

# Ivory, rhino horn and other wildlife trade in the United Arab Emirates.

*Story and photos by Esmond Brandley Martin*

***Wildlife trade has declined significantly in what were formerly some of the busiest centres of trade.***

**T**HE UNITED Arab Emirates (UAE) especially Dubai and Sharjah, became significant centres in the Middle East for the trade in certain species of endangered wildlife during the middle and late 1980s. Large quantities of African elephant ivory, much of which came from poached animals, were brought into Jebel Ali Free Zone, central Dubai and into Ajman in order to be semi-processed into simple jewellery and signature seals for export to eastern Asia. Rhinoceros horn came in from East Africa on its way to the Yemen Arab Republic. Some wildlife and their products were used in the country: there was a significant bird trade in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah in the late 1980s.

In 1972, I first visited the United Arab Emirates when my wife and I collected data on the dhow trade in the Gulf. In 1988, I returned to the UAE for WWF in order to request the Dubai authorities to close down the ivory factories in Jebel Ali and to stop the trade in endangered wildlife products. I had meetings with Shaikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Minister of Finance and Industry of the UAE, and with other senior officials concerning these problems. I returned again in January 1990, to encourage the government to rejoin CITES (the only country ever to have withdrawn from the Convention) and to thank the officials for closing down the ivory factories in Jebel Ali, Dubai and Ajman. In January 1992, I went back to the UAE for WWF for the third time to monitor the trade in wildlife products. I spent one week there visiting the Emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman and Ras al Khaimah.

## **Elephant ivory**

From 1987 to mid-1989, the United Arab Emirates had the dubious distinction of having several ivory factories which obtained their raw ivory from supplies usually without proper CITES documents since most of it was from poached animals. According to official Dubai figures, Dubai imported forty-two tonnes of 'unworked or simply prepared' ivory in 1987, twenty-four in 1988 and just under two tonnes in 1989. However, additional ivory unfortunately came into Dubai from other Emirates. Several articles have been written about these factories so it is enough to state here that after criticism of these enterprises, the Dubai authorities reacted positively by enacting various edicts. Dubai Customs Notice number 223/89 of 3 May 1989 prohibited the transit and import of raw ivory and rhino horn while Dubai Customs Notice Number 230/89 of 23 September

1989 outlawed not only raw ivory and rhino horn, but worked supplies as well. By late 1989, all the factories were closed in Jebel Ali, Dubai and Ajman. The Dubai authorities then confiscated a lot of worked ivory items, but later returned them because there was no law to keep them indefinitely in government stores. These officials also impounded 12,136 kilogrammes of raw ivory from two firms. The largest amount, 8,985 kilogrammes, came from a trading company in Dubai whose owner was originally from the Hadramaut in Yemen. He had been responsible for importing large amounts of ivory from Tanzania on dhows in the late 1980s. The second firm had three partners: one UAE citizen and two Indian nationals. After considerable investigation and evaluation by the Dubai officials, it was decided that the two firms had to be compensated for the raw ivory. Therefore, in September 1991, a cheque of 5,687,145 dirhams was sent to the larger firm for the equivalent of US \$1,567,000 or \$174 a kilogramme. The second firm was sent a cheque on the same day for the equivalent of \$591,000 or \$188 a kilogramme. Ironically, the traders received more money from the government than the ivory was worth either in Africa or in the UAE, so they did very well out of the transactions. In January 1992, the Dubai government burned these twelve tonnes of ivory.

It is very unlikely that since late 1989 large quantities of raw ivory have come into the UAE due to the restrictions imposed and enforced by the government. Ivory has been traditionally imported by dhow, steamship and aeroplane into Dubai, the main commercial Emirate. However, in the last few years, the Dubai authorities have been the strictest of the seven Emirates, and the traders know this. On my recent visit, I learned from an ivory trader that there was at least one consignment of raw ivory which had arrived in Sharjah by dhow from Somalia in 1991. It consisted of 17 pieces weighing 200 kilogrammes. In 1991, an experienced trader in Dubai received from \$80 to \$120 per kilogramme depending on the size. I talked to three ivory traders, many government officers and journalists, and none of them knew of any recent arrivals of significant quantities of raw ivory in the UAE. This is logical as the Emirates were never a major consumer of ivory, and there are now no factories processing ivory for export.

Although there is no raw ivory for sale openly in the UAE, there is some worked ivory available in shops. There are apparently no restrictions on the retail sale of ivory

items, but the CITES authority in the UAE does not allow their import or export. In Dubai, the main Emirate for shopping, there is little worked ivory on display because the store owners do not want to antagonize the local officials. What I did see in a couple of shops on the Deira side of the creek in Dubai in January 1992, were imported Chinese and Japanese ivory statuettes and jewellery. The shopkeepers told me that sales of these items were slow and most of the buyers were Europeans, especially Greeks and Cypriots.

In Sharjah, the neighbouring Emirate to Dubai, the officials are not so strict concerning worked ivory or the trade in wildlife in general. In the Sharjah souk on the first floor are many shops run by Indians selling handicrafts. In 1990, I counted at least five such shops selling mostly ivory carved in India such as bangles, paintings on ivory and figurines. One shop had for sale a carved human head sculpture from Zambia weighing one kilogramme for \$124. In early 1992, I returned to the Sharjah souk, but saw no African carvings: all pieces were from India. The salesmen did not want to say when they had imported them, but obviously some have been imported in the last few years. In the nine shops which sold ivory items in 1992 in the Sharjah souk, the most common pieces were bangles (\$26-\$68), boxes, signature seals (15 centimetres long for \$27), paintings and figurines. Most were poor quality and the prices were relatively low. The main buyers were Europeans and sometimes Americans. Generally, the ivory retail business is poor due to the worldwide decline in demand.

In the other Emirates, only a very few ivory items are for sale. For the UAE as a whole, retail sale of carved ivory has declined significantly since mid-1989 and only a limited amount of items are available.

## **Rhinoceros horn**

During the 1980s, Dubai was a major entrepot for rhino horn coming from East Africa on its way to the Yemen Arab Republic. By the late 1980s, most of this horn was originating in Tanzania and was brought from there by dhow to Dubai. Traders from Tanzania and Dubai, who were mostly of Yemeni origin since they knew about the value of rhino horn, would organize the shipment of rhino horn and ivory for the UAE. In order to avoid being caught with these illicit commodities, the first dhow, soon after leaving a Tanzanian port would meet another dhow in international waters in order to tranship its cargo.

The freight might be switched to another dhow again off Somalia or Oman so that African officials could not intercept it nor prove that the tusks and horns were from a specific African country. Although the import and export of rhino horn was illegal in the UAE during the 1980s when the country belonged to CITES, little was done to enforce the ban until mid-1989.

After rhino horn had arrived in the UAE, it was usually put on a dhow destined for the Yemen Arab Republic. Sometimes, however, the horns were carried overland by lorries across Saudi Arabia to North Yemen, but this was a riskier journey since Saudi or Yemeni officials could inspect the vehicles and cargo, even looking for rhino horn which, in the Yemen Arab Republic, had been a prohibited import since 1982.

The most recent consignment of rhino horn I have heard about in the UAE was an assemblage of horns weighing 200 kilogrammes which was shipped from East Africa (most probably Tanzania) and ended up in Sharjah in early 1991. The price of these horns varied in the UAE from \$750 to \$1,100 a kilogramme according to size. The seller did probably what most Tanzanian traders tend to do: he used the proceeds of the sale to buy many consumer goods in the UAE which he brought back to East Africa and sold at high price.

### **Skins and trophies**

Some local Arabs like to decorate their offices and houses with skins and stuffed exotic animals. For example, in one of the main government offices in Dubai, there are a stuffed tiger and lion on display. In 1990 in Abu Dhabi a few leopard skins (\$495 each) and cheetah pelts (\$330 each) imported from the Sudan were on sale in one of the main shopping centres. Also in that year, in the Sharjah souk, snake skins from India and Pakistan and various cat skins including those from leopards had been for sale. In 1992 in the same souk, there were still snake skins available. There was by then an even larger number of leopard skins most of which had been imported from India and East Africa and were in poor condition. Their retail price varied from \$275 to \$400. There was also one clouded leopard pelt for sale in the souk. The shopkeepers claimed that the main buyers were local Arabs and British nationals. One person admitted he had sold a tiger skin for \$688 to an Englishman.

### **Live mammals and birds**

The UAE has a human population of about 1,800,000 in the seven Emirates with the richest being Abu Dhabi and Dubai due to the large reserves of oil found there. Sharjah has about 400,000 people, and because it has a smaller amount of oil, it must rely on other economic activities to prosper. One of these is the trade in live mammals and birds, including endangered species. The main public place where exotic animals can be seen is the goat market. Located on the Sharjah waterfront, this untidy souk is primarily a market for goats and some other domestic stock which are brought by motor boat and dhow from

Iran, Pakistan, India and eastern Africa. Just behind the domestic animal pens are rows of small cages containing imported wild-caught birds and mammals for sale. At the time of my visit in January 1992, I did not see any unusual mammals, although in the last couple of years, various species of monkey, bear and deer have been for sale, as well as Arctic foxes, reindeer and impalas. There were many imported endangered birds in the market during my visit, such as falcons from Pakistan, including the saker (\$1,900 each) and the peregrine (also \$1,900 each). Endangered goshawks and macaws have also been seen recently for sale. The birds and mammals are kept in small cramped cages. During the summer months, the temperature soars and some animals die from heat stress.


In Sharjah town, there are two large privately owned pet shops which sell exotic animals. During my 1992 visit, I saw an African blue monkey for \$400, and greater flamingoes from Tanzania for \$550 a pair, as well as many other bird species from Tanzania. The two pet shops have sold a wide variety of animals during the last three years including chimpanzees from Uganda for \$5,500 a pair, fallow deer for \$800 a pair, gazelles from Pakistan for \$1,230 each, dik diks from Tanzania for \$550 a pair, Thomson's gazelles also from Tanzania for \$1,375 a pair and at least one cheetah for \$5,500. These are the animals the traders admitted to me that they had sold. In addition, two pairs of clouded leopards were sent by aeroplane in 1990 from India to Dubai. The trader, who was from Sharjah, claimed he had proper papers given to him by a prominent Shaikh who allows him to import, whenever he wishes, any animal including endangered species. One pair of clouded leopards went to this Shaikh and one pair was offered for sale to the public in September 1991 for \$6,060. Eventually, after bargaining, a group of concerned Europeans collected \$4,400 to purchase the two clouded leopards to give to the Al-Ain Zoo, hoping it would give them a better home. In the same year a sloth bear was brought from India by one of the Sharjah pet shops, but it became crippled because the cage it was put in was too small. The original asking price was \$2,200, but eventually the trader sold the crippled animal for \$1,240, to Europeans who presented it to the Al-Ain Zoo.

As recently as mid-1991, one of these pet shops in Sharjah was offering for sale two endangered cats from India on Appendix II of CITES: a Bengal leopard cat and a jungle cat for \$1,650 each, according to a newspaper article in the *Gulf News* (1 June 1991). The author of this article had wondered how these two endangered cats had been legally imported into the UAE since there were no proper documents. It is common knowledge that endangered mammals are smuggled into the UAE; it is quite easy to hide them on a dhow and pull into a port amongst other fishing vessels, then unload the animals without being inspected by officials. The crew on these dhows have an expertise in smuggling a variety of goods in the Indian Ocean, acquired since the Por-

tuguese era, 500 years ago.

### **Conclusion**

Since 1989, the value of wildlife and wildlife products, imported both legally and illegally into the UAE, has declined significantly. The main reason is that the ruling families do not want this dubious trade to exist in the Emirates as it gives a poor international image. The UAE has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, but this is not solely due to being a major exporter of oil. The government has made a great effort to diversify the economy by encouraging banking, retail shopping centres and even tourism. Today the UAE is a main regional centre for commercial activities. The economy does not need the relatively small revenue from the sale of endangered species, nor do the rulers want this distasteful trade. Some of the Shaikhs strongly support wildlife conservation, and when they learned of the activities of a few opportunistic ivory traders, they acted quickly to stop it in 1989.

One Emirate, however, is now especially a problem for the illicit trade in wildlife products - Sharjah. Nevertheless, to put this trade into perspective, its value is only a fraction of what the ivory trade was worth in 1988 in the Jebel Ali Free Zone. What is needed is to alert the ruling family of the activities of the few traders who are still importing rare live species, skins and ivory products from eastern Africa and the Indian sub-continent without proper documentation. In addition, the CITES authority in the UAE, which is within the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, needs to inspect regularly Sharjah's souks, goat market and pet shops to see if any endangered species were illegally imported. With a little bit more effort from the appropriate government officials to enforce the laws in Sharjah and perhaps in one or two other Emirates, the small amount of illicit wildlife trade now occurring in the United Arab Emirates could be sharply reduced. 

#### *Top right:*

*In the past, rhino horn was carried in considerable quantity from Dubai by dhow to Yemen.*

#### *Centre right:*

*Ivory and rhino horn are still being transferred from small boats to larger dhows on their journey from the East African coast to the UAE.*

#### *Centre left:*

*Leopard and cheetah skins are still being sold in the Sharjah souk, having been imported illegally from Africa.*

#### *Bottom right*

*Birds are commonly bought from pet shops throughout the UAE, such as from this one in Ras al Khaimah; they are popular pets for the Arabs.*

#### *Bottom left:*

*The goat market in Sharjah offers birds for sale, including some rare species, that have come from Tanzania.*

