

LAO TRADERS THREATEN AFRICA'S ELEPHANTS AND RHINOS

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has been studying the trade in ivory and rhino horn world-wide since the mid-1980s. She was in Nigeria surveying the ivory markets in 2012. Later in 2012 she was in Yemen to learn that

the trade in rhino horn has been much reduced. She has recently been working in Laos which is a major entrepot for African rhino horn. In her spare time, she is an active Board member of Friends of Nairobi National Park (FoNNaP) helping to spread wildlife conservation awareness.

There was much concern at the CITES conference in Bangkok in March 2013 that Laos has become the major transit country for rhino horn smuggled from Africa to Asia, and may also have a growing ivory trade. After the conference, I visited Laos to find out about the wildlife trade and about demand for rhino horn and ivory in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and also Luang Nam Tha in the north of the country near the Chinese border.

Asian rhinos once inhabited much of Laos, but not one remains in the country today. Some of their horns were passed down through the generations and are still worshiped at little altars and shrines in houses and shops. Lao people



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TOP: A vendor in Luang Prabang displays fake rhino horns for sale mainly to tourists.

BELOW: This old, small Sumatran rhino horn was on display for sale in a souvenir shop in Luang Prabang, revered by many Lao for worship.

believe these horns bring good luck in wealth, known as 'Kham Khoum'. I saw two small real Asian rhino horns on silver bases in an expensive jewellery shop placed behind glass at a private altar, along with two pairs of curved Asian elephant tusks. Some Lao also believe that praying to Asian rhino horn saves their farm animals from disease, protects their families when they travel and prevents their house catching fire. They would only sell inherited Asian rhino horns if they were desperate as it would bring bad luck. I was told that they do not believe in praying to African rhino horns as they would not work for their spirits, not being part of their traditional culture. If they had African rhino horn they would sell it to the

Vietnamese and Chinese, I was told.

Lao people I spoke to, including northern tribal headmen, had no memory of rhino horn being used as medicine, unlike in China and Vietnam. One Lao souvenir vendor I met had photographs of African rhino horns that he had sold in Laos to Chinese customers for medicinal use. He said he had some elderly businessmen friends living nearby, three Vietnamese and one Chinese (with Lao passports having married Lao women), who regularly meet at a coffee shop taking it in turns bringing pieces of African rhino horn in their wallets that they grind into a powder to share. He said they use a special grinding dish from Vietnam that is not for sale in Laos as there is no Lao



PHOTOS BY: LUCY VIGNE

From top left clockwise: Fake African and Asian rhino horns are commonly seen at souvenir stalls and jewellery shops in Laos.



48 Indian or Javan-style rhino horns, and 119 very small Sumatran like rhino horns. In total I counted for sale 262 fake African and Asian rhino horns in 61 outlets in Vientiane and 30 in 8 outlets in Luang Prabang.

The new African rhino horn fakes are sold to foreigners who pay about 400,000 kip (\$51) each, depending on size. East Asians, especially Chinese like them for decoration. They are fuelling an increasing interest and demand for the growing numbers of tourists in Laos. The fake Asian rhino horns sell for USD 20-100 each and vendors sometimes try to sell them as real horns at varying prices. Vendors at jewellery stalls used to sell very small real Asian rhino horns to wealthy Lao people from the US visiting Vientiane, as well as to Thais and Chinese, and will still do so if they can obtain them. I saw only one possibly real rhino horn for sale – an old Sumatran rhino horn obtained recently by a souvenir vendor from a man in desperate need.

The reason I did not see more real Asian rhino horns for sale is that an infamous Lao trader named Vixay Keosavang in the last few years has bought virtually all the real Asian rhino horns from the Lao shops to sell in Vietnam, I was told. At the March 2013 CITES conference, Vixay Keosavang was

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demand for rhino horn powder. Even though this Lao vendor could afford it, he grimaced at the idea of consuming it, saying he does not share the pleasure his Vietnamese and Chinese friends get from putting rhino horn powder in their coffee to increase their virility. He said these friends also drink it for general health, to prevent cancer and to improve their eyesight and that the Vietnamese had been doing this in Laos for four to five years.

What struck me was the prevalence of new fake African rhino horns openly for

sale in Laos. These consist of a posterior and anterior horn fixed on fake rhino skin as though the top of the rhino's nose has been sliced off, producing a trophy-like souvenir. Mostly made of water buffalo horn, they have been imported since about 2010 from Vietnam via the Plain of Jars. I counted 74 of them in total: 65 in Vientiane and 9 in Luang Prabang at the Hmong tribe stalls and souvenir outlets. There were also older-looking fake Asian rhino horns, mostly at Hmong stalls and gold jewellery outlets in Vientiane. I saw



A cabinet at Vientiane's international airport displayed an array of confiscated wildlife products warning traffickers that they were illegal, although the rhino horn was fake and there was no ivory on display.

PHOTOS BY: LUCY VIGNE



Pieces of dried elephant skin were displayed for sale for USD 2.5 each at several pavement Hmong tribal medicine stalls.

named as the king pin in today's illegal African rhino horn trade. His company has apparently been responsible for buying most of the rhino horn on the market from Africa, especially South Africa, since about 2008, moving it in transit through Laos to Vietnam. Keosavang is highly connected and well

protected. His company controls much of the international trade in wildlife products transiting through Laos. He has a wild animal farm enabling his company to produce fake wildlife trade import/export documents claiming the animals are from his farm. Dealers buy a quota through his agents allowing wild animals, such as live monkeys for medical research, to be transported from various countries by air in transit through Laos. Dealers show customs officials their quota permit purchased from Keosavang's network and the goods are 'legalized'. They are then taken, often on the Mekong River, to Vietnam and China.

Keosavang's company apparently has a virtual monopoly on the lucrative tiger trade from Laos. Tiger bones for traditional medicine are becoming so scarce that the company has been

obtaining lion bones from South Africa (from legal sources) for eastern Asian medicine. Pangolins, also valuable in Asian traditional medicine, are steadily being destroyed in and around Laos. Big dealers export them by the tonne to China and Vietnam. With pangolin numbers declining in Asia, it may not be long before Africa's pangolins are depleted for the Asian market.

Of great concern now in Kenya is the smuggling of African elephant tusks; some consignments are transported through Laos to China. Illegal raw ivory is mostly carved by the Chinese in mainland China and some is smuggled back into Laos for retail sale as law enforcement is lax. I counted nearly 2,000 new ivory items for sale in 13 outlets in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, excluding shops selling many small Buddha 'ivory' amulets that the Lao

PHOTOS BY: LUCY VIGNE



TOP LEFT: These ivory items were for sale in a Vientiane hotel with common pendants for sale at about USD 125 each, although a 20% discount would be offered.

BELOW LEFT: These ivory bangles were for sale in Luang Prabang, a larger one priced at USD 720. They were carved and recently smuggled in from China.

people buy, often made of elephant or cow bone. Most of the worked ivory I saw was from African tusks of which there has been a steady increase in sales compared with earlier surveys conducted in 2001 and 2011. These items are especially popular with the growing numbers of Chinese from mainland China visiting and living in Laos. I found a new ivory specialty shop in Vientiane offering for sale over a thousand Chinese-made ivory items priced in dollars and renminbi aimed specifically at Chinese buyers. Several ivory vendors in Laos are from China having moved to Laos in the last five years, some with Lao spouses. Also Thais, Japanese, South Koreans and Vietnamese buy worked ivory as it is relatively cheap in Laos and easy to buy.



Nearly all the real rhino horns in the jewellery stalls of Vientiane's large Morning Market shopping centre have now been sold, many to Vietnamese, but small fake horns are on display for sale.

Lao people rarely buy ivory carvings, preferring whole tusks for worship; they consider curved Asian elephant tusks more beautiful than African tusks. Lao do not waste a tusk on carving unless it is already broken. Most Lao are poor and cannot afford worked ivory compared with their richer neighbours.

Nobody in shops in Laos talked of the ban on the ivory trade, selling ivory items openly. If police inspectors come to a shop, vendors can simply say their ivory is fake as it can be hard to tell apart, and some outlets also sell fake ivory jewellery imported from China. Nowhere was a sign warning customers that it is illegal to export ivory items, and nowhere were CITES rules displayed or mentioned, as in Thailand, China and Japan where the governments have stricter restrictions on ivory sales warning customers of the international ivory trade ban. Most Lao ivory carvers, however, gave up their ivory business after the CITES international trade ban in 1990, turning

to furniture making. I met a Lao father and son who still carve ivory, making mainly tiny ivory Buddha amulets and rings for Lao people commissioned by jewellery shops who provide the tusk pieces. These carvers also use elephant bone and rosewood to carve Buddha figures. All their work is done slowly and meticulously with hand tools, not like the fast production of Chinese worked ivory.

Prices for Asian raw ivory are higher than ever in Laos with a cut tusk piece from a live domesticated elephant selling wholesale for 40,000 baht/kg (\$1,282/kg) and a whole tusk from a dead Lao elephant being 50,000 baht/kg (\$1,600/kg) - 25% higher. In 2001 a Lao tusk was about USD 275/kg so the price has risen by nearly 6 times in 12 years! Traders in Laos sell smoked blocks of elephant meat with skin attached wholesale for 2,000 baht/kg (\$66/kg). They sell elephant bones wholesale for \$100/kg, but local carvers get these bones for \$64/kg



PHOTOS BY: LUCY VIGNE



The largest photo shows wild animals killed in the forests of northern Laos illegally on sale beside the main road to the China border, and the three others photos are of the Morning Market in the northern town of Luang Nam Tha where wild animals killed the night before are illegally sold mostly as food to Lao, Chinese and Vietnamese.

from mahouts for amulets. Traders sometimes sell elephant products from domesticated elephants to neighbouring countries, especially Vietnam, pretending they are from the sought after wild jungle elephant.

All wild animal products are illegal to sell for both the export and domestic markets in Laos. Yet food markets across Laos sell wildlife illegally, mostly to eat, becoming active before dawn. I saw large quantities of dead wild animals for sale in Luang Prabang and Luang Nam Tha killed mostly by Hmong forest hunters the previous night. Police may inspect from 8am onwards

so most sales occur before then. Dead wild animals are also seen for sale along the main roads, and I saw several stalls beside the road running north towards the Chinese border. These animals usually are more expensive than in the markets as travellers are richer. Most animal products lie out in the sun and apparently are sometimes injected with formalin to preserve them. If they don't sell they may be smoked and put out for sale again. Wild animal meat is preferred to farmed meat if you can afford it. Bus stop restaurants sell many wild animal dishes to travellers. Sometimes Chinese and Vietnamese stop at roadside cafes leaving money for specific wild animals, such as pangolins, to be caught to take home and sell. There are small border posts that can be crossed with illegal produce hidden in vehicles. Wildlife is thus not just eaten by the Lao tribal people living in the mountains as in the past, but valuable

and increasingly endangered species are being killed for the profitable trade to neighbouring countries.

In Kenya bush meat by comparison is rarely seen in the markets and cafes. But there is concern with more Chinese living in Kenya that domestic demand and exports of wild animals will increase, as is happening in Laos. Laos is fast being depleted of its natural resources. Let this be a warning to Kenya. Big dealers in Laos have become untouchable through money and power, driving a growing black market in wildlife trade, notably in rhino horn and ivory from various African countries. Just a few individuals can have a fast and devastating effect on wildlife if allowed to continue their criminal business. African countries are increasingly being exploited for their wildlife to satisfy corrupt criminal elite networks. Africa's governments urgently need effective punishments and prosecutions of illegal wildlife traders to prevent wildlife slaughter. ●

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