

IVORY TRAFFICKING

Unravelling 20 Years of Illegal Ivory Movement

To make the logistics even more complicated, huge quantities of pangolin scales have accompanied the ivory, at times, along with small numbers of big cat parts and rhino horns.



STORY BY
DAN STILES

It is not known with certainty how many elephants were illegally killed for their tusks in Africa from 2002 to 2022, but 200,000 is not an unreasonable estimate. Statistical modelling using poaching data provided by the Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) programme of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and population data in the IUCN African Elephant Database reports have produced estimates of up to 40,000 a year during the peak poaching years between 2011 and 2014. This number of elephants would have produced under 2,000 tonnes of ivory, assuming an average tusk weight of five kilograms and 1.88 tusks per elephant – not all carry two tusks.

In addition to poached ivory, legal ivory from government and private sources also

entered the illegal trade chain in what is called 'leakage'. This additional ivory would put the total at 2,000 tonnes. A study I carried out in 2014 with the Zimbabwean elephant expert Rowan Martin and economist Brendan Moyle estimated that 2,400 tonnes of illegal ivory from all sources left Africa from 2002 to 2014, after deductions made for law enforcement confiscations. The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) Crime Tracker database shows that over 480 tonnes of African ivory were seized in Africa and Asia between 2002 and 2022.

Logistics

Since 1990, commercial exports of ivory have been banned by CITES. So, how did all of that illegal ivory end up in eastern Asia?

Elephants are poached in relatively small numbers at a time by small groups of





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poachers, often far from roads. After removal, the tusks have to be transported to a road and eventually to a town, where commonly a middleman will buy them. Alternatively, the poachers might be working for a middleman and deliver the tusks to him or to her. From the towns, the ivory is transported to cities (sometimes in another country) in lots of various sizes, usually of 20 to 200 kg, where the ivory is consolidated with the exporters, known in the media as 'kingpins' or 'big fish'. Now it has to be packed with some sort of concealment cover and loaded into shipping containers (if by sea) or crates (if by ports).

The ivory has to be transported to sea or airports and pass through Customs, often with scanners and possibly sniffer dogs, before being freighted to Asia. To veil the origin of an ivory shipment, it is common practice for



the containers to change ships and papers in transit ports or even for the ivory to be repacked into different containers. At the destination port, the ivory again has to pass through Customs, be offloaded onto land transport, and driven to a holding location before onward sale and distribution to end-users. A single tusk might pass through 10 countries from its source to sale as a worked piece, and is subject to discovery and seizure in any of them.

To make the logistics even more complicated, in recent years, huge quantities of pangolin scales have accompanied the ivory, at times, along with small numbers of big cat parts (bones, canines and claws) and rhino horns. Gathering all of the pangolin scales and getting them to the exact locations

TOP

Ivory fake antiques sold in Kinshasa's Bikeko crafts market. The trade in fake ivory antiques is a significant concern globally, as it contributes to illegal wildlife trafficking and poses a threat to endangered species, particularly elephants. Authenticating ivory can be challenging, and distinguishing between genuine antiques and replicas or fake items is often a complex task.

BELOW RIGHT

Artificially stained ivory artefacts sold in Kinshasa, DRC, can be carried abroad by tourists and declared as wood.



PHOTOS BY DAN STILES

TOP

In April 2016, Kenya burned 105 tonnes of ivory. Governments and conservation organizations often undertake such actions to send a clear message that they are committed to protecting endangered species, such as elephants, and to deter illegal trade in ivory. These events are typically publicized and carried out under strict supervision to ensure transparency.

as the ivory for container packing must have involved many people along the trade chain.

Many poachers and traffickers have been caught, but as an informant in Uganda told me recently, "If you have money, you go free; if you don't, you go to prison." An examination of African court records will show that the small-time poacher or transporter has the highest conviction rate and longest sentence. When arrested and tried in Africa, the people at the top end up back on the street fairly quickly, regardless of the evidence against them (see April-June 2021 issue of *Swara*).

The 'plea bargain' is a recent ploy increasingly adopted by African law enforcement and courts. In the United States, this is commonly used to gain the accused's cooperation to plead guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence. In Africa, it invariably results in a fine in exchange for no jail time, in essence, a sanctioned bribe. An example was the sentencing of three Vietnamese and one Guinean trafficker in Nigeria in July 2023 for trafficking 7.1 tonnes of pangolin scales and 850 kg of ivory. They pled guilty and

paid fines the equivalent of \$6,000 each, an affordable business expense.

Networks

How can 2,000 tonnes of ivory be smuggled? The answer has two components -- the first is the development of transnational organised criminal (TOC) networks, and the second is corruption. The two go hand-in-hand.

Before CITES banned the ivory trade in most countries in 1990, ivory was traded legally by many companies or state agencies around the world. When the ban made the commodity illegal, some of these companies continued to trade illegally, but they needed to change how they operated. The supply chain was now completely different. One of the earliest known examples of organised international ivory trafficking emerged in Lilongwe, Malawi in the 1990s. A local company, Allena Curios, owned by the Gwedeza family, was manufacturing and exporting ivory legally before the 1990 ivory trade ban. A Taiwanese man named Fong Hsieh, working in Malawi, was buying ivory from Allena. Hsieh had many Chinese



PHOTOS BY UNITED STATES FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE



One of the earliest known examples of organised international ivory trafficking emerged in Lilongwe, Malawi in the 1990s.

TOP LEFT
Steve Oberholtzer, United States Fish & Wildlife Service Special Agent in Charge, Office of Law Enforcement discussing the illegal ivory trafficking with reporters.

BELOW
Ivory disguised as African artifacts that was seized during a covert investigation.

contacts, including ivory industry people in Hong Kong. After the ban, Hsieh teamed up with a Malaysian Chinese who liked to be called Peter Wang but whose real name was Wang Yong Sai. Wang smuggled ivory to places such as Japan, Singapore, China and Hong Kong.

According to EIA, which first uncovered and investigated the Wang-Hsieh network, the smugglers had made 19 known ivory shipments since early 1994 up to a 2002 seizure of 6.2 tonnes of their ivory in Singapore. The route was from an ivory consolidation location in Chipata, Zambia, to Lilongwe, then by road to Beira port

in Mozambique, where it went by a small freighter to Durban, South Africa, and finally onward to East Asia.

The ivory was being supplied by poachers operating mainly in the Zambezi Valley in Zambia. Sindikani Banda was responsible for consolidating the poached ivory in Chipata and transporting it to Gwedeza at Allena Curios in Lilongwe. Gwedeza sold it to the Chinese, and they cooperated to smuggle it. Despite EIA publicising all of this information and working with wildlife authorities in Zambia and Malawi to stop it, the network continued to operate thanks to corruption. In 2014, the husband and wife team of Yunhua Lin and Zhang Qinhua came from Fujian Province in China and took over network leadership. They added rhino horn, pangolin scales and minerals to the business.

Lin, Zhang and others were finally arrested in 2019. In 2021, Lin was sentenced to



PHOTO BY WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

TOP

Moazu Kromah on his arrest in 2019. Kromah was initially arrested in February 2017 by the Uganda Wildlife Authority in cooperation with the Natural Resources Conservation Network a Ugandan NGO in possession of 1.3 tonnes of ivory. Although Kromah is described as being at the centre of vast ring of organised criminals, connected to at least four major criminal syndicates, the case did not progress through Ugandan courts due to suspected corrupt elements in the criminal justice system.

14 years and Zhang to six years in prison. However, Lin has been observed several times since sentencing at his farm and businesses under prison guard escort.

Two other major TOC ivory networks developed in the 1990s as well. The first emerged in Kampala, Uganda, but operated throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and the second was headquartered in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The Kampala network comprises West Africans who originate mainly from Guinea and Mali. The most well-known member of this network is Moazu Kromah, a Liberian who fled to Guinea in 1990 as a refugee from the civil war. Very soon after that, Kromah went to Kampala where he started working for a Malian businessman smuggling diamonds and ivory from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Elephant poaching was rife in the DRC in the 1990s, and most of the ivory went out through Uganda and onward to Kenya or Tanzania for shipping to Asia.

Kromah had a flare for organisation and business as he established an extensive network that operated in eastern, southern, central and west Africa, composed mainly

At the peak of Kromah's operations between 2013 and 2016, he shipped out many tonnes of ivory every month from Mombasa, which originated mainly from Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, DRC and Zambia, based on DNA analyses.

of West Africans but also Ugandans, Burundians, Congolese, Kenyans, Tanzanians, Mozambicans and others. His network supplied ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales and more to mainly South East Asians. He had links with the infamous Vixay Keosavang in Laos, along with Laotian wildlife trafficking companies such as Vannaseng and Vinasakhone, and with Thai and Vietnamese traffickers.

At the peak of Kromah's operations between 2013 and 2016, he shipped out many tonnes of ivory every month from Mombasa, which originated mainly from Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, DRC and Zambia, based on DNA analyses. The Kenyan Feisal Mohammed Ali was transporting Kromah ivory when he was charged with trafficking in 2014. The Feisal court case became quite a media circus, and his conviction in 2016 was cause for grand celebration in the conservation community, only to turn to outrage when an appeal judge overturned the conviction and freed Feisal.

Kromah, his brother Bangaly Kourouma and nephew Mohammed Kourouma, both Guineans, were busted in a sting operation with 1.3 tonnes of ivory and packing materials in Kampala in 2017. Still, Kromah gave bribes to stay out of jail and stall the court case. The United States government took an interest in Kromah when it was discovered that he also had links with the big drug smuggling ring of the Akasha brothers, who were based in Mombasa. US undercover operators from the Drug Enforcement Agency set up a sting and busted Kromah and several close associates for ivory and rhino horn trafficking. Between 2019 and 2022, five of them were whisked off to New York for trial, where they pled guilty, receiving sentences ranging from 54 to 63 months. Two of them, Mansur Mohamed Surur and Abdi Hussein Ahmed were also charged with intent to sell heroin. Kromah was scheduled for release in December 2023.



PHOTO BY NEWSROOM/ICMCS.ORG

The Dar es Salaam network probably began in the 1990s, although no hard evidence exists. It was started by Yang Fenglan, who became known as the "Ivory Queen". Yang first came to Tanzania in 1975 to act as a Kiswahili-Chinese translator during the building of the TAZARA rail line from Dar es Salaam to Zambia, returning to Beijing afterwards. In 1993, Yang returned to Tanzania, this time as an interpreter for the Chinese experts running the Kiwira Coal Mine in Mbeya. She stayed until 1995 before going back to China again.

In 1997, she returned to Tanzania and set up two businesses. Yang ran her own operation from a two-story building in Dar es Salaam with her Chinese restaurant on the ground floor and Beijing Great Wall Investment Company on the above floor, where she occasionally stored her tusks. She also served as vice-chairwoman and secretary-general of the China-Africa Business Council of Tanzania, where she met and cultivated important business and political personalities. Yang and her restaurant became active in bringing together Tanzanian and Chinese business interests.

Since business and politicians are closely linked, Yang probably gained political protection for her poaching and trafficking



PHOTO BY WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

TOP
Ivory and weapons recovered from Mateso and his gang. Poaching operations in Africa have grown increasingly sophisticated with injections of large amounts of cash from foreign ivory traffickers resulting in professionalized ivory poaching gangs armed with high-powered hunting rifles and AK-47s.

operations in exchange for cutting some of the influential politicians in on the business. EIA's *Vanishing Point* report names some of these politicians, but none have ever been charged or prosecuted.

It does not appear that Yang exported the ivory herself. She ran several poaching gangs in Tanzania, northern Mozambique and possibly north-eastern Zambia through Tanzanian lieutenants who worked for her (Boniface Malyango and Mateso Kassian being the two main ones). She accumulated the ivory they poached in Dar es Salaam and found others to buy from her and export it. It appears she initially sold her ivory to

BELOW
Yang Fenglan a Chinese businesswoman who has been convicted of smuggling ivory. She was formerly based in Tanzania and is nicknamed by the media as the "Ivory Queen".



TOP
Elaborately carved ivory items in a shop in Hanoi, Viet Nam. Viet Nam is currently the most common destination for trafficked ivory.



PHOTO BY TERRA MATER FACTUAL STUDIOS / THE IVORY GAME

the Hsieh-Wang network for export. Still, in the late 1990s or early 2000s, she met a group of Chinese closer to home who had the perfect attributes to become ivory smugglers — seafood exporters from Shuidong who operated from Zanzibar.

In November 2013, three Chinese were arrested in Mikocheni, Dar es Salaam — near Yang's restaurant — packing 1.9 tonnes of ivory into a container. The Chinese worked for the Shuidong Network, which had bought the ivory from Yang. Shortly afterwards, investigators seized a container belonging to Shuidong traffickers in Zanzibar linked to the Mikocheni bust with almost three tonnes of ivory. The three Chinese were tried and two of them sentenced to long prison terms. The one who got off, Chen Jinzhan, used Yang Fenglan's lawyer to defend himself.

MIDDLE
Boniface Malyongo, 'Shetani', ran at least 15 poaching gangs in Tanzania that killed thousands of elephants and supplied ivory to major wildlife traffickers.



PHOTO BY [HTTPS://OXPECKERS.ORG/2017/11/IVORY-SMUGGLERS/](https://oxpeckers.org/2017/11/ivory-smugglers/)

In 2014, the Protected Area Management Solutions (PAMS) Foundation teamed up with the Tanzanian National and Transnational Serious Crimes Investigation Unit (NTSCIU) to investigate Yang. They gathered enough information to charge her and two accomplices, Salivius Matembo and Manase Philemon, in October 2015 with specific cases of ivory trafficking, including some involving the Shuidong group members. Yang was apprehended after a dramatic car

BELOW
Mateso Kasian, a Tanzanian, started poaching in the Selous-Mikumi area of southern Tanzania, then moved to Niassa.



PHOTO BY PEXEL/ BALAZS SIMON

chase through the streets of Dar es Salaam. She and her two accomplices were eventually convicted and sentenced by a Tanzanian court in February 2019 to 15 years imprisonment for "leading an organised criminal gang".

From 2009 to 2014, 22.6 tonnes of ivory were seized inside Tanzania, while 40.7 tonnes of ivory linked to Tanzania were intercepted outside the country, indicating that corruption in Tanzania's ports allowed most of the ivory to be shipped out. In 2014, a Zanzibar-based sea cucumber trader called Wei Ronglu, from Shuidong, told EIA undercover investigators, that 20 containers with ivory hidden inside were shipped to the Chinese mainland, usually via Hong Kong, in 2013. Wei claimed that, on average, one out of 20 containers of ivory is seized. Each container usually holds between two and three tonnes of ivory inside, packed with low-value goods such as shells and dried fish for concealment. So, in 2013 alone, some 40 to 60 tonnes of ivory were shipped to China by the Shuidong syndicate.

Malyango and Kassian were level 2 in the supply chain, meaning they bought the tusks from the poachers in the field and transported them to collection points. Matembo and Philemon assisted Yang, all of whom were level 3, in getting the ivory to Dar es Salaam and preparing large batches that were sold to the Shuidong people, level 4, who packed and exported it. Shuidong Network traffickers in China, level 5, received the shipped ivory

and sold it at a good profit to those who would process it into worked ivory sold to consumers.

The Shuidong people moved to Pemba in Mozambique and finally to Lagos, Nigeria, where the Chinese government moved in to put them out of business in 2019 with a series of arrests and convictions that punished them with long prison sentences.

Lessons learned

The only convictions that yielded genuine prison time for high-level traffickers were those in which the accused were extradited either to the US or China. Yunhua Lin in Malawi (and probably his wife) seems to use prison as free lodging, coming and going at will.

The West African network operates out of Uganda, with branches in Burundi, DRC, Nigeria, Mali and Togo. The Vietnamese are their most active collaborators currently. Corruption in those countries, involving compromised politicians, military officers, wildlife agency officials, Customs agents, diplomats and the judiciary, is facilitating the continuation of wildlife poaching and trafficking. It has become an entrenched system. ●

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TOP

Ivory poaching has had devastating effects on elephant populations. Large-scale poaching has led to a significant decline in the number of elephants across Africa and Asia. This decline threatens the ecological balance of ecosystems and poses a conservation crisis.

DID YOU KNOW

An estimated 100,000 elephants were killed for their ivory in Africa between 2010 and 2012. The number of elephants remaining in Africa is uncertain, but are likely to be in the region of 500,000.