TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME IN EASTERN AFRICA:
A Threat Assessment

September 2013
Trafficking of Ivory from Eastern Africa to Asia

The rebound in the African elephant population is one of conservation’s great success stories. Elephant numbers declined rapidly between 1970 and 1989, the year of the international ban on the ivory trade, but both national and international efforts to protect the species caused numbers to grow dramatically in Southern and Eastern Africa since that time. Prior to 1970, Eastern Africa was home to the largest elephant populations on the continent, but the region was hit hard by two decades of poaching, and only strict conservation efforts have allowed the population to partially recover.65

While the estimates in the figure opposite were gathered using different methods, most experts agree that protection of the species allowed a strong recovery. Female elephants give birth to a single calf after a 22-month gestation period, but due to long reproductive lives (they can give birth into their 50s), populations can grow by as much as 7% per year.66

Unfortunately, consumer demand in Asia has apparently spurred a new wave of poaching. In fact, wildlife authorities say that since 2007, the elephant has experienced its most serious conservation crisis since 1989.67 As incomes rise, so does demand for ivory. Recently, authorities in Malaysia made what may be one of the largest ivory seizures ever – six tons in a single shipment, representing the ivory of perhaps 600 elephants,68 equivalent to one-quarter of the known elephant population of Uganda. Available evidence suggests that current poaching rates in Eastern Africa have exceeded natural population growth rates. Most countries in Eastern Africa can claim fewer than 1000 elephants, so this demand could quickly destroy some national populations.

Most elephants live in remote areas, many in forested areas, many in countries with limited capacity to count them, and some in areas where surveys are dangerous. Despite sophisticated estimation techniques, there remains substantial uncertainty about their numbers. Based on these estimates, there are at least 140,000 elephants in Eastern Africa today, or about one-third of the continental population.69

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67 *Elephants in the Dust*, op cit.
68 At about 1.8 tusks per elephant and an average of 5.5 kg per tusk.
70 The elephant database.
estimated 73% of these are located in the United Republic of Tanzania, and adding in populations in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda would cover 99%. These four countries are the source of most of the illicit ivory harvested in the region.

If it is difficult to determine the number of elephants, it is even more difficult to determine the number of elephants poached. Based on reported killings in countries with the capacity to detect them, the trend is distinctly upward. More telling, though, is the indicator elephant experts use: the share of known elephant deaths that can be attributed to poaching.

Elephants die of many causes, and many die in places where their carcasses will never be discovered. So the absolute number of poached elephants detected is less telling than the share of dead elephants detected who were illegally killed. In the past few years, that share has passed the critical 50% mark in Eastern Africa, and today is close to 60%. On the basis of these figures, it is estimated that in 2011 alone, between 4% and 11% of the elephant population of Eastern Africa was killed.

Eastern Africa is important as a source of illicit ivory, but it may be even more important as a transit area. In fact, the majority of the recent large seizures of illicit ivory made anywhere in the world were exported from either Kenya or the United Republic of Tanzania, largely through the big container ports in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam. Recent seizures suggest the container port at Zanzibar is also used. The share of large seizures that were trafficked through these two countries appears to be growing (see Figure below). Since ivory comes from many places and is distributed to buyers across Asia, these ports represent a vital chokepoint in the flow.

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71 Ibid.

72 See, for example, the statement of the Office of the Prime Minister of Kenya, ‘Threat of Poaching to Kenya’s Tourism and National Economy’, issued 9 January 2013.


74 CITES, SC62 DOC 46.1 (Rev. 1)

75 TRAFFIC identifies consignments in excess of 800kg of ivory as a point where organized crime is involved, as shipments above this threshold involve the coordination of hundreds of tusks being placed in a single consignment.

76 Ibid.
The African elephant is not currently deemed “endangered” as a species, but its decimation in Eastern Africa could be devastating. In addition to the reduction in genetic diversity, its loss could seriously undermine local tourist revenues, a key source of foreign exchange for many of the countries of the region. The trade is also associated with violence. There have been cases where armed groups have crossed borders to raid elephant herds, and ivory has been associated with the arms trade. Across Africa, the struggle against poachers costs the lives of around 100 wildlife rangers per year.

International trade in ivory poached from African elephants became illegal in 1989 when African elephants were listed in CITES Appendix I (reserved for species threatened with extinction and potentially affected by trade). Most populations of elephants in Eastern Africa remain in CITES Appendix I. The United Republic of Tanzania applied to CITES in 2007 to have its elephant population moved to Appendix II. African elephants are currently classed as “vulnerable” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Available at: http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/12392/0

Testimony of William Clark to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, March 5, 2008.

Ibid. Includes only data where source was known. There were six seizures where the region of export was unknown in both periods.

Map 3: Share of detected dead elephants that were poached in 2011

Source: MIKE database - Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS)

Figure 18: Number of large (800 kg+) seizures by region of export

Source: ETIS

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78 Testimony of William Clark to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, March 5, 2008.
Trafficking of rhino horn

In contrast to South Africa, where rhinos number around 20,000, Eastern Africa has very few – just over 1,000 based on the latest count – due to a history of aggressive poaching. As a result, poaching is less frequent today (an estimated 25 incidents in 2011), but its impact could be even greater. Most rhino poaching is conducted by organized gangs looking to fill an order, and so occurs in waves. Stronger protection measures in the south could prompt poaching gangs to focus on Eastern Africa, with potentially devastating effects. In April 2012 alone, four rhinos were poached in Kenya, all in national parks or ranches. Also in 2012, a Kenyan Wildlife Service ranger was involved in poaching a rhino from Tsavo East National Park.

Rhinoceros populations in Africa (December 2010)

Kenya, 959
Tanzania, 113
Other East Africa, 9
Other Africa, 23,964

Source: CITES

Rhino horn is made of keratin, a substance with no demonstrable medical benefits. Nonetheless, there has been a recent boom in demand for rhino horn due to its alleged medicinal properties. This has led to a wave of poaching (primarily in South Africa) and smuggling (primarily to Vietnam). Prices in Vietnam have reportedly risen as high as US$65,000 per kilo in 2011 – higher than the price of gold.

Due to its value intensity, most rhino horn is trafficked by air directly from Southern Africa, with Eastern African airlines and hubs occasionally being used. In May 2012, seven rhino horns were recovered from the baggage of a Vietnamese national at Maputo International Airport, Mozambique, as he attempted to board a Kenya Airways flight. There have been attempts to use maritime routes in the past. Between 2000 and 2006, 27 rhino horns were seized in the port of Mombasa.

What is the nature of this market?

Ivory is valued all over the world and has been used for all sorts of utilitarian and decorative purposes across the centuries. As alternate materials have emerged, the use of ivory has become increasingly confined to items with an artistic, ceremonial or religious value. Current demand for ivory is strongest in Asia. This continent also has elephants, but these are valued as beasts of burden, they are much fewer in number, and only the males have tusks. As a result, almost all of Asian demand for ivory is satisfied by African elephants.

The Asian ivory market is comprised of diverse national markets, where demand can wax and wane depending on local fashion trends. In Japan, ivory is a preferred material for the traditional signature stamp (hanako). Japanese demand for ivory stamps has declined in recent years, and this, among other things, appears to have led to declining national demand. In contrast, growing affluence in China, where possession of elephant ivory remains a status symbol, appears to have rendered China the world’s leading destination for illicit ivory.

Unlike many threatened species parts, it is possible to own ivory legally. Ivory has a long shelf life. It was not subject to international controls until 1976 (when African Elephants were listed in CITES Appendix I). Large amounts of ivory were on the market based on the latest count – due to a history of aggressive poaching. As alternate materials have emerged, the use of ivory appears to have rendered China the world’s leading destination for illicit ivory.


CITES, CoP16 Doc. 54.2 (Rev. 1).


80 CITES, CoP16 Doc. 54.2 (Rev. 1).
Japan and China bought 108 tons. The United Republic of Tanzania recently petitioned CITES to allow the international sale of 100 tons of its official stockpile, but subsequently withdrew the application. In short, there is a lot of legal ivory in circulation, and more legal ivory may enter the market in the future.

The legality of any particular piece of ivory comes down to paperwork, and weaknesses in the paper trail can allow illicit ivory to be sold as licit. If authorities fail to enforce paperwork requirements, ivory from poached elephants can be openly sold. Recent research in Guangzhou, China, one of the largest open ivory markets in the world, found that more than 60% of the items offered for sale were being sold without the required ID cards certifying their licit origin. Unless paperwork is strictly monitored, it is vulnerable to forgery or purchase from corrupt officials. Whole tusks in transit can be seized, but once the ivory has entered its destination market, it does not appear that much interception takes place.

This shifts the burden of enforcement to the supply side. Since the law enforcement capacity of Eastern African countries is limited and corruption is an issue, most ivory is seized during shipment, often on arrival in Asian ports. The largest seizures have been made from shipping containers and, as in the recent Malaysian seizure, the volumes can be staggering. This suggests well-resourced players and a high degree of organization to the market. As in most illicit markets, however, there exists a parallel stream of smaller shipments. Unless these small scale couriers are being coordinated, this is indicative of a relatively open market in which players at all levels can participate.

**How is the trafficking conducted?**

For trafficking to occur, the ivory must first be sourced, and for ivory to be sourced, an elephant must die. There are two principal types of poaching: opportunistic and commissioned. There is considerable debate as to which is most prominent. This is an important question for policy, because the answer will determine whether supply-side or demand-side measures are most likely to be effective. If most are killed opportunistically, then the slaughter is likely to continue even when demand is low.

Opportunistic killings occur when local hunters bring down an elephant because it poses a threat to local agriculture, or for bush-meat, or solely for its ivory. Whatever the case, once the elephant is dead, few hunters would leave behind a commodity that has had high value for centuries. Since many of these hunters are very poor, they would continue to harvest ivory when given the opportunity, even if low demand resulted in sharp price declines. Unless there are reasons for passing up this cash income, most will decide to shoot if the benefits outweigh the costs, and the costs (bullets, labour, and transport) are likely to remain low. All that is needed is a few well-known intermediaries or sales points, and market forces will ensure a steady supply. But if demand rises sharply, these opportunistic killings may not be able to provide sufficient volumes.

In the past, the market has been viewed as largely opportunistic, but recent evidence suggests this pattern may be changing. There have been several well-documented cases of mass elephant slaughter, where organized crime groups poached large amounts of ivory all at once. For example, a professional Sudanese poaching gang killed more than 200 elephants in northern Cameroon in early 2012. The size of the large shipments detected suggests well-resourced and organized groups on the receiving end, who may be proactive in sourcing the ivory when demand is high, as it presently appears to be.

If most poaching was opportunistic, then the rate of killing would be expected to be fairly consistent, barring any new human incursions into elephant ranges. On the other hand, if high prices produce more killing, then proactive poaching expeditions are likely the cause. It is possible that populations are moving into areas where they are encountering more elephants opportunistically, but it is unlikely that this movement is sufficiently large to explain the recent surge in poaching.

The demand-driven perspective has been given additional support by the findings of DNA analysis. Studies have found a high degree of relatedness when tusks from large seizures have been compared, suggesting that the animals were killed en masse and to order. The presence of small tusks in large loads suggests whole families were killed at once. Of course, both local people and brokers may consolidate loads from a single area over time before transporting them to distant markets. Even if poached opportunistically over time, the ivory in a single shipment may come from a single area where elephants share a common gene pool, so the data remain inconclusive.

It is highly likely that both opportunistic poaching and commissioned poaching occur. While opportunistic poaching may not be sufficient in scale to pose a long-term threat, commissioned poaching almost certainly does. While every link in the supply chain needs work, the largest payoff is likely to be received by focusing on the demand side of the market, to reduce the number of commissioned hunts.

An additional source of illicit ivory is leakage from official stockpiles. African governments collect and store ivory seized from traffickers, from elephants found dead by rangers, and from official population control efforts. In some countries, this is sold through regulated local markets. In others, it is held for an eventual bulk sale. But as a high-value commodity in poor countries with corruption prob-

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94 *Elephants in the Dust*, op. cit., p. 35.
problems, some of this eventually finds its way onto the illicit market. And this is why some countries have staged highly public burnings of ivory stocks, symbolically rejecting the legal ivory market.

Eastern African elephant populations form an important source of illicit ivory. The recent large seizure in Malaysia was of savannah elephant ivory, suggesting either an Eastern African or Southern African origin. But the area most intensively targeted is Central Africa, and most of this ivory is shipped through Eastern Africa. In Central Africa, nine out of 10 elephants found dead in recent years were poached.

Many Central African countries have unregulated domestic ivory markets, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, and Cameroon. Ivory bought at these markets may be trafficked through road and air links to Uganda and onward from there for processing and export. Timber is a popular cover load for transnational smuggling within Africa.

Once sourced, the ivory may be carved in Africa, often into products tailored specifically for the Asian market, or transported whole for carving in Asia. Traditional carving centres exist in Ethiopia and Egypt. Recent Interpol operations found a large number of items for sale in Ethiopia that had clearly been carved for export to the East Asian market. Recent studies have found a growing number of carved objects in Lagos, with vendors speaking Chinese to their clients.

While Eastern Africa has become the primary gateway for African ivory being trafficked to Asia, ivory may be trafficked from Eastern Africa to West Africa, for local retail sales or onward transport. West Africa has very few remaining elephants, but retail sales in the region have long been detected, as well as some bulk shipments. In 2011, Nigerian customs officers found 51 Kenyan ivory tusks in boxes belonging to a passenger from Mali, at Lagos International Airport. But these seizures are exceptional today – most involve shipments from Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania to Asia.

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96 SC62 Doc. 46.1 (Rev. 1).
97 Briefing from John Sellar, Chief, Enforcement Assistance, CITES Secretariat, July 2011.
100 WCO Operation GAPIN, 2011.
There are two main ways ivory is trafficked to Asia: in large consolidated shipments and in small amounts repeatedly over time. Maritime containers appear to be the preferred means of long-distance mass transport. Airfreight, while it does occur,\(^1\) is much less common, perhaps due to the greater expense, the obvious bulk of whole tusks, and better monitoring at airports as compared to seaports.

In addition to large maritime shipments, ivory is also “ant trafficked”. China’s recent wave of investment in Africa has brought thousands of Chinese executives and workers to the continent, including countries where ivory is openly sold, often carved into items for the Asian market. It may be transported in luggage or by post in small quantities, for personal use or re-sale at great profit in Asian markets. The quantities involved are generally small (although tusks cut into suitcase-sized chunks have been detected), but, due to their frequency, could constitute a major source of supply.\(^2\)

**Who is doing the trafficking?**

The participants in the trafficking can be divided into poachers, middlemen, and buyers.

Opportunistic poachers are local people who happen to live in or near elephant ranges. The director of Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWS) described poachers as being “a common man or a villager who very well knows the wildlife in a certain area.”\(^3\) And the KWS know the poachers well, arresting 100 or more of them every year.\(^4\)

Since most of the poachers are locally based, the groups are kept small to ensure secrecy. Most local poachers own their own firearms, so there is little need for financiers, except perhaps for ammunition. But, because gunshots attract attention, poachers have diversified their killing techniques to include the use of poisons, snares, and arrows. Ivory can be buried until stocks are sufficient to merit transportation and sale. Successful poachers can move up to become middlemen, as they get to know the trade and accumulate sufficient funds to buy the stocks of other hunters. Many of the middlemen are former poachers, specializing in buying small consignments and transporting them to bulk buyers near the point of export.

But it is not all about the locals. Poachers have frequently been detected crossing borders to hunt elephant herds, including members of non-state armed groups. In Eastern Africa, Somali poachers are most prominent, with some heavily armed groups crossing deep into Kenya to hunt in ranges such as the Tsavo East National Park, which is located between Nairobi and Mombasa, and Amboseli, a park close to the border with Tanzania.

Somali poachers have been crossing into Kenya since the 1980s. Some of these early poachers may have joined the Somali diaspora in Kenya and may be directing the current poaching by Somali groups.\(^5\) The weaponry and discipline shown by some groups suggest connections to Somali warlords, including groups driven out of Somalia.\(^6\) But poachers often cross borders in pursuit of their prey, so the Somali poachers are not unique in that respect.

There have been Somali trading points along the border with Kenya since the 1990s, and there are also some in the Tsavo area, Somali traders in Kenya purchase both ivory and rhino horn, and typically operate small shops (diikas). Most deal in animal parts as a side line while operating other businesses. One of the most notorious is said to operate a company dealing in spare car parts and tires.\(^7\)

Somali traders aside, the single most important group of middlemen involved in the procurement, processing, and transport of ivory are Asians living in Africa. Appearing after the 1990 ban, “the involvement of Chinese nationals in Africa with the procurement and shipment of ivory to Asia remains a serious and seemingly expanding issue of concern.”\(^8\) This is indicated by the growth of mixed seizures, in which both whole ivory and products carved for the Asian market are detected.

**How big is the flow?**

If, as argued above, between 4% and 11% of the elephant population of Eastern Africa was killed in 2011,\(^9\) this would amount to between 5,600 and 15,400 elephants, or between 56 and 154 metric tons of ivory originating in Eastern Africa. Based on 2009 data, UNODC had previously estimated the flow of ivory out of Africa at 120 tons. Allowing for some growth of this market, and assuming that Eastern Africa provides a share of this flow commensurate with its share of the African elephant population, it makes sense to place the value at the lower end of this spectrum, or 56 tons.

Based on the known destination of ivory seized, about two-thirds of the global ivory market is located in Asia. Two-thirds of 56 tons is 37 tons. At US$850 per kilogram at destination,\(^10\) this flow would be worth US$31.5 million in 2011.

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3. Briefing from Dr Esmond Bradley Martin, Nairobi, August 2011.
5. CITES COP16 Doc 53.1
6. Martin, Esmond and Vine, Lucy, The Ivory Dynasty: A Report on the Soaring Demand for Elephant and Mammoth Ivory in Southern China, 2011, p. 4: “In January 2011 we surveyed ivory factories and retail outlets in Guangzhou, the largest city in southern China and an important ivory centre, and in Fuzhou, a city famous for carving. According to a factory owner in Fuzhou, in 2010 he paid on average USD 455/kg for government-owned t-15kg tusks with a range of USD 303- 580/kg. Similarly, privately-owned raw ivory in 2010 was USD 750/kg, according to various sources. Siberian mammoth high quality tusks were around USD 400/kg in 2010 wholesale in China.” According to most sources, demand for ivory has increased between 2010 and 2011.