

Adding up the ivory

Did one-off sales of certain government stocks in 1999 lead to a revival of the illegal ivory trade? An undercover survey reveals that, in some cities in Africa, business is picking up again.

Words: **Daniel Stiles** and **Esmond Bradley Martin**

Cause and effect? Both poachers and shopkeepers seem to have stepped up production in some areas since the auctions of government ivory stocks were proposed in 1997. The question is – are these events related?

Auctions of government stocks of raw ivory, permitted by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), were held in April 1999 in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia, following years of bitter debate between proponents and opponents of the international trade in ivory. The opponents lost, and 50 tonnes of ivory were bought by Japanese traders.

For the upcoming CITES conference in Nairobi, the two sides are once more pitted against each other, with South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia on one side – proposing a limited trade in elephant products from their countries only – and Kenya and India on the other, co-sponsoring a resolution to put all countries back on Appendix I.

Which side prevails may depend on the answer to a question left hanging by the Southern African auction: did that one-off sale of ivory stimulate the trade as a whole? To answer this, the scale of the current trade in Africa needed to be assessed to establish a baseline from which to measure future

changes. This study was carried out by the authors in 13 key countries of sub-Saharan Africa in mid-1999, supported by Save the Elephants of London and Nairobi. Daniel Stiles toured Central and West Africa, and Esmond Bradley Martin Southern and North-east Africa. The following are their reports.

Central and West Africa by Daniel Stiles

Flying over the dense equatorial forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), I wondered how many elephants might be surviving down there. And after I landed in Kinshasa, I wondered about my own survival. There was a civil war on, and I was coming to conduct an unauthorised study of an illegal activity. I was supposed to see how much worked ivory was for sale, what the prices were, how many ivory workshops there were and how many carvers worked in them, where the raw ivory came from and how it was transported, how much ivory was consumed, where worked ivory went, who bought it, and so on. I had decided that I would pose as an agent for a large buyer. Otherwise, why would anyone answer my questions?

My initial fears were echoed in each succeeding country. My guidebook labelled Bangui and Lagos as deathtraps and Douala as highly risky. But at least Yaoundé was survivable and Libreville was safe, as were parts of Abidjan and Dakar. Ironically, N'Djamena, in Chad, was said to be the friendliest place, but I was thrown out of there after I was seen taking photographs and writing notes – undesirable activities in Chad, apparently.

I survived the ordeal for more than nine weeks, and collected masses of data on the raw and worked ivory trade in Central and West Africa. I was in-

terrogated by security people more than once, was one street away from a gunfight between police and protestors in Bangui, saw a screaming soldier waving an AK-47 in the face of a petrified man in Kinshasa, was mugged in Douala, and came down with an illness in the rainy-season swamps of Lagos that did not end until the searing heat of Dakar. I had to depart hastily in many places as my ivory-buying front wore thin with suspicious traders. They wanted money, not words.

Overall, there was a huge amount of ivory for sale in the places I visited. I counted over 44,000 pieces totalling about 6.5 tonnes, and more was undoubtedly hidden away. The sale of worked ivory is legal everywhere except Gabon, and Libreville had the smallest amount of ivory on display, showing that the law can deter sales. From one craft vendor, though, I was able to negotiate for the purchase of 42 tusks weighing 252kg without much trouble. Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire and more than justifying the name of its country, displayed the largest amount of ivory that I saw – more than 20,000 pieces. Lagos was second with almost 6,000 displayed, but with many more in bags and under counters.

As alarming as this sounds, the scale of ivory traded is still lower now than in 1989 everywhere except Lagos, where there appears to have been a moderate increase. CITES voted a ban on the international sale of ivory in 1989, and the market and ivory prices crashed soon afterwards. Kinshasa, Bangui, Yaoundé, N'Djamena and Dakar still have fairly low levels of trade, but this is due as much to ivory shortages as to low demand. Unfortunately, the market is showing signs of reviving, and many of the indicators show an increase from the levels seen ▶

Karl Ammann

Daniel Stiles



in the early and mid-1990s in Central and West Africa.

All of the countries visited have laws against the export and import of raw ivory, but these laws are commonly either flouted by officials or circumvented by traders. Elephant hunting is also banned or strictly controlled by law in all of the countries, but compliance is low.

There is a ready buyer for any tusk, of any size, from a poached elephant. I saw tusks as small as 10cm long mounted on wooden pedestals for sale. Not surprisingly, the prices are lower in the ivory supply countries, with the lowest in the Central African Republic (CAR), where small- to medium-sized tusks cost no more than \$20 (£12.50) per kg. The price is about the same in eastern DRC, where ivory is stockpiling because of the civil war. Conversely, ivory prices have shot up from an average \$30 (£19) per kg to \$50 (£31) per kg in Kinshasa since 1998, as eastern DRC ivory is no longer available there. Prices go progressively higher as one moves away to Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.

Cameroon is the pivotal country in the international trade, as raw ivory comes in from CAR, Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon, where elephants are poached by pygmy bands led by traders. Cameroon also supplies ivory from its own dwindling elephant herds in the east. There are several ivory carving factories in Douala, and these supply not only the local crafts centre and tourist hotel shops, but also foreign residents and visiting buyers. I witnessed large carved tusks, covered in sun-baked earth and decorated with coloured disks, being wrapped for air shipment to Italy, where the earth is washed off after passing customs.

African traders also take worked pieces disguised in this way to other parts of Europe and to the United States. Americans in Manhattan are particularly fond of a certain ivory mask of a former queen of Benin, paying \$2,000 (£1,250) for one. Italians, Spanish and French are said to be the biggest European buyers of worked ivory. The Chinese and Japanese are also big buyers.

Raw ivory is also exported by air and

sea from Douala to Europe and Asia. In late 1998 and in 1999, two large consignments carried by North Korean diplomats were intercepted, one in Paris and one in Nairobi. The biggest buyers of raw ivory throughout the regions I visited are said to be Chinese and Koreans, and Beijing and Seoul are the main destinations, though I was given the name of a Ugandan crafts trader in Kampala who is now shipping ivory from eastern DRC, hidden among hippopotamus tusks, to Hong Kong.

A comparison of trade indicators in Central and West Africa shows that between 1989 and 1999 there was (1) a robust ivory demand in the late 1980s, (2) a crash of the ivory trade after the 1990 CITES ban and (3) a revival of the trade in cities such as Douala and Abidjan since the mid-1990s.

I asked ivory vendors and carvers if they had heard of the auctions in Southern Africa. All had, but they knew little about why or how they had been carried out. All they knew was that it was good news. They believed ivory was once more legal to trade down there, and they were eagerly awaiting the imminent lifting of the detested ban in their countries.

North-east and Southern Africa by *Esmond Bradley Martin*

Parts of North-east Africa have a significant illegal wildlife trade, and some countries lack any law enforcement. Djibouti's Brazzaville Avenue is lined with shops where hundreds of ivory items are displayed, all illegally imported from Ethiopia and Somalia. They are bought mainly by the French military and their families. I was warned not to go into these shops to ask questions or take photographs; shopkeepers had told a previous expatriate conservationist that if he did so, he would find a knife in him. Fortunately, my assistant made up a convincing story: I was taking photos of the wildlife-product shops to publish in a guidebook which would help them sell more souvenirs.

I never know how far I can go in obtaining information without being arrested. In Omdurman in northern Sudan, I spent a week in 1997 talking

to Sudanese ivory craftsmen and shop owners about the ivory trade, knowing very well that security officials were monitoring all my moves. Sudan's jails are definitely not places to end up in.

I sometimes come up against a different kind of conflict. One morning, when I was talking to a manager of a souvenir shop in Omdurman, a trader brought in a rhino horn to try to sell to me. While I was examining it, a British visitor came into the shop and angrily shouted at me that I was scum of the earth for showing interest in a rhino horn. At least someone in Sudan was vociferously against the wildlife trade, unlike the officials.

In Ethiopia in June 1999, I learned that elephant tusks were being smuggled in from Kenya and Sudan with impunity and being taken to Addis Ababa to be cut up and made into souvenirs. I counted almost 10,000 ivory items in 54 shops in the capital. But sales have fallen dramatically since mid-1998, especially because of the war with Eritrea with the resulting drop in tourism. Many of the buyers are diplomats or officials from international organisations such as the UN and employees of non-government agencies based in Ethiopia.

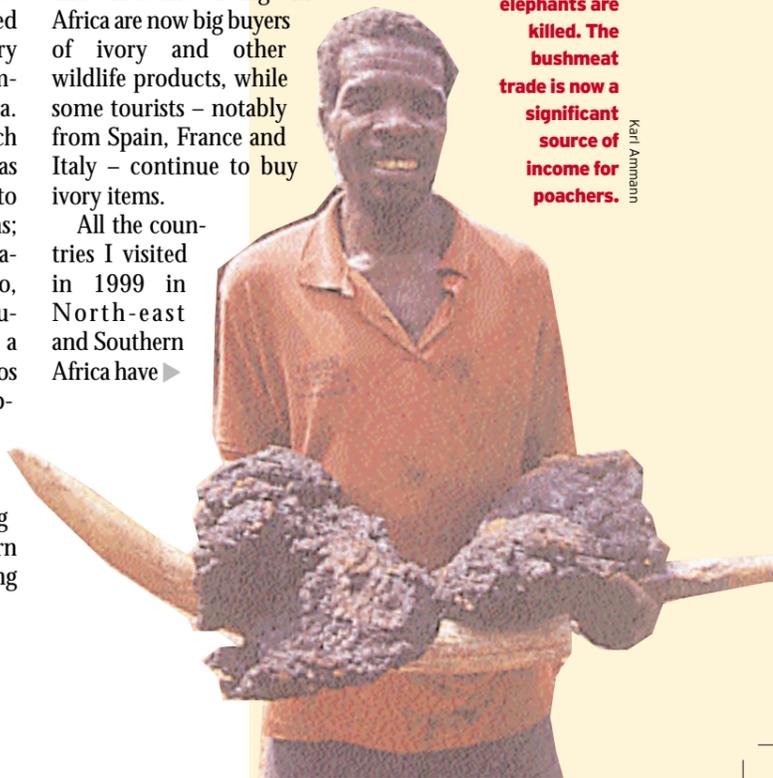
Throughout Africa, this problem has been greatly underestimated by conservationists. Diplomatic immunity has caused the deaths of many elephants. In addition, Chinese and Koreans living in Africa are now big buyers of ivory and other wildlife products, while some tourists – notably from Spain, France and Italy – continue to buy ivory items.

All the countries I visited in 1999 in North-east and Southern Africa have ►

Some vendors in West and Central Africa believe it is legal to trade ivory in Southern Africa once more, and eagerly await the lifting of the detested ban in their own countries.

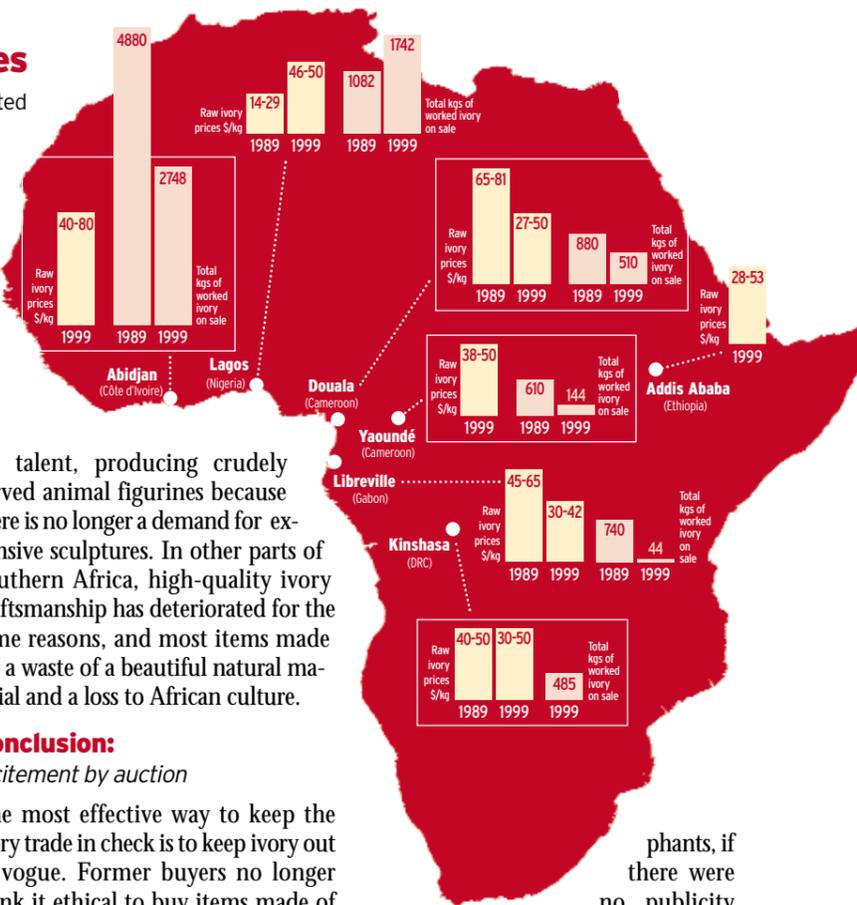
Deadly cocktail. It's not just for their tusks that elephants are killed. The bushmeat trade is now a significant source of income for poachers.

Karl Ammann



Trade figures

A sample of the information collected by Stiles and Martin in their survey of 17 cities in 13 African countries.



Market forces. Both the price of ivory and the sales of worked ivory have fallen since the CITES ban took effect in January 1990. Recently, though, there has been an increase in the number of ivory items sold in Abidjan, Lagos, Harare and Cairo. The 1999 survey data will provide the baseline for future monitoring.

legal domestic sales of ivory carvings. There was a lot of ivory on display – almost 42,000 items – but turnover has remained slow since the 1990 CITES ivory ban. As all these countries are members of CITES, which bans exports, most foreigners are nervous about buying ivory. Nevertheless, several international airports have shops selling ivory, and the most glaring is Maputo's, where there are 1,023 ivory items displayed in 13 vitrine cases and shops. One of these is in the VIP lounge, where travellers go after completing immigration and customs.

Since 1990, the ivory trade has collapsed the most in Southern Africa (except Mozambique), because of stricter enforcement of the international bans and the drop in customers. In the past decade, sales have fallen by more than 90 per cent in South Africa and Zimbabwe, former major markets. The owner of Johannesburg's biggest ivory shop (which displayed 819 items in August 1999) told me that the value of tusks had declined to almost zero; he wouldn't pay anything for them, as his ivory items, except for small trinkets, no longer sell.

He used to employ about 40 ivory workers before 1990, but now only one. Today, this craftsman is wasting

his talent, producing crudely carved animal figurines because there is no longer a demand for expensive sculptures. In other parts of Southern Africa, high-quality ivory craftsmanship has deteriorated for the same reasons, and most items made are a waste of a beautiful natural material and a loss to African culture.

Conclusion:

Incitement by auction

The most effective way to keep the ivory trade in check is to keep ivory out of vogue. Former buyers no longer think it ethical to buy items made of ivory because they believe it encourages elephant poaching. The collapse in the ivory trade in the 1990s in Africa has been largely due to 1980s' media coverage that made ivory unpopular. The recent one-off sales of legal raw ivory from Southern Africa to certain Japanese buyers would technically have no effect on the rest of Africa's ele-

phants, if there were no publicity about the sales.

Unfortunately, the media have given some incorrect or ambiguous messages about ivory sales re-opening – which could have the disastrous effect of encouraging poaching. But ivory exports and imports remain banned for most of the world, as elephants in many African countries would be poached heavily otherwise. It's essential, then, that the media avoid the temptation to shock the public about ivory sales. This would only backfire and raise the demand for ivory once more.

Our conclusion is that the 1999 auctions of raw ivory in Southern Africa could help fuel an already reviving international trade, particularly in Central and West Africa, because of misconceptions that legal ivory trading might resume throughout Africa. Though the trade is well controlled in most Southern African countries, the internal ivory trade in some other countries – those that can't meet certain wildlife and ivory-trade management criteria – should be suspended. This suspension could be lifted after appropriate safeguards against poaching and smuggling were put in place. For the internal trade, though, it is up to the political will of the African governments themselves. CITES will decide the fate of the international trade in April.

BBC1

Ivory Wars, featuring Esmond Bradley Martin, will be shown this month (see Preview, p69).

BACKGROUND

Elephants and ivory: a decade of wrangling

- In the history of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the issue of the African elephant has been the most contentious. In the late 1980s, when elephant poaching was severe, Southern African officials advocated tighter controls on the ivory trade, while many Western conservationists were pushing for an outright ban.
- At the 1989 CITES meeting, the African elephant was placed on Appendix I. From 1990, no legal international commercial trade in elephant products was permitted for any CITES member,

and the trade in ivory collapsed.

- In 1997, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia were given permission to sell their raw ivory stocks in a one-off quota of 59 tonnes. It would go to Japan, where it could be processed and sold, but not re-exported.
- Other countries complained they were spending money stockpiling tusks and asked to sell some too. They were allowed to do so, on condition that the buyers wouldn't resell them. No sales have happened. In April 1999, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana did, however, auction just under 50 tonnes of raw ivory

to Japanese buyers.

- Ivory will again be a major issue on the agenda at the 11th meeting of CITES in April. South Africa wants to downlist its elephants to Appendix II so that it can sell, 'experimentally', 30 tonnes of whole tusks. Namibia, Zimbabwe and Botswana have requested annual quotas.
- In contrast, Kenya and India will propose putting all Southern African elephants on Appendix I. All proposals have complex ramifications for the future of African elephants, and the best decisions should be based on scientific and practical analysis.