luck in wealth. Asian rhino horn is highly regarded for this purpose. Some families inherit Asian rhino horns from their fathers. It is considered extremely bad luck to sell such a rhino horn, and families will do so only in desperate circumstances. When real Asian rhino horn is available, wealthy Lao people from the USA will sometimes buy it in the jewellery shops of the Morning Market in Vientiane, vendors said. The richer Lao from abroad, and also Thais and Chinese, who used to buy real Asian rhino horn, would visit only the expensive jewellery shops, realizing that the many pieces seen at the Hmong traditional medicine stalls and cheaper souvenir stalls in the markets were fakes. I was told by informers, however, that all the real Asian rhino horn that was previously available in the jewellery shops had been recently bought by Lao traders, notably Xaysavang Trading Export-Import Co. Ltd, apparently to sell in Vietnam. Some vendors tried to pretend their small counterfeit Asian rhino horns were

the real thing, asking ridiculous prices for them. I saw only one possibly real Asian rhino horn in a souvenir shop in Luang Prabang where the vendor believed he had received an authentic horn, but even he was not convinced without proper testing.

In Luang Prabang, the master ivory carver I met said neither he nor his father before him had ever been asked to carve rhino horn as Lao people prefer it whole for their altars, as for Asian ivory tusks. Neither do Lao people, even the most traditional northern tribal headmen interviewed, consume rhino horn. They had no memory of rhino horn being consumed for any health cures. Real or fake, Lao are not interested in buying African rhino horn for themselves, as these animals are not from Lao PDR so they would not work on their altars for their spirits.

Real African rhino horn has been used in Lao PDR by some Vietnamese and Chinese living in the country since at least 2009. I was told the older men liked to consume it at ceremonies at their homes and at weddings. I learned that a group of businessmen regularly meet at a coffee shop in Luang Prabang and take it in turns, bringing a piece of rhino horn in their wallets that they grind into a powder on a special plate to put in their coffee to improve their health. These porcelain dishes (from Vietnam) are apparently not for sale in Lao PDR. Lao people appear not interested in joining in to consume rhino horn. The Vietnamese and Chinese say to their Lao friends that consuming it improves eyesight and virility, especially for elderly men. It is ironic that in traditional Chinese medicine, rhino horn in the past was consumed primarily to reduce fever and never as an aphrodisiac, but around 2008 a few newly wealthy Vietnamese elite decided to market it as an aphrodisiac as well as for cancer, and now some are aware of this in Lao PDR. Rhino horns, fake or real, were not seen in any pharmacist shops in Lao PDR because Lao people prefer western medicine.

RHINO HORN FAKE SUBSTITUTES

Increasing numbers of new fake African rhino horns are for retail sale in the country. Vendors can sell them openly at souvenir and pavement stalls as they are not real. They attract many tourists' attention and are marketed to foreigners as souvenirs, sometimes to decorate new houses, and for good luck in business for only about 500,000 kip (USD 65) for one of the larger life-sized mounts with two horns. Vendors sometimes sell them for considerably more to gullible buyers.

Most of these fake African rhino horns are made of water buffalo horn or cow horn, with a larger anterior and smaller posterior horn mounted on a fake rhino skin base resembling a trophy. I was told they have been coming to Lao PDR since 2010 from Vietnam via the Plain of Jars. I counted 74 mounts (each with two fake rhino horns) on display for sale; of these 65 were in Vientiane, 9 in Luang Prabang and none in Luang Nam Tha. Most were at souvenir outlets and at Hmong tribal medicine stalls. I also counted 48 Javan look-alike rhino horns and 119 very small Sumatran-style rhino horns, mostly in Vientiane's Morning Market. Seen selling fake rhino horns were 30 outlets in Vientiane and 8 outlets in Luang Prabang. A number of souvenir and jewellery outlets were closed as this was the wedding season, so these were minimum numbers, but it shows a continued interest in fake Asian rhino horns (which are sometimes offered to rich foreign visitors as the real item for very high prices) and a growing demand for inexpensive fake African rhino horn 'trophy' mounts for the tourist trade.

VENDORS' VIEWS AND THE FUTURE OF THE RHINO HORN TRADE

Lao people still like to worship Asian rhino horns on their altars to bring them luck in wealth, but most vendors admit that these are rare nowadays. Vendors are not interested in selling real African rhino horns for worship to Lao people as these rhinos are not part of their animist spirit tradition. One Lao vendor had photos in his shop of African rhino horn he had obtained in the past. He said that in 1993 he bought a 750-g African rhino horn for USD 6,000 and quickly sold it for USD 10,000 to a Chinese customer. Vendors said they would sell African rhino horn if they had it to Chinese and Vietnamese in Lao PDR. Meanwhile, the open trade in legal fake African rhino-horn 'trophies' is a growing business for the tourist market, although these items were in the display cabinet at the Vientiane airport as examples of illegal wildlife trade items.

Discussion

Ivory

In the 1990s and early 2000s very few ivory items were for sale except old items and tiny amulets made in Lao PDR. Since then the variety of ivory objects for sale in Lao PDR has been increasing. In 2013 most ivory



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These are typical Buddha amulets—the four below carved from elephant ivory, the three on the top carved from elephant bone—that are sometimes supplied to the carvers by owners of domesticated elephants in Lao PDR.

items were said to be newly crafted by Chinese carvers. This ivory is of African origin, including jewellery (especially bangles and small-beaded necklaces with pendants), figurines (especially Buddhas), chopsticks, cigarette holders and sometimes ivory name seals and netsukes. In 2011, vendors said there was far less Chinese-made worked ivory for sale in the country (Nijman and Shepherd 2012). Some vendors said the retail ivory trade was new and growing, especially to meet Chinese demand, and the new Chinese items I saw verify this. In 2002, in Vientiane's Morning Market, 93 ivory items were counted, in 2011 there were 142 ivory items (Nijman and Shepherd 2012) and in 2013 I counted 447 items, including new Chinese-made ones. In 2011 a luxury hotel in Vientiane was selling 1,843 ivory items (Nijman and Shepherd 2012) but in March 2013 this shop was closed; coloured necklaces were still in the shop, but the glass cabinet holding the ivory was empty. However, there was a new ivory specialty shop with a large number and variety of Chinese-made ivory objects for sale specifically for the Chinese with its signboard outside only in written Chinese.

Cross-border trade for elephants and elephant products remains a grave concern. Illegal trade in live elephants from Lao PDR into Thailand continues (Stiles 2009; Bottollier-Depois 2013). And cross-border trade to Vietnam in raw ivory and other elephant products



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Normally sold inexpensively as fakes, these African rhino horn trophy copies are displayed for sale to foreigners, mostly in Vientiane.

from Lao elephants is growing. Lao ivory was reported to be going to Vietnam in 2008 (Stiles 2008), but this is now a major trade route, along with other elephant products. The cross-border trade in wildlife products is almost impossible to monitor properly as there are numerous routes through the forests for local people to neighbouring countries. The Mekong River also acts as a mode of transport for illegal products. Yet despite some dealers saying they are now wary that police are infiltrating the system posing as drug and wildlife product traders, especially since 2010, there is still scarce evidence of success in curbing the ivory trade.

In comparison, the retail ivory trade in neighbouring Cambodia has declined, due largely to improved law enforcement. In March 2013 a survey counted only 945 ivory items in 48 retail outlets, 90% of them being tiny Cambodian-made amulets (Martin and Martin 2013). The Cambodian government and non-government organizations (NGOs) there have cracked down on elephant poaching and reduced the numbers of tusks on the Cambodian market (Martin and Martin 2013). This shows that stronger law enforcement can work and is greatly needed in Lao PDR.

Rhino horn

Lao PDR has become well known for the notorious wildlife dealer, Mr Vixay Keosavang, director of Xaysavang Trading Export-Import Co. Ltd, who has never been prosecuted in the country. There are many allegations of the company's involvement in the illegal African rhino-horn trade, especially via Lao PDR to

Vietnam. In November 2013 the US State Department offered a USD 1 million reward for information to dismantle this wildlife-trading syndicate (Fuller 2013). Most Lao people are desperate to improve their standard of living, and many will risk the illegal trade in wildlife, especially in lucrative African rhino horn, to make money.

Conclusion

Lao PDR has been known for several years as a significant entrepot for African ivory and rhino horn. Not only is the country rapidly losing its own valuable wildlife resource (including its elephants) to international markets, officials have not curtailed the illegal international ivory and rhino-horn trade from Africa since joining CITES in 2004. No government officers have reported any ivory seizures to ETIS/CITES from 1989 to the present yet there is a growing retail ivory trade with new Chinese-crafted ivory items flowing through the country. Lao's rhinos went extinct because of the rhino-horn trade decades ago. It now appears that demand for African rhino horn in Lao PDR could increase with the growing numbers of Vietnamese and Chinese in the country. Lao PDR must enforce its laws forbidding both international and domestic trade in ivory and rhino horn that threatens Africa's elephants and rhinos.

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