Tusks and trinkets: An overview of illicit ivory trafficking in Africa

Anita Gossmann

Introduction

By 1989, ivory poaching had reached epidemic proportions in Africa, prompting an all-out, global ban on the ivory trade. Despite a dip in illegal activity during the 1990s, there has been an increase in illegal ivory trafficking on the continent in recent years.

Over the last five to ten years, there has been a growing indication of a greater level of organisation and sophistication in the illegal trade in ivory. Growing numbers of seizures and greater quantities of illegal ivory found during these seizures are considered by many to be indicative of a rise in illegal ivory poaching and trafficking in Africa.
The overall rise and sophistication in the trade is accounted for by a growing demand for ivory in East Asia following extensive economic development in the East during the 1990s. This demand has been accompanied by a growing East Asian presence in Africa in terms of investment and development projects.\textsuperscript{1} The rise in demand and access has further been assisted by poorly regulated domestic ivory markets, porous borders, and limited local law enforcement capability.

Evidence suggests organised poaching is occurring in various regions, but with a notable rise in Central Africa and the Congo basin. Transit routes and countries also vary, with poached ivory often criss-crossing several land borders before exiting the continent, usually by sea. End markets are overwhelmingly concentrated in Asia and especially China.

Beyond mere criminal enterprise, organised ivory trafficking is also associated with armed conflict. Conflict on the continent has traditionally provided cover and opportunity for illegal poaching. However, ivory is also being used as a means to fund war and purchase weapons and supplies for armed fighting groups in several ongoing conflicts.

Unlike other illegal trades taking advantage of Africa’s porous borders and limited law enforcement, organised ivory trafficking has an added urgency in that elephants and hippos across the continent are being killed in the process. According to Traffic’s Tom Milliken, ‘Central Africa is currently haemorrhaging ivory’.\textsuperscript{2}

**Africa and the international illegal ivory trade**

**A market-driven trade**

With 85 per cent of the world’s wild elephants located in Africa, the continent plays a key role in the supply of ivory to both domestic and international markets. Most of this supply is from illegal and unsustainable sources.\textsuperscript{3}

Domestic and international markets are characterised by legal ivory-carving industries and markets. In most countries in Africa and abroad, ivory carving and the selling of worked ivory remains legal, albeit with some restrictions.\textsuperscript{4} Legal ivory carving is restricted to the use of existing stocks of ivory acquired prior to the 1989 ban. However, distinguishing between pre-1989 and recently poached ivory is near impossible.

Regulation of domestic ivory markets varies greatly, and the trade in illegal ivory is directly related to the presence of thriving ‘large-scale, poorly regulated domestic ivory markets in parts of Africa and Asia’.\textsuperscript{5} Further enabled by high levels of corruption and limited law enforcement capabilities, illicit ivory flows are effectively laundered through these poorly regulated but legal domestic markets.\textsuperscript{6}
With pre-ban ivory stocks believed to be running low, if not long since expired in China, the need for ivory supplies to meet a growing demand is essentially driving organised poaching in Africa.

**African markets**

From domestic markets in Africa, worked ivory is bought by tourists, aid workers and business travellers. Meeting consumer demand, ivory pieces include jewellery, souvenir pieces, figurines, chopsticks and name seals – favourites with Asian buyers. Costs usually range between US$20 to US$200. While ivory is expensive in most African markets, prices are cheap compared to markets in Asia.

Poorly regulated markets persist despite the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which prohibits the sale of ivory in unregulated domestic markets. Although CITES has been endeavouring to tackle the matter of unregulated markets since 2003, efforts have so far been unsuccessful. Such local, legal markets are easily exploited by foreign nationals looking to ship ivory out of the continent.

Contraband ivory from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Southern Sudan, for example, supply the Sudanese market. Centred in Khartoum and Omdurman, the market is one of the largest and most poorly regulated in Africa. It is considered to play a major role in the illegal trade and is a hub for the shipment of ivory to China. Similarly, despite a government crackdown in 2005, the Ethiopian market is seeing a resurgence with ivory coming primarily via Sudan and Kenya.

Some countries, however, remain beyond the realm of CITES, for instance Angola. Having not signed the convention, Angola has become a hub for the sale of illegal ivory. In the last field assessment by Traffic in 2006, researchers noted enough ivory in local craft markets in Luanda to reflect the death of at least 250 elephants. Given that Angola was believed to only have 246 elephants at the time, worked ivory found in Luanda was believed to be primarily of DRC origin, with the majority of vendors also being DRC nationals. Angola is further suspected to be a major conduit for raw ivory being trafficked from the DRC to China and Vietnam.

**Asian markets**

Much of the illegal ivory trafficked from Africa supplies legal and illegal markets and industries in Asia. Both China and Japan, for example, have longstanding domestic and legal ivory-carving industries. While Japan traditionally dominated the global demand for illicit ivory, China has surpassed the former since the late 1990s and is now the world’s largest market for trafficked ivory. Large volumes of illicit ivory enter China
either directly or via ports in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Other major markets and transit countries include Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. All are considered to play key roles in the trafficking of ivory and represent to varying degrees both transit and end-user markets.

Prices in these markets for illegal ivory vary but are known to have fetched around US$850 per kilogram in China and Japan in 2007 (from US$200 in 2004) and, according to some estimates, up to US$1700 per kilogram by 2009. In Vietnam, considered to be one of the most expensive markets for ivory, retail first prices currently stand around US$1500 and US$1800 per kilogram. Wholesale prices are estimated to be between US$750 and US$1200 per kilogram. These are near triple of that in 2001 and 2002. In turn, business travellers to Africa from Asia can purchase ivory for about US$200 per kilogram in Africa and then sell it for US$2000 after carrying it home to Asia in a suitcase.

**Demand meets opportunity**

**Asia meets Africa**

Despite the 1989 ban, the volume of ivory being seized is on the rise. According to Traffic, large-scale seizures (of one ton or more) increased from 17 between 1989 and 1997 to 32 between 1998 and 2006 alone. Rising quantities are attributed to a growing demand for ivory in Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan and especially China. Raw ivory is used for furnishings, decorative crafts, jewellery and traditional name seals, or hankos, in Japan.

This demand for ivory was spurred on by the rapid economic development experienced in the East during the 1990s, and the rising affluence of peoples in the region. This economic boom has further been accompanied by a growing Asian presence across Africa in terms of Asian business investments and development projects on the continent. These projects include construction, road-building, timber, mining, or oil exploitation projects, many of which commonly occur in proximity to sources of ivory. In Sudan, for example, some 75 per cent of ivory is bought by Chinese customers, followed by South Koreans, many of whom are working in the oil, mining and construction industries.

The greater role of transnational criminal syndicates in the ivory trade coincided with the increase of foreign nationals from end-user markets in Africa, namely Asian foreign nationals. A greater Asian presence on the ground in Africa has afforded opportunities for criminal links to be established and capabilities developed to move large consignments of raw and worked ivory to Asian markets.

In comparison, ten years ago non-Africans were involved in poaching on the continent, but more opportunistic poaching. Today Chinese nationals are behind all of the recent
rings identified in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya and have been shown to be important players in Sudan. According to the most recent Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) data, Chinese nationals were arrested, detained or absconded in at least 126 significant ivory seizures (accounting for some 14.2 tons) in 22 African range states between 1998 and 2006 alone.

By far the most telling in terms of the extent and degree of organised criminal activity involved was the 2002 Singapore seizure. In June 2002, 6.2 tons of illegal ivory was seized from a cargo ship in Singapore following a tip-off to local authorities. A container on the ship, which sailed from Durban, was found to be carrying six wooden crates from a company in Lilongwe, Malawi, containing 532 elephant tusks and more than 40,000 blank ivory hankos. Given that one ton of ivory is representative of approximately 100 elephants, the seizure is believed to have accounted for the death of some 600 elephants.

Problematically, ivory seizures are overwhelmingly only made following tip-offs to customs officials, and it is estimated that as little as 10 per cent of overall contraband is in fact confiscated. Moreover, most seizures occur while the ivory is in transit, rather than at its final destination. After investigation, the Singapore shipment was deemed to be only one of at least 19 ivory shipments by the same syndicate. Of the 19, 15 had been destined for Singapore, with Japan often the final destination. The remaining four containers were set for Guangzhou, China, the heart of China’s ivory industry. Given that some of the crates confiscated contained 40,000 hankos and were labelled Yokohama, the shipment is believed to have been heading for Japan.

Similarly, in a May 2006 seizure in Hong Kong, one shipping container was found to contain nearly four tons of contraband ivory after arriving in port from Cameroon. Authorities later uncovered a further two containers, one of which still had traces of ivory, and analysis of shipping records showed that the Taiwanese man responsible had previously shipped 15 containers along the same route. Although there is no way of knowing whether these containers were used to move illegal ivory for certain, the 15 were estimated to have had the capacity to hold some 40 tons (from 4,000 elephants) of illegal ivory.

Two months later, on 3 July, a shipment was confiscated in Kaohsiung Harbour, Taipei. Two containers were found to have 744 tusks (3.06 tons) and 350 tusks (2.1 tons), respectively. Shipping documents showed that both containers had sailed from Tanga, in Tanzania, and were en route to Manila. One month later, in August, a further 2.8 tons were seized in Osaka. Many of the tusks were marked with Swahili lettering, suggesting that the shipment also originated in East Africa.

More recently, in 2009, large-scale seizures included more than a ton of ivory confiscated in Thailand in January. The shipment was traced back to Uganda. In March, 6.2 tons
was seized at the Hai Phong port in Vietnam, and in May, three tons were seized in the Philippines. Both shipments were traced back to Tanzania, with the Hai Phong seizure having come via Malaysia.

Importantly, these seizures suggest that shipments are organised and consistent rather than being once-off in nature. In addition to these large-volume seizures, smaller, more opportunistic seizures also occur all the time in both Africa and Asia.37

Moving a ton or more of ivory is no small endeavour, though. The ability to move such quantities is reflective of the level of organisation, scope, sophistication and financing involved in the current illicit trade. This, in turn, indicates the involvement of major criminal syndicates with established links in existing markets with the standing infrastructural and organisational capacity to absorb and process these volumes of ivory.38

It is problematic that this scope, sophistication and financing overwhelmingly exceed the capacity, infrastructure and resources of enforcement agencies in Africa.39 Those charged with protecting elephants are often without sufficient personnel, radios, water bottles, appropriate 4x4 vehicles, aerial support, communication systems, adequate weapons and ammunition.40

Moreover, corruption and collusion is high at all stages of the ivory trade, providing opportunity and protection for traffickers. Corruption is prevalent among members of enforcement agencies, government bureaucrats, military officials, economic elites, and customs officials.41 Government officials have even been known to pilfer from legally acquired government stocks and sell the ivory on the black market. In turn, the overall risk to traffickers is very low and especially relative to the high profits to be made. Ivory, like other wildlife-related crime, is generally considered a low priority among law enforcement agencies.42

**CITES and ivory sales**

Some conservationists argue that the demand for ivory has been further stimulated by CITES decisions to allow one-off sales of government ivory stocks, first to Japan in 1999, and then to China and Japan in late 2008.43 Moreover, members of CITES are driving towards legalising the ivory trade in the future.

Wildlife Conservation Society biologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Dr J Michael Fay has argued that poaching has intensified in southeastern Chad since 2005 due in part to the increased acceptability of and access to the global ivory trade – ‘the world thinks it is okay to buy ivory again’.44 Bill Clark, a game warden with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and current chair of Interpol’s Wildlife Crime
Working Group, similarly argues that greater legalisation of the ivory trade will only serve to stimulate poaching and trafficking.\textsuperscript{45}

However, others maintain that the 1989 ban cut off the legal supply of ivory, ‘which was bad news for elephants’.\textsuperscript{46} In this, the ban has in fact stimulated illegal poaching and trafficking in ivory. According to Daniel Stiles, who has conducted extensive field research into global ivory markets, ‘[t]he CITES-approved sales are irrelevant to market demand’.\textsuperscript{47} Rather, a long-standing consumer demand, coupled with the economic means to purchase ivory, drives the market.

\textbf{Ivory crime:}
\textit{Ivory trafficking in Africa as a criminal enterprise}

\textbf{The mechanics of the illegal ivory trade in Africa}

Prior to 1999, a fairly diverse group of players were involved in ivory poaching and trafficking. These included indigenous hunters who would sell tusks to dealers in the cities; members of fighting forces who poached elephants and sold tusks to traders; professional bushmeat hunters who killed elephants opportunistically; professional hunters commissioned to acquire certain sized tusks; local villagers killing elephants after human/elephant confrontations and then selling the tusks; and corrupt wildlife officers selling off tusks from found or culled elephants.\textsuperscript{48}

Today, random opportunistic poaching by local individuals still occurs to some extent, as does killing due to increased human/elephant conflict as people encroach on elephant habitats. As in the past, these individuals then sell their ivory to local dealers for between US$20 and US$50 per kilogram depending on the size, quality and source of the ivory.\textsuperscript{49} The dealers then sell the ivory to local craftsmen and ivory workshops for processing. In Addis Ababa and Khartoum, prices can reach US$100 or US$150 per kilogram.\textsuperscript{50} Armed forces also engage in poaching and trafficking. With access to arms and transport, members of the Sudanese Army have been implicated in transporting ivory to and from Khartoum and Omdurman.\textsuperscript{51}

However, increasingly frequent large-scale seizures and recent DNA evidence collected from these seizures suggests that the role of organised crime in poaching operations has become far more prominent.\textsuperscript{52} A purchase order for a specific quantity of ivory is believed to be received. Locally based dealers hire contractors to poach the required number of elephants and organise for the transport of the poached ivory to port.\textsuperscript{53} Dealers of Asian origin (largely Chinese or Korean) commonly work in one country and organise for ivory to be poached in another country. For example, in one case a man of East Asian origin ran an export business in Cameroon, but used the business as
a cover for exporting contraband ivory poached in the region along the Gabon/Congo-Brazzaville border. These dealers are further assisted by corrupt rangers and police who facilitate operations.

Contractors then organise teams of poachers to kill a particular number of elephants in a specific area. The actual poaching is carried out by youths who are recruited and led into the bush by experienced poachers who have a direct link to dealers of both ivory and illegal weapons which are needed for poaching. In turn, contractors are known to provide arms to the poachers for specific operations. These more experienced poachers usually also engage in other crime such as cattle rustling, banditry and weapons smuggling.

Poachers are usually well armed and poaching operations are conducted using mostly assault rifles, including AK-47s, M16s and G3s. In addition to rifles, poisoned arrows are also used, especially in Kenya. Poachers in Kenya are believed to be using poison from the acocanthera shrub.

DNA evidence suggests that elephant populations within a restricted geographic location are targeted to meet the needs of a planned shipment. Rather than being poached and collected from various locations, the ivory has been found to come from very closely related elephants. Analysis of the Singapore seizure found that the ivory originated from savannah elephants across a narrow stretch of Southern Africa, centring on Zambia. Analysis of the 2006 Hong Kong seizure found that the poached ivory that had sailed from Cameroon came from forest elephants native to a restricted area in southern Gabon, near the eastern border with Congo-Brazzaville. More recently, ivory from the 2006 Taipei seizure was found to have come from elephants in a relatively small area traversing the Selous Game Reserve, in Tanzania, and the Niassa Game Reserve, in Mozambique. This further matched 390 tusks and 121 cut pieces (2.6 tons) seized by Hong Kong authorities five days after the Taipei seizure in Sai Ying Pun, in July 2006.

Once poached, ivory is disguised and largely transported by land, often crossing several borders before reaching a seaport. This way, ivory is exported from a country other than its origin. For example, the ivory seized in Singapore in 2002 is known to have been poached in Zambia, then smuggled across the border from Chipata into Malawi by road and driven down to Lilongwe. In an ivory factory in Kawale district, the poached ivory was inventoried, packed and stowed inside a container. The container was then driven down to Durban, presumably crossing into Mozambique and then South Africa. Although large shipments make use of regular trucks, logging trucks, and 4x4s, smaller amounts are also moved by motorcycle from less accessible areas to trading centres.

Once at port, the ivory is disguised and hidden within shipping containers using various methods. In the 2006 Hong Kong seizure, one shipping container was found to have...
false compartments filled with ivory. The means by which the compartments had been packed and skilfully constructed suggested a thorough metallurgical knowledge, but also supports that traders ‘know in advance that they have space (and shipping budget) for specific amounts of ivory’.

Once loaded, contents are then declared to be anything from timber planks to used tyres to stone sculptures to plastic waste to sisal fibre. Importantly, syndicates will commonly move ivory via multiple shipments so as to reduce risk of confiscation.

Air transport is also used, but largely involves smaller amounts ranging from three or four kilograms to several hundred kilograms. In such cases, raw ivory is usually cut up into smaller pieces, wrapped up and smuggled out by air.

Although poaching occurs all year round to some extent, large-scale poaching primarily occurs seasonally, most commonly during rainy seasons. Not only is water more readily available for poachers to drink, but in many parts of Africa, bad roads are rendered impassable as a result of the rain and rangers are unable to access all areas of a reserve. Ivory is then often hidden and later collected during the dry season when it is possible to move the load by road. Conversely, in West Africa, poaching usually occurs during the dry season or la saison serre when ‘there are fewer and fewer water points as the dry season progresses, and the elephants are forced to drink at fewer places, where the poachers set their ambushes’.

Sources and routes of illicit ivory in Africa

The countries affected by poaching most notably (but not exclusively) include: Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, Sudan, Chad, the DRC and CAR. Overall, poaching is traditionally best associated with states exhibiting low levels of law enforcement and high levels of corruption, conflict, political instability, and access to small arms.

Although Southern African states have had some success in terms of maintaining elephant populations and in improving law enforcement capability, capacity remains limited to poor in Central, West and parts of East Africa. Unlike most Southern and East African states, Congo Basin countries, for example, overwhelmingly have crumbling infrastructure and poorly supported wildlife departments. Regardless, evidence suggests that not only does poaching still occur in Southern Africa, but that these states still act as transit countries for trafficking illegal ivory.

Historical trafficking routes used prior to the 1989 ban continue to be used to move ivory to port. In addition, new construction and development projects are providing greater access to elephants, as well as building the infrastructure that allows for ivory to
be transported out of the range area. New logging, road-building and road rehabilitation projects in the Congo Basin are creating *highways of death* for forest elephants. Recent studies have shown that elephant poaching has escalated in the region, and particularly in proximity to roads and other infrastructure projects, with no elephant carcasses being discovered further than 45 kilometres from the nearest road. According to WWF, forest elephants in Cameroon, CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and the DRC could be extinct within ten years if current poaching levels persist.

The DRC is considered to be one of the primary sources of illegal ivory for both African and international markets at present, and ‘the most important source of ivory found in West African and Sudanese ivory markets’. In turn, the country’s elephant population is estimated to have fallen by a third in the last five years. Although there have been no recent field studies, an active domestic market in Kinshasa was reported in the last ten years.

Worked and raw ivory is believed to be moving from the DRC to Luanda, Kampala, Khartoum, Omdurman, Douala, Kenya and Tanzania, from where ivory is then shipped to the East. Recently, in May 2009, 100 pieces (35 kilograms) of ivory were intercepted between Masaka and Kampala on a bus en route from the DRC. The bus reportedly entered the country at the Bwera border crossing, along the DRC/Uganda border, with ivory hidden among sacks of bananas. From Khartoum and Omdurman, raw ivory also moves north by land to Cairo, Luxor and Aswan.

Both Nigeria and Cameroon have large domestic ivory markets and carving industries, and play an important role as transit hubs for ivory moving from Africa to Asian markets. Douala has traditionally acted as a collection site for raw ivory from Central Africa, including CAR, Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon. From the country’s southeastern region, poaching is commissioned by a variety of middlemen, including government officials, and the ivory is then transported by land, usually in timber trucks and fuel tankers. Cameroon’s Lobéke National Park and CAR’s Dzanga-Ndoki National Park are considered hotspots for poaching in the region. Large movements of ivory simultaneously occur from Cameroon to Nigerian ports.

Poaching in Kenya and Tanzania is of growing concern. Although some Kenyan ivory still moves to Ethiopian (usually via Madera and Moyale) and Sudanese markets, ivory primarily moves towards local seaports (commonly Mombasa and those of Tanzania). Poaching has increased by over 60 per cent in Kenya between 2007 and 2009. In April 2009, a Kenyan and Tanzanian were apprehended in Kenya just 50 kilometres north of the Tanzanian border. They were caught driving a car with 512 kilograms of tusks. In July, Kenyan authorities seized a further 16 elephant tusks (280 kilograms) on board a cargo flight in Nairobi’s Jomo Kenyatta Airport. The plane had flown in from Maputo and was destined for Thailand and then Laos. Officials noted that blood on the tusks
indicated that the elephants had been poached recently. Incidents have been especially high in the Amboseli and Tsavo National Parks, both situated along the country’s southern border with Tanzania.

Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe have been the predominant suppliers of illicit ivory in recent years in Southern Africa, with ivory moving via Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia to Tanzania or South Africa. The triangle formed by the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, the Luangwa Valley in Zambia, and the Niassa Game Reserve in northern Mozambique is considered a hotspot for poaching in the region, with the ivory moving usually via Tanzania or Mozambique to the East.

**Bloody ivory: Ivory trafficking and armed conflict in Africa**

Elephant populations vary across the continent. While the savannah elephant populations in Southern and East African states are larger and more steady, forest elephants in Central and West Africa are experiencing a severe decline in numbers. Areas where this decline is most notable correlate with armed conflicts in or across porous borders of weak states.

The relation between conflict and ivory trafficking in Africa is longstanding and has been prominent for a number of years. Traditionally, conflict has enabled the trade and provided criminally motivated poachers with greater access to elephants as protection provided by sanctuaries is compromised. Rebel groups and militias often use reserves and other wildlife habitats as safe havens and live off the land, hunting wildlife as a means of sustenance. Refugees fleeing conflict zones are also frequently implicated in opportunistic poaching.

However, the origin and conditions under which ivory is acquired are difficult to determine and require sophisticated DNA analysis. Given the international demand and the organised infrastructure available to satisfy this demand, ivory also offers fighting forces an accessible, lootable source of income to aid in sustaining operations, feeding troops, and purchasing weapons and supplies. In these cases, militia structures and military units are used to conduct poaching.

**The Democratic Republic of Congo**

Consignments of raw ivory are known to be moving out of conflict areas in the northern and eastern regions of the DRC. In addition to soldiers and militia fighters poaching elephants for their tusks, overall insecurity in the northern and eastern regions impede anti-poaching efforts.
In Garamba National Park, in the northeastern DRC, elephant numbers have been reduced from some 12 000 to less than half that number. Poaching occurs primarily during the rainy season between June and September, when elephants leave the park and go into the forest area where it is easier to hunt them. This ivory is then moved (usually by motorcycle) via Aba on the Sudanese border and Ariwara, on Uganda’s border, to seaports in Kenya and Tanzania.

Since the beginning of 2009, the Congolese military (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, or FARDC) have deployed inside Garamba following an offensive against the Ugandan rebel group the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), who had taken refuge in the park. However, whenever FARDC have deployed to Garamba, so soldiers have turned to poaching. According to the park manager, Luis Arranz, ‘we know that they [FARDC] are killing elephants to sell the ivory ... Once they came to help the rangers fight against the poachers and they became poachers ... Now they have come to fight the LRA but what they do is poaching.’

Since the FARDC deployment, some 180 tusks are known to have passed through Ariwara alone. However, exact numbers of elephant deaths remain unknown as large areas within the park are inaccessible to rangers due to insecurity in the area – ‘there are zones in the park where the rangers can’t go’. LRA rebels have also launched attacks on ranger facilities, and in one incident attacked park headquarters, killing 16 people and burning equipment and infrastructure.

Similarly, in Virunga National Park, in the eastern DRC, militias and FARDC are known to poach elephants and hippos. Between January and August 2008, poachers reportedly killed a fifth of the park’s elephants, believed to number between 200 and 300. Militias involved include the Mai Mai and the Front Démocratique pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), consisting of the former Rwandan Hutu Interahamwe. As in Garamba, fighting between warring factions renders large parts of the park unprotected allowing for opportunistic poaching in areas otherwise inaccessible to rangers. In any event, in many cases it is the military or militias based in the park that carry out systematic, widespread poaching for meat to eat and sell, and for ivory. According to Robert Muir, DRC project leader for the Frankfurt Zoological Society:

There was one very dramatic case towards the end of 2006 when the FDLR wanted to support the Congolese military in their efforts to oust the CNDP from Sake ... The FDLR needed rations so that they could send their soldiers south and requested support from the Mai Mai, based at Cyondo on the southern shores of Lake Edward. For four days and nights, the Mai Mai, in motorised fishing boats, slaughtered the largest remaining pod of hippos – hundreds, quite literally turning the waters red. The meat was given to the FDLR, the ivory apparently to the north and then out through Uganda.
Some 400 hippos are believed to have been killed in the incident. Most poaching in the park occurs sporadically and is conducted using assault rifles, primarily AK-47s and occasionally heavy weaponry. Ivory is then collected and moved by land or boat via Uganda.

### Chad/Sudan

In Zakouma National Park, southeastern Chad, Janjaweed militiamen are conducting long-distance raids into the park and surrounding areas. The Janjaweed are a militia active in the Darfur region of Sudan, an area which lies along the Chad/Sudan border near to the park. The area and the elephants which inhabit the region have long since been the target of marauding Arab horsemen and bandits, who have targeted elephants for their ivory. The Janjaweed, however, are selling the ivory on the Khartoum and Omdurman markets to fund their operations and purchase weapons. It has even been suggested that they have traded ivory directly for weapons with Chinese dealers, although this could not be confirmed. Regardless, funds sourced through the ivory trade are sustaining Janjaweed operations.

Almost 3,000 elephants in the park are known to have been lost since 2006, reducing the 3,800-strong elephant population of four to five years ago to a mere 800 today. Horse-mounted raids are most frequent in the rainy season between May and October, during which the elephants leave the relative sanctuary of the 3,100 square kilometre park and scatter across the 50,000 square kilometre Salamat region outside the park. The militiamen rarely target-shoot elephants but instead often open automatic weapons on grazing herds. As a result, numerous elephants, including calves and those without tusks, are killed. In 2007, more than 100 elephants were killed in a single attack by some 30 Janjaweed militiamen on horseback. The militia are also reported to have conducted raids into the northern DRC and CAR, and have ‘wiped out’ the elephants in eastern CAR.

### Somalia/Kenya

Members of Somali militias have been conducting raids deep into remote protected areas in northern Kenya for some time. However, there has been a serious intensification within the past year and Somali raids are considered to be the primary source of poaching in Kenya today. Raids occur anywhere within 500 kilometres from the Somali border.

Poaching occurs all year round, but especially in the rainy season when elephants disperse widely and poaching parties are not restricted to passing via known water sources where ranger units frequently patrol. Those involved are commonly heavily armed and appear proficient in military-type skills such as small-unit tactics and infiltration. Poaching raids have been linked to known Somali warlords involved in narcotics and
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weapons smuggling. Evidence further suggests that the militias rely on an established network of operators both within Kenya and Somalia. Poached ivory is then exchanged for firearms and supplies.121

Zimbabwe

Political and economic instability in Zimbabwe has seen ivory poaching rise along with the steady deterioration of anti-poaching capabilities.122 The impact on elephant populations over the last three to five years has been ‘disastrous’.123

Although poaching occurs all year round, levels are especially high between April and December during the hunting season. Poaching by impoverished rural people still occurs, however the military are most commonly involved. With access to the necessary weapons – mainly rifles – some sources estimate that the military are responsible for around 60–70 per cent of all poaching incidents in the country.124 Some corrupt National Parks officials have also been implicated, however, orders reportedly come from government level.125 It is also believed that ivory has been used as a form of currency by the Mugabe regime, including for repaying debts and purchasing weapons from China.126 In addition to recent elephant killings, ivory has also been trafficked from the government stockpile.127

Although poaching is reported from various areas in the country, incidents in Chizarira National Park and Hwange National Park continue to raise special concern.128 In Hwange, during the dry season, elephants are largely dependent on pumped water provided by the park at a number of boreholes. These boreholes are not always functioning, and in 2007 IFAW reported that this was part of a deliberate action to force elephants into areas where they can be more easily poached.129

Poached ivory usually moves via South Africa or directly to China by means of air shipments from Harare.130 In June 2009, for example, a Chinese national carrying 500 kilograms of ivory was apprehended on arrival in Beijing en route from Harare.131 If by land, ivory most commonly moves through Beit Bridge on the South African border. Alternatively, it transits Mozambique or Zambia to Tanzania. A popular route to Zambia includes the Chette Gorge on Lake Kariba.132

Conclusion

Legal trafficking?

An illegal trade has flourished around a legal demand for an illegal commodity. While the CITES secretariat may or may not be driving towards legal trade, most agree that
enforcement capabilities are just ‘not adequate at the moment’ for the trade to be partially or fully legalised. Much needs to be done to improve law enforcement capability and capacity-building to counter corruption and collusion within African range states.

Jason Bell-Leask, director of IFAW Southern Africa, argues further, however, that even with increased enforcement on the ground, the ivory trade is likely to remain difficult if not impossible to control, that ‘the value of this commodity is just too high to prevent poaching and illicit trade’. The recent string of seizures, including those in Thailand and Vietnam, in the wake of the one-off sale in 2008, would seem to support this. Instead of the sale flooding the market, lowering prices and putting traffickers out of business, increasing seizures of increasing amounts suggest that business is booming for organised criminals involved in the illegal trade.

Here efforts to better regulate the diamond trade may be instructive. Diamonds, like ivory, are a lucrative lootable resource found in many of the same locations as ivory (West Africa, the DRC, Angola, CAR, Zimbabwe, etc) and similarly give little to no indication of the conditions under which they are sourced, allowing for illicit flows to easily infiltrate the legal trade. However, efforts under the guise of the Kimberley Process to regulate the flow of illicit rough diamonds are now considered to be deeply flawed just six years after the introduction of the process in 2003. The trade in illicit rough is in fact ‘getting worse’. In countries where conflict and instability exist, or even in post-conflict regions where governance is weak, borders are porous and infrastructure fragile to non-existent, the process has been wracked by weak internal controls, limited political will and infrastructural incapacity. Worst of all, the process has provided a veil of legitimacy to illicit rough diamonds coming out of loosely controlled state diamond sectors characterised by corrupt and illegal practice. In this, the process is enabling illegally sourced or mined diamonds to be laundered through a certification system. Instead of curbing illicit flows, it legitimises these flows.

In turn, should the right infrastructural capacity and resources not be present at the time of a legalisation of the ivory trade, it is likely that organised poaching and trafficking will increase in Africa, and especially in those states that can least afford it. Like the diamond trade prior to the Kimberley Process, legal ivory markets are already being infiltrated if not supplied by illegal ivory flows. If the diamond trade is any indication of what could happen, then it is well possible that any legal system for ivory will become a conduit for illegal supply.

**Last word**

What is certain is that elephants are being killed at a pace unseen since the 1989 ban. Organised criminal, largely Asian syndicates are heavily involved in poaching and
trafficking to supply this stock and meet a mushrooming demand for ivory in parts of Asia. Armed conflict and instability in elephant range states not only make this supply possible, but the supply aids in making conflict possible.

Twenty years on from the 1989 ban on the ivory trade, evidence on the ground in China and Japan suggests that people are expecting more and more ivory. In the end, though, this is purely a vanity market; there’s no health, welfare or security-related use for ivory. Nobody needs ivory, they just want ivory. And it seems a flawed argument that elephants should be killed for their tusks so as to meet a want for trinkets, earrings and chopsticks.

Notes

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