

Pete Oxford/BBC NHU



Largely ignored until now, the ivory trade is thriving in parts of Asia – far more than it is in Africa – and research published here for the first time reveals its shocking extent.

Words: **Daniel Stiles**  
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# From tusks to trinkets

The Asian elephant once ranged from Iraq and Syria in the Middle East to the Yellow River in China, but today this magnificent animal is in serious decline. During the 1980s and 1990s, world opinion was outraged by the devastating impact the ivory trade had on African elephants, but the plight of the Asian species *Elephas maximus* now goes relatively unnoticed.

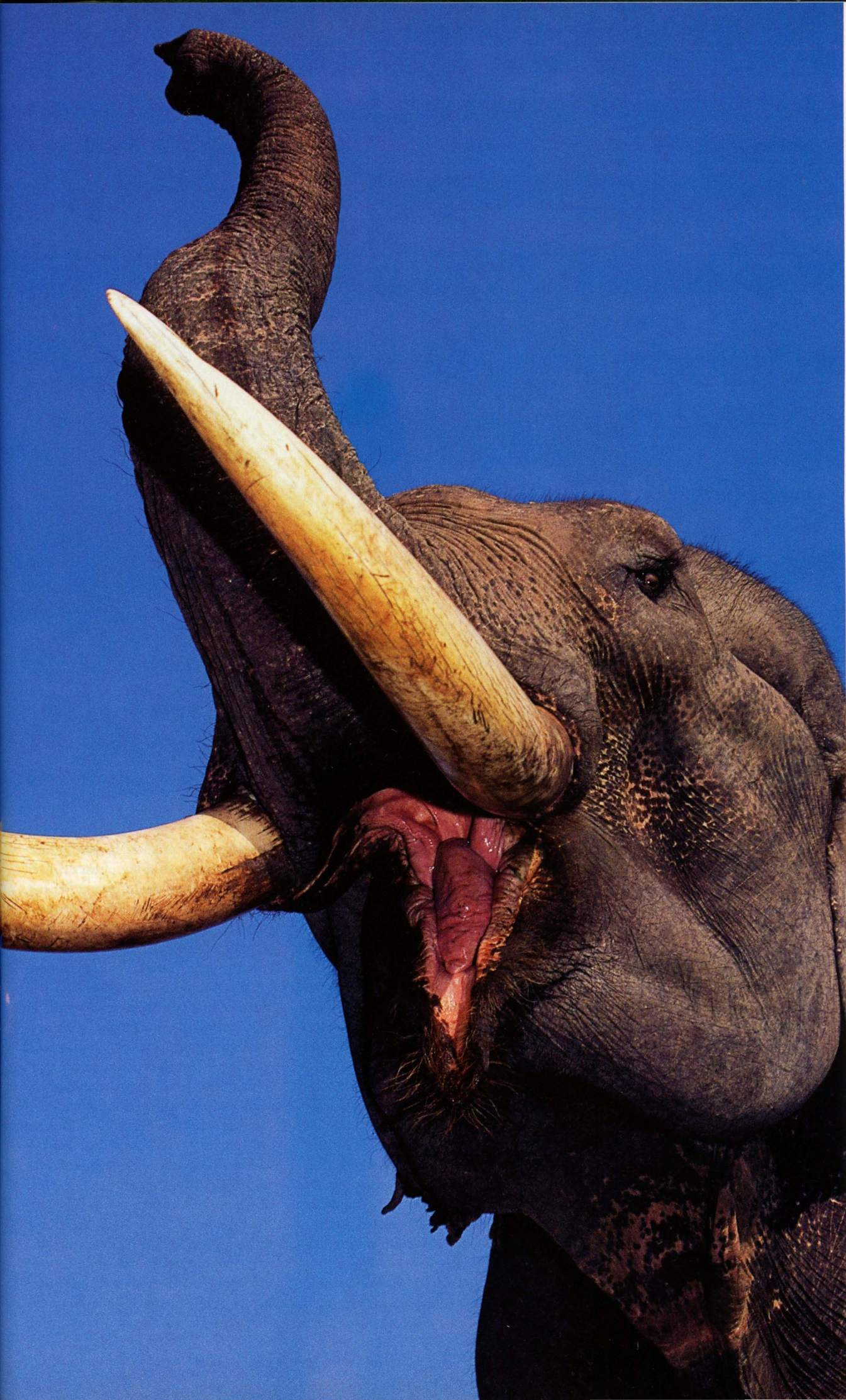
Today, there are estimated to be fewer than 50,000 Asian elephants left in the wild – one tenth of the population of their African cousins. The number of male elephants is in considerable decline in Asia, because it is only the males that carry tusks, unlike in Africa, where both sexes do. Since 1990, wild elephant populations have decreased by more than 90 per cent in Vietnam, close to 90 per cent in Cambodia, by more than half in Laos and by about a quarter in Burma. Numbers have also gone down in Sri Lanka. Of

the countries we visited, only in Thailand has the population remained steady in the past decade. India now holds the vast majority of the world's Asian elephants, with an estimated 24,000-28,000, but even here populations are under threat.

Given these facts, it is surprising that conservation organisations and governments have been reluctant to support or carry out investigations into the trade in elephant ivory in Asia, even though it is prohibited by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and, in many cases, by national laws. Even when organisations, such as the wildlife-trade monitoring group TRAFFIC, sponsor ivory-trade studies, as they have done recently in India and parts of South-east Asia, the reports are not publicised and are difficult to obtain.

The reason for such sharp declines in Asian-elephant populations isn't ►





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**Precious teeth. Only male Asian elephants have tusks, and so they are targeted by poachers – with the result that, for example, only 7.3 per cent of Sri Lanka's male elephants are now thought to be 'tuskers'.**



**Above: Asian elephant tusks confiscated at Brussels Airport.**

**Right: Apprentice carvers in Mandalay, Burma. The Burmese Government encourages the ivory-carving industry as 'cultural heritage'.**

hard to pinpoint. Poaching for the ivory trade is a major problem, while habitat loss is a factor, too, not least because it brings elephants into conflict with human settlements and agriculture. In parts of India, elephants are poisoned with pesticides, and collisions with trains are not uncommon (*BBC Wildlife*, January 2002). Nevertheless, many experts estimate that there is enough suitable land in these countries to support larger populations than exist today. We carried out a survey in all the major Asian elephant range states selling ivory items, in a bid to find out just how great this ivory threat is.

When we carried out an undercover ivory-trade survey in most of the major markets in Africa in 1999 (*BBC Wildlife*, April 2000), we were surprised by the amount of worked ivory we found openly for sale, and by the rampant smuggling of ivory between African countries and outside to both Asia and Europe. But what we discovered in

Nepal, Sri Lanka and South-east Asia exceeded our African findings. In Thailand, we found more than 88,000 worked ivory items for sale, greater than the combined number in Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, the four largest ivory markets in Africa. Tourism is fuelling the trade, with Thailand smuggling in ivory from other South-east Asian nations, as well as from Africa. Burma and Vietnam also have unsustainably high levels of ivory for sale, and in Singapore, which is renowned for its zealous approach to law enforcement, we were astonished by the number of shops that were selling mostly illegal ivory. The total number of ivory pieces we counted for sale in eight countries – more than 105,000 – almost equalled the number we found in 15 countries in Africa.

### **Ivory indicators**

Collecting data on the ivory trade is a cost-effective way to monitor the

killing of elephants. Counting elephants in the wild has always proved to be expensive and difficult, because they tend to live in thick, tropical forests. Most censuses since the 1960s have either been disputed or discounted by government and non-governmental organisation officials, who often have vested interests in arguing for either the growth or decline of elephant populations.

Conversely, the counting of worked ivory items seen for sale in retail shops and ivory workshops in major market and carving centres is straightforward and relatively inexpensive. You can deduce that the more ivory you see, the more elephants there were killed to produce it. Periodic surveys in key national markets can give an indication of the patterns of demand for ivory and show where that demand lies. Further indicators can be gathered at the same time, all of which help to build up the pattern: the number of retail outlets



selling ivory, the number of ivory workshops and craftsmen and the prices of raw and worked ivory.

There's one other advantage that monitoring the ivory trade has over monitoring elephant deaths: it indicates the potential for killing elephants in the future. The higher the buyer demand for ivory ornaments and jewellery, the greater the probability that poachers will go after elephants.

Of course, elephants die naturally, and tusks of domesticated live male elephants in Asia are clipped periodically, but these sources form only a small portion of the ivory used to produce the hundreds of thousands of worked ivory items that are for sale in Africa and Asia today, not to mention those pieces smuggled into Europe and the Americas. Ivory stocks can build up over time if business is slow, which could lead us to misinterpret the real demand, and so we also asked vendors how sales had been over time and monitored price

changes – a good indicator of demand fluctuations. Vendors and craftsmen could tell us if high or low numbers of worked ivory on shelves are due to high or low demand.

#### **Flaws in the law**

There are problems with interpreting the results. For instance, the ivory markets in Cambodia and Laos are quite small, but both these countries have suffered major elephant declines in the past decade. This is almost certainly because much of their ivory crosses the border to satisfy the demand in Vietnam, which has few elephants left. Vietnamese poachers are notorious for going after elephants and other wildlife in all three countries, and some of the

ivory, together with bones, horns, organs and skins from other animals, including tigers and bears, will then cross the northern border into China, as they have for centuries. Thailand (and Vietnam, in much smaller quantities) was the only country in which we found imported African ivory, and this may be the reason why Thailand's wild elephant population has remained stable at 1,650 during the past decade.

Laws relating to the ivory trade vary from country to country. It is completely banned in Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, while in Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand, it's permitted only in certain circumstances. Ivory sales are legal in Burma. Even in Singapore, we saw 2,700 ►

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ivory items being sold, mostly illegally, and openly in the main shopping areas. Singapore is also a major transit point for raw ivory smuggled out by ship from Africa to eastern Asia, as several ivory seizures made there and reported by TRAFFIC over the past 10 years attest.

We found, in all, more than 105,000 pieces of worked ivory for sale in 521 retail outlets. We think there are four main problem areas:

- Governments do not have the will or resources to enforce their own legislation effectively, and some loopholes still exist.
- Government wildlife inspection officers and customs officials can be easily bribed to allow the sale and import/export of ivory.
- Residents and, in particular, foreign visitors create market demand by buying ivory.
- Carvers and sellers of worked ivory are either ignorant of, or insensitive to, the harm their trade does to elephants.

### Breaking the habit

Arresting the decline of the Asian elephant depends, at least in part, on hitting the ivory trade, and to do this, efforts have to be focused primarily on governments and ivory buyers and

then on the manufacturers and sellers of worked ivory.

First, it must be recognised that the ivory trade in Asia is closely linked to that in Africa. When we carried out our research in Africa in 1999, we found that ivory was routinely being illegally shipped out to Asia and Europe, mainly from Central Africa. If all countries in both Africa and Asia that currently allow the sale of worked ivory would agree to a strict moratorium on sales, the poaching of elephants would be greatly reduced. In most countries where there are complete bans – such as India, Nepal and Sri Lanka – you find very little worked ivory in shops and markets. In Africa, the same can be said of Kenya and Tanzania. Where there are loopholes in the law to exploit, as in Thailand and Singapore, ivory sales continue.

But if you have laws, you also have to enforce them. Governments should have officials who regularly inspect shops and boutiques for worked ivory, and penalties for breaking the law that really act as deterrents. For many retail outlets, ivory makes up only a small percentage of their trade, and so shopkeepers might give up the business voluntarily if made aware of the Asian

elephant's plight. Shops that would be expected to sell ivory should also be made to post notices pointing out that buying ivory is illegal, as a means of dissuading foreign visitors.

Finally, something could also be done to persuade ivory carvers to give up their craft. We estimated there were about 200 carvers in the eight Asian countries we visited and between 570 and 620 in the 15 African countries surveyed. If they weren't working, there would be much less ivory for sale to tourists and businessmen.

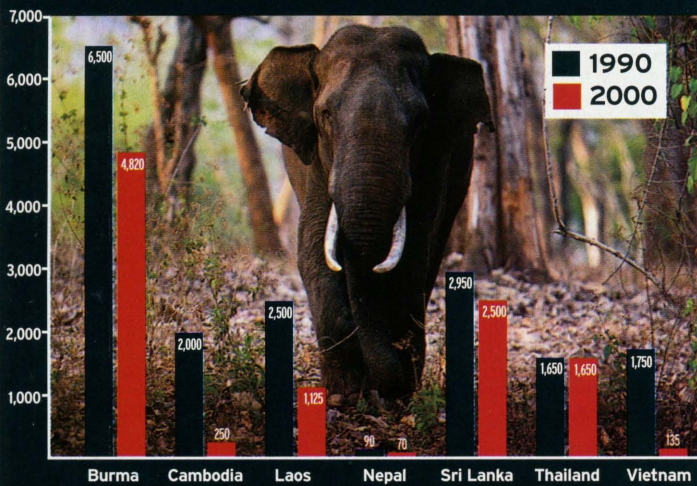
All of the above proposals are feasible for governments to carry out and would not be that expensive. Once the ivory trade was under control and elephant poaching trimmed down to manageable and sustainable levels, consideration could be given to lifting the moratorium. But maybe people will just find that they can live without ivory figurines and trinkets after all.

### Further information

**The South and South East Asian Ivory Markets**, by Esmond Martin and Daniel Stiles, the report on which this article is based, is available from Save the Elephants, 7 New Square, Lincoln's Inn, London WC2A 3RA or PO Box 54667, Nairobi, Kenya.

**Licence to sell. This was one of seven shops in Yangon in Burma with ivory openly on sale – in this case, with government approval.**

## WILD ELEPHANT POPULATION ESTIMATES Source: IUCN



Art Wolfe

## Tusk trade: the findings

- The largest illegal movements of tusks from wild Asian elephants are those from Burma to Thailand and from Laos and Cambodia to Vietnam. All countries with ivory-carving industries in the regions surveyed receive illegal Asian ivory from neighbouring countries.
- From the 1980s to 2001, the wholesale price of Asian tusks has increased in all the countries surveyed, because of the continued demand for worked ivory items and the growing shortage of ivory within the countries.

- The average wholesale price for tusks in this study was more than five times higher than in Africa (\$250/kg versus \$45/kg), because of the smaller quantities of ivory available and the greater demand.

- More than 105,000 ivory items were found for retail sale in the 521 shops in 17 towns and cities in the eight countries surveyed.

- Thailand had the largest domestic market for ivory items, with more than 80 per cent of the total number surveyed. Sri Lanka had the least number of ivory items seen.

- By far the largest amount of the foreign worked ivory in the countries visited was from China. Since 1990, exports from China and imports of these ivory items have been mostly illegal. In Singapore, almost all of the worked ivory for sale is from China, and in Nepal, about a third.

- The main buyers of ivory items in the major Thai and Vietnam markets are tourists and businessmen from Europe (especially the French, Germans and Italians), Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, China and the US in that order. The main buyers in Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Singapore are nationals and/or ethnic Chinese of various nationalities, followed by Europeans, Japanese and South Koreans. The number of Asians buying ivory has increased proportionately in the past 10 years.

- More than 85 per cent of all the ivory items offered for sale is jewellery, which is in great demand

because it is cheap and easy to smuggle.

- For ivory items of similar quality and size, the highest retail prices by far are in Singapore, followed by Vietnam.

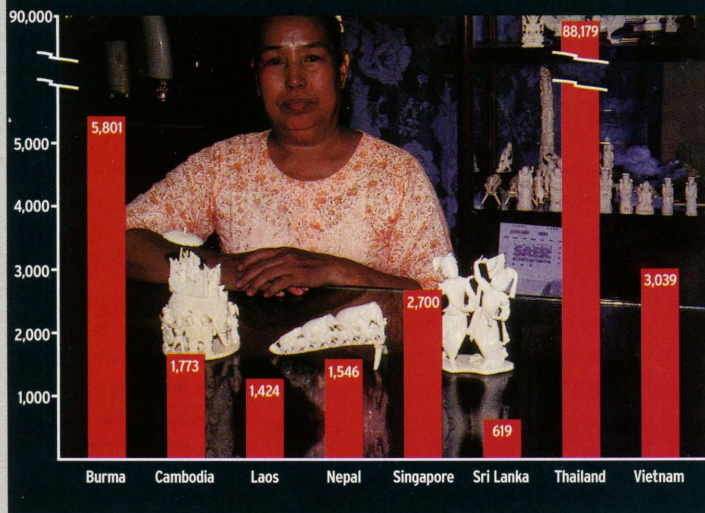
- In Cambodia, Laos and Sri Lanka, there were few elephant ivory items for sale. Most ivory-coloured trinkets were made out of substitutes, such as bones and resins.

- The craftsmen and vendors in South and South-east Asia were pessimistic about the future of the ivory business, except in Burma. Very few craftsmen were training younger people to continue the profession, apart from in Mandalay, where it is common for senior craftsmen to train apprentices.

- The quality of ivory workmanship has declined since the 1980s, with the possible exception of Burma. The growing middle classes in Asia are less discerning and want cheaply priced trinkets and jewellery, as do the increasing numbers of package tourists from the west.

- The highest-quality worked pieces were seen in Singapore, which were mainly newer Chinese items, and in Bangkok, which were older Thai, Chinese, Japanese and other South-east Asian ivory pieces.

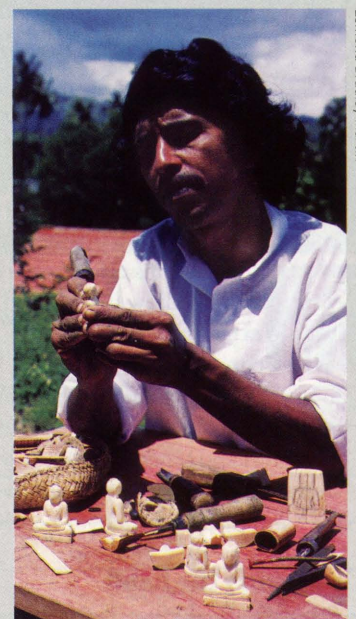
## NUMBER OF WORKED IVORY ITEMS FOR SALE



Daniel Stiles



Kitana Rai



Esmond Bradley Martin

**Dying craft.** Sri Lanka's enforcement of its ban on trade in ivory means few illegal trinkets are on sale there.