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Crime rings boost ivory smuggling

By Richard Black

Environment correspondent, BBC News website



The number of seizures has gone up, and so has their average size

The last year has seen a major increase in the illegal ivory trade, with more involvement from organised crime.

Figures compiled by Traffic, the agency charged with monitoring the trade, show a doubling in the volume of illegal ivory seized from 2008 to 2009.

Researchers believe most of it is poached in West and Central Africa, while China is the main destination.

Traffic says there is no evidence that last year's one-off legal sale of ivory in southern Africa boosted smuggling.

The volume of ivory seized is not a complete indication of the size of the illegal trade, because the effectiveness of police and customs authorities can vary from year to year and only a fraction of illegal consignments are discovered.

“ More than any other country, China seemingly holds the key for reversing the upward trend in illicit trade in ivory ”

Traffic report

Nevertheless, Traffic believes a significant increase lies behind the seizure figures, especially because the final numbers for 2009 could rise even higher.

"Our analysis cuts off in August, and our figures are already showing the increase," said the agency's director Steven Broad.

"So it's a serious concern. And the increase is based on a relatively small number of big seizures, which tend to indicate more organised operations behind the trade," he told BBC News.

A year ago, an operation by Interpol and Kenyan authorities netted a tonne of ivory in a single consignment - the biggest on record - and led to the arrest of 57 people in five African countries.

Reports indicate that prices of \$1,000 per kilo can now be commanded.

China question

Traffic believes that poaching and exporting is currently concentrated in West Africa.



It is not clear whether the trade increase is affecting elephant numbers

Nigeria emerges as a country implicated in many seizures made elsewhere, but whose authorities have not themselves made a single seizure in 18 years.

As sources of ivory, Traffic also picks out Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo as countries of concern, while Thailand stands accused as a major trans-shipment point.

More than half of the consignments involving these countries are large ones, indicating the involvement of organised crime, Traffic says.

Tanzania emerges as a nation effective at controlling poaching in its own elephant herd, but which gangs are increasingly using to export ivory.

Traffic concludes that most of the illegal ivory ends up in China, although Vietnam is developing as a market.

Chinese connection

In recent years, China has stepped up monitoring and enforcement on ivory carvers and sellers, and its efforts were rewarded in July last year when the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) voted to allow Chinese buyers into the legal sale of stockpiled ivory that was about to begin in southern Africa.

The sale permitted Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe to sell more than 100 tonnes of

ivory from government stockpiles.

Most of it came from animals that had died naturally, and the money raised was designated for elephant conservation.

Although not opposing the sale, Traffic believes Chinese authorities have further to go.



Slaughter fear over poaching rise

"The [Chinese] approach is to have very tightly controlled outlets selling the legal ivory, and there is a lot of detail - you can even check the legality on a public database when you go to buy something," said Mr Broad.

"But what effort has been put into suppressing the black market trade outside those controlled outlets? Based on what we have at the moment, we can't say they're failing; but it's a big question."

The Traffic report also highlights the increasing presence of Chinese citizens in African countries as a factor facilitating trade.

"Chinese nationals have been arrested within or coming from Africa in at least 134 ivory seizure cases, totalling over 16 tonnes of ivory; and another 487 cases representing almost 25 tonnes of ivory originating from Africa was seized en route to China," says the report.

"As ever, more than any other country, China seemingly holds the key for reversing the upward trend in illicit trade in ivory."

Poaching territories

It would be logical to suppose that if the volume of the ivory trade is increasing, that must be fed by a rise in the rate of poaching.

Although Kenya has documented a rise, information from other countries is scanty, and it is not clear whether the smuggling increase is affecting the viability of elephant populations.

On a pan-African basis, elephant numbers are increasing. But behind that overall trend lies a pattern of effective conservation and population increase in southern and eastern Africa, while numbers are low and believed to be falling in the centre and west of the continent.

Last year's legal ivory sale, authorised by CITES in 2007, remains controversial.

The previous one-off sale in 1999 was followed by four years of a decline in smuggling, apparently disproving the assertion made by some animal welfare organisations that a legal trade forms an opening into which black market ivory can pour.

This time, the data is unclear. Traffic is analysing evidence of elephant kills in Central Africa that might provide an answer; and until then, "We really can't tell - the jury is out," said Steven Broad.

Tanzania and Zambia are requesting the right to make a similar sale, again of more than 100 tonnes. The request is due to be decided at the next CITES meeting in March.

Traffic is supported jointly by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and WWF, and is charged by CITES with monitoring the ivory trade through the Elephant Trade Information System (Etis).

Etis contains a 20-year record of 14,364 elephant product seizure records from 85 states.

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Kenya seizes massive ivory haul



The price of ivory has shot up and can fetch more than \$1,000 per kg

Kenyan authorities have seized almost 700kg of ivory worth millions of dollars in a night-time raid at the country's main airport.

The Kenya Wildlife Service says a similar amount was intercepted in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Both consignments - with a potential value of more than \$1.5m (£938,000) - were reportedly headed for Thailand.

The BBC's Will Ross in Nairobi says poaching is on the increase mostly owing to high demand for ivory in Asia.

Our reporter says it is not yet clear whether the ivory, recovered at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Airport, had been trafficked from other parts of the continent or was from East Africa.

Twenty years ago the world's elephant population was plummeting and the trade in ivory

was banned.

But over the past decade the ban has been periodically relaxed and occasional supervised ivory auctions have been allowed.

Chinese influence

Officials say the sales have fuelled demand for ivory in Asian countries, especially China, contributing to a sharp increase in elephant poaching.

So far this year poachers in Kenya have killed 128 elephants for their ivory; last year 98 were killed.

In July, Kenyan authorities intercepted 16 elephant tusks and two rhinoceros horns being illegally exported to Laos from Mozambique.

Some wildlife experts have attributed the increase in elephant poaching to the presence of Chinese workers in Africa.

With demand for ivory products increasing back home, some Chinese workers on low salaries in Kenya are reported to have become middlemen in the ivory trade.

And because of the high demand for ivory across Asia, the price of ivory has shot up and can fetch more than \$1,000 a kilo.

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'Slaughter' fear over poaching rise

By Andrew Luck-Baker
Science reporter, BBC News



The Kenya Wildlife Service got to these tusks before the ivory thieves

The number of African elephants killed illegally for their ivory is rising steeply.

A poaching surge in the past five years is raising fears of a re-run of the catastrophic slaughter of elephants in the 1970s and 1980s.

During that period, referred to by some as the "ivory holocaust", Africa's elephant population plunged from an estimated 1.3 million animals to 500,000.

One team of scientists argues that, today, about 38,000 elephants across sub-Saharan Africa are dying annually at the hands of poachers to feed the growing demand for ivory carvings and trinkets in eastern Asia.

If that poaching rate is correct and is sustained, the elephant would become extinct across most of sub-Saharan Africa in fifteen years.

The calculation on which this figure is based is questioned by a number of other experts on the illegal ivory trade. They believe the overall slaughter rate is considerably lower.

Rocketing prices

Nonetheless, 20 years after the international trade in ivory was made illegal, there is widespread concern over the escalating problem.

According to Tom Milliken of the wildlife trade monitoring organisation, TRAFFIC: "Since 2004 there's been a rapidly increasing trend in the illegal ivory trade. And this is very worrying because it follows on from a progressive decline in the ivory trade."

In the last five years, the price of ivory has sky-rocketed.

There are reports of Asian dealers paying well in excess of US\$1,000 per kilo - such is the demand from the burgeoning population of consumers in China, for example, who can now afford ivory products.

A combination of the soaring value and the fact that wildlife crime is a low priority for most law enforcement agencies means that ivory poaching and trafficking has attracted the interest of international criminal syndicates.

According to Sam Wasser of the Centre for Conservation Biology at the University of Washington, Seattle: "This has created a situation where organised crime has gotten very heavily involved in the illegal trade. In fact, if you look at all wildlife crime - not just ivory - there are tens of billions of dollars being made annually."



Elephant populations around Africa face an uncertain future

The slaughter of elephants is at its most rampant in the forests and bush of Central Africa, in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo where civil war, corruption and poor standards of governance make the animals particularly vulnerable. However, poaching rates are also rising in southern and East African countries.

Patrick Omondi, who is head of species conservation at the Kenya Wildlife Service, said that the number of elephants killed for their tusks in his country more than doubled between 2007 and 2008. The latest figures for 2009 suggest it may double again by the close of this year.

2009 has also seen a string of spectacular seizures of contraband ivory made by authorities in eastern Asia. In March, Vietnamese customs discovered a shipping container with 6.3 tonnes of tusks in Hanoi.

Within six weeks, another 3.5 tonnes was seized in Manila in the Philippines and another illegal shipment of one tonne was picked up in Bangkok, Thailand. The combined weight

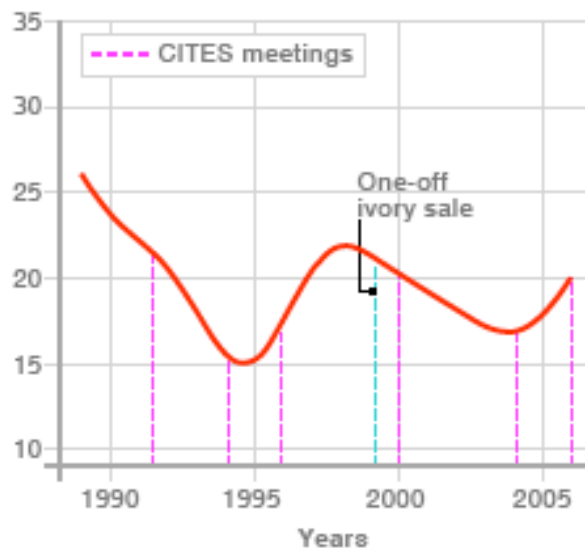
of just these consignments represents about 2,000 dead elephants.

Speaking on the BBC Radio 4 programme Last Chance for Africa's Elephants?, Peter Younger of the wildlife crime unit at the global police agency, Interpol, said: "These three seizures over that short a period of time are the largest seizures I've seen since I've been in this business."

They had been shipped out of Africa from Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, though the East African country is not necessarily the country where the elephants were poached.

IVORY SALES AND POACHING: A LINK?

Ivory seizures (tonnes)



SOURCE: Traffic

Data suggest the 1999 sale did not affect seizures of illegal ivory

Once ivory has been trafficked out of the continent, it is often impossible to identify where the tusks were originally poached.

According to Sam Wasser, the lack of this information has kept the criminals several steps ahead of law enforcement and allowed intense elephant killing to go unchallenged in areas where anti-poaching measures are not adequately enforced.

In a bid to fight back against the illegal trade, Professor Wasser has led the development of a DNA forensic technique which pinpoints the origin of seized ivory.

Over the last decade, hundreds of elephant dung samples have been collected and sent to his lab from all over sub-Saharan Africa.

DNA from each has been analysed. The team have focussed on 16 specific genes from the elephant genome and plotted how the specific genetic code of each one varies from location to location. This gives them a map of elephant genetic variation across the sub-continent.

Being an overgrown tooth, an elephant tusk also harbours the animal's DNA. So when Sam Wasser's team receives a piece of seized ivory - either raw or carved - they pulverise it to a powder and then chemically extract the DNA within. The make-up of the 16 genes is

then compared to the dung DNA database.

'Organised crime'

Because populations of elephants living near each other are more genetically similar than populations further apart, a statistical analysis allows the Seattle lab to say where the poached ivory originated - sometimes to within several tens of kilometres.

According to Professor Wasser, this method is much less cumbersome than other ivory genetic marker techniques.

He also said that his DNA tests on impounded ivory shipments have revealed new information on the way the criminal syndicates of poachers and illegal dealers are operating.

The findings are contrary to a widely-held belief of law enforcement agencies, he told the BBC.

"They thought that the dealers who were shipping them were cherry-picking across Africa: taking bits of ivory from here and there, putting together a big consignment together and sending it out. We find that's not happening at all," said Sam Wasser.



There is widespread concern over the escalating problem

"In fact they (the dealers) get a purchase order - we need so many tusks at such a time - and they go and hammer these populations over and over again - the same population. So they are doing major, major devastation."

For example, analysis of samples from two large illegal shipments in 2006 suggested that

the Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania had become a hotspot of intense poaching. These seizures were 5.2 tonnes of ivory in Taiwan and 2.6 tonnes caught in Hong Kong.

Another Hong Kong seizure in 2006 contained 3.5 tonnes of tusks, hidden behind a false wall in a shipping container. It had left Africa from the port city of Douala in Cameroon.

Follow-up investigations revealed a second and third container with similar secret compartments. Both had chips of ivory on their floors. All three were owned by a Taiwanese national living in Cameroon.

Customs documents suggested at least 11 shipments to ports in East Asia. Although all the illegal exports came out of Cameroon, the Seattle DNA tests showed that most of the ivory originated from the south-east of neighbouring Gabon. According to Sam Wasser: "There wasn't a lot of indication of heavy poaching in Gabon so this exposed Gabon as a very significant poaching area."

Forensic techniques such as the geographic DNA test can help to reveal regions where anti-poaching measures need to be beefed up. They can also aid the investigations of how the big time ivory traffickers are operating.

However, many of the interviewees who spoke to BBC Radio 4 are daunted by the scale and international nature of the criminality involved. At Interpol, Peter Younger argues that much more concerted co-operation among African and Asian countries is necessary.

"In this particular area of crime, we're losing because the people we are tasked to deal with are much more co-ordinated than we are. We have a mechanism to co-operate. Interpol is the only international police agency, but there are other platforms. We are just not using them enough."

"Last Chance for Africa's Elephants?" is available on the BBC iPlayer. It was originally broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Andrew Luck-Baker will also be presenting two editions of "Discovery" on BBC World Service on the crisis facing the African Elephant on Wednesday 19th and 26th August