



CHINA'S GROWING IVORY DEMAND KILLS MORE ELEPHANTS

China's growing wealth is exporting more workers to Africa and spurring demand for ivory trinkets at home. The result is more poaching, dead elephants and illegal ivory.

The countries most severely hit by elephant poaching gangs are the Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). But there is concern that the presence of growing numbers of Chinese

on the continent but only five years later there were at least 500,000. They are some of the major buyers of ivory in Africa, especially in such countries as Sudan and Ethiopia. Fairly recently, I saw Chinese labourers visiting Khartoum's and Omdurman's souvenir shops in the evenings, pricing and buying ivory objects such as jewellery, animals, chopsticks and name seals. The latter two items are crafted in Omdurman specifically for the Chinese. I photographed ivory objects being bought by Chinese residents who purchase about 75% of the items, according to the vendors. Some Chinese were buying in bulk to take home.

In Ethiopia in 2008, Lucy Vigne and I surveyed retail outlets for ivory in Addis Ababa and found



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workers in Kenya could encourage a further surge in poaching there.

For more than 7,000 years, Chinese artisans have been working ivory, mostly for the elite, but nowadays the ever-increasing middle class can also afford to buy. Additionally, Chinese living in other countries of South and East Asia are buying an increasing number of ivory objects. This has been compounded in recent years by an extremely fast growing Chinese population in Africa. Chinese workers are being employed all over Africa's elephant range states, often to build roads and to undertake other construction work, while Chinese shops are also expanding over the continent.

In 2001, there were an estimated 72,000 Chinese nationals resident

149 pairs of newly-made chopsticks and 70 new name seals mostly for Chinese customers. The laws in Sudan and Ethiopia make the sale of newly-made ivory objects illegal, but demand by the Chinese encourages craftsmen to make and shopkeepers to sell these illicit goods.

Chinese are also buying many ivory objects in central and West Africa. Some use Nairobi airport as a transit point. In July 2008 three Chinese were caught in transit at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport with ivory chopsticks and bangles which they had obtained in Lubumbashi in the DRC. They were on their way to Harare; they claimed to the authorities in Kenya that these items were actually made out of a special white wood.

Above: In 2005 over 11,000 ivory items made in Sudan were on display for sale in 50 shops in Khartoum and Omdurman. Most of the buyers were Chinese.

In January 2009, three more Chinese were arrested at the Nairobi airport with carved ivory items; all were destined for different parts of China. In February 2009, the authorities at Nairobi's airport, with the aid of 'sniffer' dogs, arrested a Chinese man who was carrying ivory bangles he had brought from Guinea.

As well as ivory being smuggled by air, some ivory leaves Africa via sea ports. From East Africa, the main port for illegal ivory is Dar es Salaam. For example, as recently as March 2009, seven tonnes of ivory that had been shipped from Dar es Salaam port to Hai Phong port in northern Vietnam, close to the China border, were confiscated by Vietnamese officials. From West Africa, it is known that consignments of raw and worked ivory have been smuggled by Chinese sailors from Douala in Cameroon to China. Chinese sailors have been arrested in Douala several times.

There has been a recent increase in the number of elephants poached in Kenya, according to the *Annual Report 2008* of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). From 2003 to 2007 an average of 62 elephants were poached each year. The year 2008 witnessed more than a doubling of poached elephants from the previous year: from 48 to 98 animals. These figures from KWS refer only to known elephants poached, excluding those whose carcasses have not yet been found. They are therefore minimum figures.

It is a concern that the Chinese could be encouraging poaching by buying ivory in Kenya, as they are doing in other African countries, for export to China, but no Chinese people have yet been caught in the country with ivory. The number of Chinese coming to work in Kenya has increased substantially over the last few years. In 2001 there were an estimated 190 Chinese residents, but by 2007 there were 5,000, according to the *African Studies Review* of December 2007. In 2008/9 many Chinese workers were developing new roads in northern Kenya (such as the Isiolo and Marsabit Road) and southern Kenya (near Amboseli). Both regions are famous for their elephants. According to informants, Chinese are willing to buy ivory and rhino horn. There has been a growth in demand for ivory with the price of tusks rising from 2007 to early 2009. In northern Kenya, Isiolo traders bought ivory from Samburu poachers in early 2007 for KSh 1,500

(\$22) per kilo; by October 2008 the price had risen to KSh 2,250 (\$33) per kilo. In southern Kenya in early 2009, in the Amboseli area, Maasai poachers were selling tusks for KSh 3,000 (\$38) per kilo and for the equivalent of \$63 per kilo just across the border in Tanzania.

From the Isiolo region, tusks are taken northwards to Moyale and Mandera on the Ethiopian border. Most of this ivory is reaching Addis Ababa to be crafted into items mainly for the Chinese market. From Isiolo, perhaps some of the ivory is moving to Nairobi or Mombasa destined for China or Thailand, as these are the two main countries carving illegal ivory in Asia. From the Amboseli region, some of the ivory being sold by poachers travels south into Tanzania and some moves northwards to Nairobi. In Tanzania this ivory is probably being shipped out of Dar es Salaam, along with other consignments of tusks. A lorry travelling north from the Amboseli area was caught in April 2009 with over 700 kilos, supposedly going to Nairobi. A Kenyan and a Tanzanian pleaded guilty to illegal possession of this ivory. It was one of the largest seizures in Kenya for years. Which traders were involved is not clear as the lorry drivers were arrested, rather than the lorry being followed to its destination.

Even traders in wealthy industrial countries are involved in the illicit ivory commerce with China. Dan Stiles and I were surprised to discover large quantities of newly-crafted ivory items for sale in the USA in 2006 and 2007. Virtually all of these were made from African tusks. Shops on the west coast and in Hawaii, whose proprietors have close relations with Hong Kong and China, had the most. We found 7,400 newly-made (post-1990) items for sale in the USA, almost all from China. Of course, all these recent imports break the laws of China and of the USA.

China itself, including Hong Kong, has the largest retail ivory market in the world. Stiles and I counted over 47,000 ivory items on retail sale in 2002–2004, and we covered only the east coast of China. The country with the second largest total of ivory objects is the USA with about half the number seen in China. Of these, about one-third were newly made and from China.



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Above: This Chinese buyer in Khartoum shows a friend an ivory hippo carving that he has just bought.

Esmond Bradley Martin is a geographer who has been carrying out field research world-wide on the illegal trade in endangered wildlife products since the 1970s. He specialises in the ivory and rhino horn trades. Since his PhD at The University of Liverpool, he and his wife Chryssee have lived in Kenya. He has written over 200 articles and a dozen books on wildlife conservation matters.

Where does the majority of the new illegal raw ivory originate? The answer is central Africa. Nigel Hunter, Tom Milliken and I wrote a paper for *Pachyderm* 36 (2004) in which we estimated that between 4,900 and 12,000 elephants from central Africa are poached each year to supply tusks to the craftsmen of Africa, China and Thailand. The country with the biggest number of ivory craftsmen is China. The countries in Africa most severely hit by elephant poaching gangs are the Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan and the DRC. For instance, the large elephant population formerly found in the Garamba National Park in northern DRC has fallen from 23,000 in the late 1970s to 3,800 in early 2009.

The explanation for this slaughter of elephants in central Africa over the past two decades is multifaceted. China's demand for tusks and worked ivory (especially jewellery, animal carvings, chopsticks and name seals) is an important reason but there are other factors such as the ease of buying and exporting ivory, both retail and wholesale, from many central African coun-

tries. The cities of the region are home to large, unregulated and illegal ivory markets, making the purchase of ivory simple. The political and economic mismanagement for which this part of Africa is known, has resulted in breakdowns in law and order, easy availability of firearms, massive unemployment, chronic poverty and serious corruption at all levels of government and the private sector. All this greatly facilitates the poaching of elephants and the movement of their tusks and ivory items out of the country to other parts of the world, especially China.

International conservation organisations are aware that for the past decade or so China has been the main importer of illegal ivory in the world. From 1998 to 2006, at least 39 tonnes of ivory were seized for the Chinese market, some en route to China and the rest by Chinese officials at ports, airports, border crossings, and from traders within China. The Chinese have improved their law enforcement recently, but there is also a great deal of ivory that is successfully smuggled into the country and not caught by the authorities.

In late 2008 the CITES authorities allowed China to bid (with Japan) for tusks from official stockpiles in four southern African countries to be consumed within China. Twelve Chinese traders purchased 62 tonnes at an average price of \$144 per kilo, an extremely low price, as similar tusks sell for at least \$500 per kilo within China. Perhaps this purchase of such a substantial amount of inexpensive ivory will lower the value of new illegal tusks coming into China and consequently reduce the economic incentive to poach elephants in Africa and Asia. In contrast, the increasing numbers of Chinese working in Africa and the expanding wealth in China are stimulating sales of new ivory which could promote further elephant poaching. Regular, intensive monitoring of ivory markets involving fieldwork in the relevant African and Asian countries is essential.

Only by understanding the ivory trade dynamics can the Chinese threat on Africa's elephant populations be tackled effectively. ●

— Esmond Bradley Martin