

Chinese demand for ivory driving illegal trade

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China and its insatiable demand for ivory is helping push many African elephant populations towards extinction, a hard-hitting investigation claims. It has become the largest ivory trading country in the world and is single-handedly fuelling a consumer led demand for illegal black market ivory, it is alleged. Even ivory seized by the communist government has found its way back on to the market. Chinese nationals, government-owned companies and organised crime syndicates were all implicated in the smuggling of vast amounts of illegal ivory and the resulting elephant poaching affecting much of Africa, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) claims. The EIA is an international campaigning organisation dedicated to investigating and exposing environmental crime. The result of its investigation have been published as CITES - the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species - prepares to meet this weekend at the Hague. Africa's elephant population and whether the ivory trade should be allowed to resume will be on the agenda.

A total ban on ivory trading was imposed by CITES in 1989 after elephant populations in several African countries were devastated by poachers. In the 1980s an estimated 100,000 elephants were being killed per year and up to 80 per cent of herds were lost in some regions. In Kenya, the population plummeted by 85 per cent between 1973 and 1989. But since the ban the elephant has recovered well and there are now between 470,000 and 600,000 elephants surviving in Africa, Most are confined to well-protected areas but less than 20 per cent are under formal protection. But the EIA investigation warns that China's failure to crackdown on the ivory trade was leading to a resurgence in demand. Throughout the 1990's, privately-run carving and ivory distribution operations emerged and flourished unchecked by Chinese authorities. Large amounts of ivory continued to be exported from, and imported into, China and in 1990 China reported the export of almost 9,500,000 ivory carvings.

EIA investigators found huge amounts of ivory products freely available and showcased in shops and hotels when they visited China. The investigation found a growing Chinese presence and investment in Africa looking for the resources it needed to power its incredible economic expansion. "Demand for ivory will overwhelm the ability of range states to conserve their elephants from poaching gangs connected to Chinese ivory buyers, often in collusion with corrupt government officials," says the author of the investigation's report, Allan Thornton. He said: "China's massive illegal ivory trade is not an accident. Failure by the Government of China to ensure meaningful enforcement of CITES regulations that prohibit the import and export of ivory resulted in illegal ivory flooding onto the domestic market in the 1990's. China's demand for ivory is directly

responsible for the renewed poaching crisis facing many African elephant populations, as this report shows.

"After CITES increased protection for Africa's rapidly disappearing elephants by banning international trade in ivory products in 1989, China neglected to fully enshrine the legal protections in domestic law for 17 years. Over that period its government did little to enforce CITES regulations prohibiting ivory imports or exports." The main failures included a vast loophole enabling traders to register ivory which they had "forgotten" to register at the time of the 1989 CITES ban as "pre-convention", in effect enabling smuggled ivory to become 'legal' and then moved onto China's flourishing domestic market. Illegal ivory seized by Chinese government agencies is also alleged to have 'disappeared' into government ivory stocks. The EIA claims that traders have confirmed that government ivory stocks continued to be sold to them in the 1990's and 2000's, including via government owned companies.

Even the ruling Communist Party of China was reported to have held ivory stocks which were sold to traders. To make matters worse, the Chinese government has now legalised dozens of companies thought to be implicated in illicit trade and was seeking legal approval from CITES to take part in future ivory auctions in order to expand its domestic trade. The EIA called on China to stamp out the illicit trade and affirm its commitment to CITES and to protecting endangered species by taking immediate action to ban the domestic trade in ivory. It said by simplifying enforcement procedures and empowering enforcement personnel across the nation, the ivory trade could be eliminated within China's borders. In 1993 China successfully banned domestic rhino horn trade after rhino poaching in Africa and Asia and the flow of horns to China reached crisis levels. China's action to save the world's rhinos had demonstrated the high level political will needed to protect the wildlife of other nations.

The EIA report said that China's intention to host a 'green' 2008 Olympic Games would be damaged if the problem continued unchecked. Mr Thornton said China needed to answer two questions: Where does all the ivory in China come from, almost 18 years after international trade was banned? Does the Government of China have the political will to ban the domestic ivory trade that is helping to push many African elephant populations towards extinction? The countries being affected by increased elephant poaching included Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Mali. There was nobody available at the Chinese embassy in London to comment.
