

Market surveys find disturbing increase in Thai ivory market

Bangkok, Thailand, 2nd July 2014—Monthly monitoring of Bangkok's domestic ivory market by TRAFFIC reveals a near trebling of the number of ivory items for sale in the past 18 months and a steep rise in the number of outlets selling ivory in Thailand's capital city.

The number of worked ivory products found for sale rose from 5,865 in January 2013 to 14,512 by May this year, while between January and December 2013, the number of ivory retail outlets rose from 61 to 105.

The report provides evidence that the quantity of ivory found exceeds the limited supply available under current Thai legislation that allows sale of ivory from domesticated animals, meaning the vast majority of ivory being sold is illegal under international commitments.

The findings are published in *Polishing off the ivory: Surveys of Thailand's ivory market*, a report released just days ahead of a crucial meeting of the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) where Thailand will be asked to outline the actions it has carried out in implementing a national ivory action plan to address the nation's commitments under that Convention.

The revelations also come following a statement made at the last full meeting of CITES, which took place in Bangkok in March 2013, when the then Prime Minister told more than 170 world governments that Thailand would act to end the domestic ivory trade.

"As TRAFFIC's latest market research demonstrates, Thailand's efforts to regulate local ivory markets have failed: it is time for the authorities to face the facts—their nation's ivory markets continue to be out of control and fuel the current African Elephant poaching crisis. Without swift and decisive action to address glaring legal loopholes, this unacceptable situation will continue," said Naomi Doak, TRAFFIC's Co-ordinator for the Greater Mekong region.

At least 20,000 African Elephants were killed in 2013 poached for their ivory to meet the heavy demand from Asia, where Thailand has the unenviable reputation as home to one of the world's largest unregulated ivory markets. Asian-run transnational organized criminal gangs are believed to be behind much of the trafficking.

"TRAFFIC calls on Thailand to act swiftly and decisively against the rampant ivory trade that is nurturing a criminal underworld, fuelling the poaching of elephants in Africa and seriously tarnishing Thailand's global image," said Doak.

Partly to blame for the current trafficking crisis is a 75-year old law that permits legal trade in ivory from domesticated Asian Elephants in Thailand. But with no registration system in place it is impossible to trace the ivory, creating a loophole for ivory from illegal sources to be laundered into the marketplace.

The maximum quantity of ivory that the country's domesticated elephants could produce is estimated at 650 kg annually, a quantity that is "considerably less than what was observed in Bangkok markets," according to the report.

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Further evidence of the illegal origin of the ivory for sale comes from a number of large-scale seizures of African-sourced ivory heading to or seized in Thailand in recent years. Since 2008, over 13 tonnes of African Elephant ivory have been seized in such transactions.

“The Thai authorities have procrastinated for almost two decades about revising their outdated ivory legislation and the world’s patience with them is fast running out—it is high time to review and close the legal loophole that allows the laundering of African Elephant ivory as well as the open trade of other CITES-listed species and shut down the illegal ivory trade,” said Chris Shepherd, Regional Director for TRAFFIC in South-East Asia.

Despite international bans on ivory sales and regulations outlawing the movement of ivory across international borders, several of the ivory retail outlets in Bangkok have signs targeting Chinese buyers, directly undermining China’s own efforts to discourage the purchase of ivory by its citizens traveling abroad. In 2013, Thailand welcomed 26.7 million visitors according to the Thailand Tourism Authority, with China topping the chart at 4.7 million arrivals, a 69% jump from 2012 while overall tourist numbers were up almost 20%.

“The large growth in tourist numbers means Customs officers worldwide should be especially vigilant in checking visitors leaving or returning from Thailand with ivory souvenirs,” said Shepherd. “The message should be coming across to tourists to Thailand loud and clear – buy ivory and you buy trouble.”

Ironically, elephants are revered in Thailand and, as an important part of the country’s identity, they are an integral part of Thai beliefs and culture. Despite this, Thailand is consistently highlighted through analysis of the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), which TRAFFIC manages on behalf of the CITES Conference of the Parties, as one of the most problematic countries worldwide in regards to the illegal ivory trade.

“Thailand has to live up to its international obligations—we’ve heard promises of action before, but the world is still waiting to see the country live up to the public commitments it has made,” said Shepherd.

ENDS

- **Download Photos at:** <http://www.traffic.org/storage/Ivory-market-images.zip>

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About TRAFFIC

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, works to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature. TRAFFIC is a strategic alliance of IUCN and WWF.

Notes

1. CITES recognizes two species of elephants, the Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus* and the African Elephant *Loxodonta africana*, and prohibits all international commercial trade in wild individuals or their parts and derivatives such as ivory, except under exceptional and very limited circumstances.
2. Thailand has wild populations of Asian Elephants estimated to number between 2,500 – 3,200 individuals. Thailand's captive population of Asian Elephants is far greater and numbered 4,169 animals in 2012, according to government data