

Thailand a hub for growing illegal ivory trade



TRAFFIC documented more than 26,000 worked ivory products for sale in Thailand: ivory Buddhas were popular items

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THAILAND IVORY TRADE - LAWS AND LOOPHOLES

The internal trade in Thai and foreign wild elephants and their products is illegal according to the Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act (WARPA) of 1992. Wild elephants are classified as protected animals. WARPA, along with the Wild Elephant Protection Act of 1921, prohibit the killing of wild elephants or their capture without official permission from the government. Domestic Thai elephants, however, are subject to the archaic Draught Animal Act of 1939, which continues to allow trade in domesticated elephants as well as the possession and/or sale of ivory derived from such animals. These loopholes are routinely exploited to prevent meaningful law enforcement actions from transpiring within Thailand.

ELEPHANT-SIZE LOOPHOLES SUSTAIN THAI IVORY TRADE

June 2009. Legal loopholes and insufficient law enforcement mean that Thailand continues to harbour the largest illegal ivory market in Asia, says a new report from the wildlife trade monitoring network **TRAFFIC**. The report also raises concerns that legal provisions governing trade in domesticated elephants are providing cover for illegal trade in wild-caught, highly-endangered Asian elephants from both Thailand and neighbouring Myanmar.

26,000 ivory items for sale

TRAFFIC's survey documented over 26,000 worked ivory products for sale in local markets, with many more retail outlets dealing in ivory products than were observed during market surveys carried out in 2001. Market surveys found 50 more retail outlets offering ivory items in Bangkok and Chiang Mai in 2008 than the previous year. However, overall there was less worked ivory openly on sale than in 2001.

Thailand in top 5 for illegal ivory trade

"Thailand has consistently been identified as one of the world's top five countries most heavily implicated in the illicit ivory trade, but shows little sign of addressing outstanding issues," said Tom Milliken, of TRAFFIC, which oversees a global monitoring programme, the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

"Thailand needs to reassess its policy for controlling its local ivory markets as currently it is not implementing international requirements to the ongoing detriment of both African and Asian Elephant populations," said Milliken. "Since 2004, the Thai government has only reported two ivory seizure cases totaling 1.2 tonnes of raw ivory."

Thailand's capital, Bangkok, a major tourist destination, has emerged as the main hub for illegal ivory activities, accounting for over 70 percent of the retail outlets in Thailand offering ivory items for sale.



TRAFFIC found 13 ivory workshops in Thailand, 8 of them in Uthai Thani; much of the ivory being processed was illegally imported from Africa Click photo to enlarge ©

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Ivory workshops

The report includes new information on ivory workshops-eight in Uthai Thani, one each in Chai Nat and Payuha Kiri, and three in Bangkok-between them employing dozens of carvers in the production of ivory jewelry, belt buckles and knife-handles. Much of the ivory being worked is illegally imported from Africa.

European and US markets

Some workshop owners boasted close ties with European knife makers, while others reported sending ivory, steel and silver items to the US for sale in gun shops.

"The Thai Government needs to crack down on this serious illegal activity and stop allowing people to abuse the law," said Dr Colman O'Criodain, WWF International's analyst on wildlife trade issues. "A good first step would be to put in place a comprehensive registration system for all ivory in trade and for live elephants".

Wild-caught Asian elephants

The study also uncovered reports of traders buying wild-caught elephant calves for use in Bangkok as "beggars" on the streets in major tourist centres, or selling them to elephant camps and entertainment parks.

Elephants imported from Myanmar

Hundreds of live elephants are known to have been illegally imported from Myanmar in recent years, to be sold to elephant trekking companies catering to adventure tourism in Thailand. The capture of wild elephants has been banned in Thailand since the 1970s, but such trade usually goes undetected because domesticated elephants do not have to be registered legally until they are eight years of age.

The study also found that over a quarter of all live elephant exports from Thailand between 1980 and 2005 could have been illegal due to incomplete and inaccurate declarations made on the documentation required under CITES.

"There must be greater scrutiny of the live elephant trade if enforcement efforts are to have any impact at all," said Chris R. Shepherd, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia's Acting Director.

"Thailand and Myanmar should work together, and with urgency, to address cross-border trade problems," he added.