



**Presents of death?**  
Cheap ivory trinkets such as these are confiscated from tourists by UK customs every year. Many bring these items (in these cases, from Africa) into the country unaware that what they are doing is illegal and unthinking of the impact the ivory trade has on its original source – elephants.

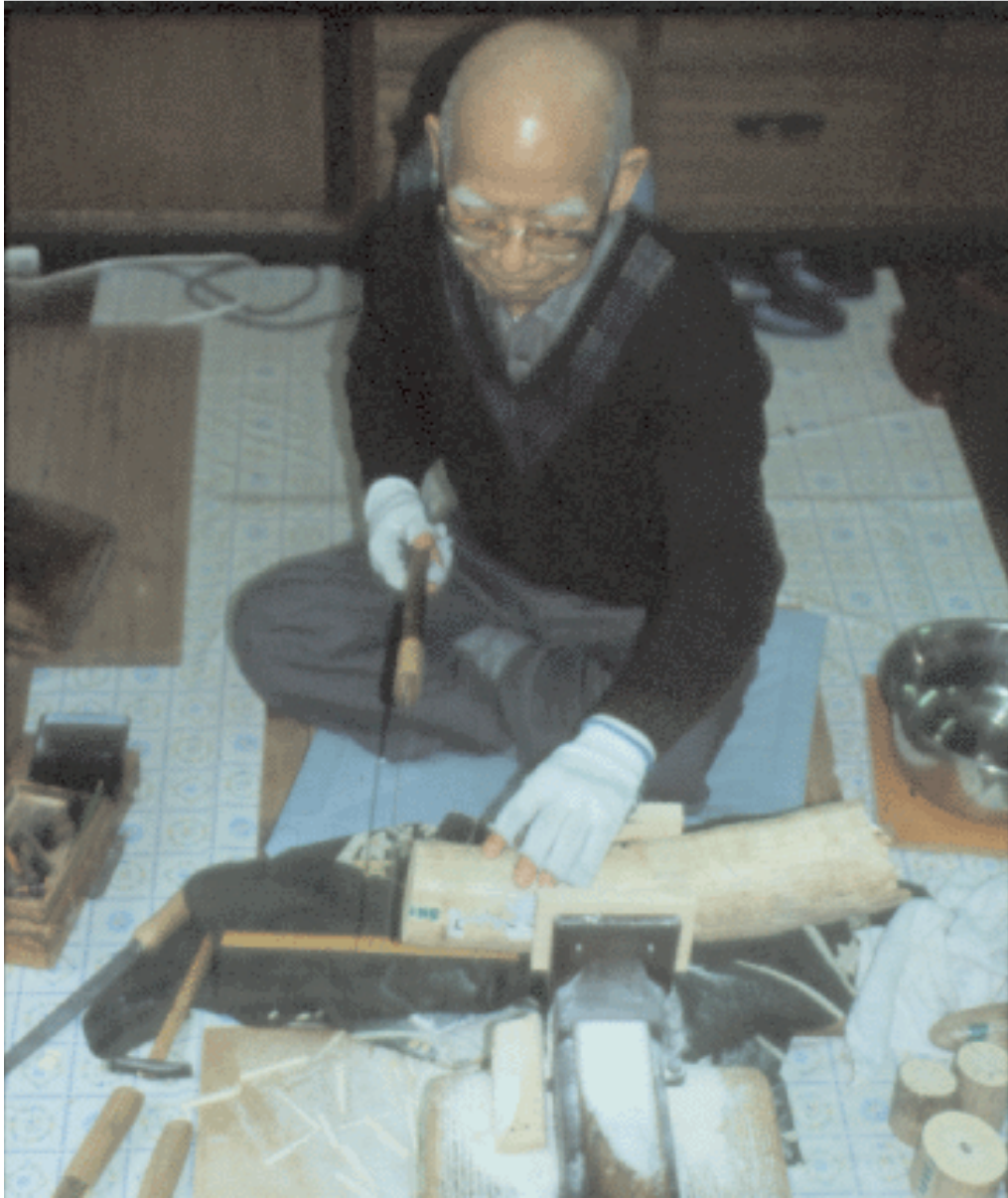
# Underground to

Take a stroll down Portobello Road on a Saturday afternoon, and you will be surprised at how much carved ivory you can find for sale. In London's West End boutiques, you may stumble upon antique ivory, some of it actually old, if you're lucky. The same holds true for improvised African street markets in Rome, sedate antique shops on the left bank of the Seine in Paris and outdoor markets or high-end gift stores in any major European or American city. To see truly masses of carved ivory, though, you should visit Nathan Road in Hong Kong or the Friendship Store in Shanghai. There is a lot of ivory out there.

Where did it all come from? The Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) banned the in-

ternational trade in African elephant ivory in 1990, and a similar ban on Asian ivory had come into effect in 1976. So, did all of the ivory seen for sale in these markets and shops leave Africa and Asia before these dates? No, not by a long shot.

In 1999, we travelled undercover to 15 African countries to find out how much raw and worked ivory was for sale, what the prices were, where the tusks came from, where the worked ivory went and how and who was doing the carving, the buying and selling (*BBC Wildlife*, April 2000). We found about 110,000 pieces of ivory openly for sale, with much more hidden away. We carried out a similar survey in eight South and South-East Asian countries in 2000-2001 (*BBC Wildlife*, March 2002). There we found



Esmond Bradley Martin

An 'ivory triangle' in China that uses smuggled African tusks to supply carved ivory to the world has emerged as Asia's ivory manufacturing base, according to evidence gathered by Save the Elephants. **Daniel Stiles** and **Esmond Bradley Martin** report from the Far East on the trade's implications for the on-going survival of the world's largest land mammal.

# Asia

Big in Japan? Most of the ivory worked in Japan is made into *hankos*, or name seals. Though Japan has legal stocks, some of the new ivory comes into the country illegally.

more than 105,000 items for sale. We finished our third regional study in East Asia in 2002, adding another 54,000 pieces to the total – approximately 270,000 in all. That represents roughly 27 tonnes of ivory, which translates to about 3,500 tusk-bearing elephants. More than 5,000 elephants would probably have been slaughtered to provide that amount of ivory, because poachers in Africa commonly mow down whole herds, including the young, to get the tuskers.

In spite of efforts, not always the best, of wildlife authorities and customs agents around the world, illegal ivory is still being shipped or carried from the workshops of Asia and Africa to markets where willing buyers are not overly concerned about the fate of elephants. Between 1979 and 1990,

more than half of Africa's jumbos were wiped out to provide ivory jewellery, trinkets, souvenir carvings, piano keys, chopsticks and East-Asian name seals to consumers around the world. After the international African-ivory trade ban in 1990, South-east Asia lost about 40 per cent of its wild elephants over the next decade. Raw ivory supplies from Africa were severely reduced, and so to keep up with a growing demand for ivory in an economically booming Asia, Asian workshops had to turn to local sources. There are now maybe 500,000 elephants left in Africa and less than 50,000 in all of Asia.

When we were prying into the secrets of the ivory business in the West African crafts markets, Central African back-street ivory

workshops or souks of Egypt, our informants repeatedly named certain places and people as the destinations and buyers of raw and worked ivory – China, Hong Kong and Japan. So we were looking forward to going there to find out what was going on.

Mr Cho is quite representative of the story in Hong Kong and China. He owned an ivory-carving factory in Hong Kong in the 1980s. When the 1990 CITES ban came into effect, he switched to tagua nut, a vegetable ivory, but sales were poor. In 1997, Cho set up shop in Guangzhou, in the province of Guangdong, about 100km from Hong Kong, and here his factory ostensibly carves mammoth ivory.

Many other Hong Kong businessmen followed Cho to Guangzhou, and in the ►

## MAP

### Ivory trade: the global situation

- The main sources of the world's ivory are in Africa.
- The most prized, the 'hard' ivory of the forest elephant, comes from the jungle stretching from the Democratic Republic of Congo through Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic and Gabon into Cameroon. Much of this ivory makes its way to Cameroon, where some of it travels on to Nigeria, Ivory Coast or Senegal. Another share is worked in Douala (in Cameroon) and sold there and a further quantity is shipped or flown as raw or worked ivory to Asia and Europe.
- 'Soft' ivory comes from elephants living in the vast savannahs that extend from Kenya in the north to South Africa. Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique have the highest poaching rates. Much of this ivory goes either to South Africa, where it is shipped to China, or it goes north to Ethiopia and Djibouti, where some of it makes its way to China or Thailand.
- The largest carved ivory markets are Egypt, the Ivory Coast, and Zimbabwe in Africa and Thailand, Hong Kong, China and Japan in Asia.
- The worst offenders, in terms of smuggling, are China-Hong Kong, Thailand, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon and Nigeria.

1990s, manufacturing exploded there. Not all businessmen had Cho's qualms about working an illegal material such as ivory, however. Today there are only a handful of part-time ivory carvers in Hong Kong, while most of the new, private, ivory-carving workshops are located in the triangle formed by Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau. We discovered that these workshops now supply almost all of the new worked ivory to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Before 1990, all of the ivory working in China was done in huge, government-owned factories employing hundreds of carvers. The State – or, more accurately, the Communist Party – owned all the raw ivory. That ivory is now used up, and the old state-owned factories are dead or dying for lack of new supplies. Capitalists have taken up the slack. Up to 50 tonnes of smuggled ivory heading into China, mainly from Africa, have been seized by the authorities since 1996 – this is probably only a fraction of what actually

slipped through and suggests that, in the past decade, China has been the world's single largest recipient of illegal ivory.

In 2002, we found more than 35,000 worked ivory items for sale in Hong Kong shops, and more than 9,000 in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. But retailers and workshop owners told us that business had crashed from the booming 1980s. So why

### Up to 50 tonnes of smuggled ivory heading into China, mainly from Africa, have been seized by the authorities since 1996.

the need for all these new workshops? The unpalatable truth is that much of this ivory heads for places such as the Portobello Road. Much of it is given an 'antique' tint, because antique ivory can be imported into many countries (including the UK) outside of CITES regulations. This 'antiquing' can be done using a number of different meth-

ods, including infusions of tea, coffee or tobacco or doses of smoke. We also know that millions of dollars worth of genuinely antique ivory enters the US every year, most of it shipped from the UK and France, along with some fake antiques and new ivory. US Customs data do not report where the UK and France obtained the new ivory, though China's Ivory Triangle is a strong possibility.

But it's not just affluent western Europeans and Americans who buy ivory. In an ominous trend for the future of the elephant and as a result of the economic miracle unleashed by Deng Xiaoping, China's *nouveau riche* are becoming increasingly important ivory consumers.

The story is quite different in Japan. Though the country has, historically, been a major ivory market and to some extent still is, the economy has been stagnant since 1990, when the stock market began its spectacular tumble, and the ivory industry has experienced an equal fate. We found little more than 7,500 ivory items for sale in the



Buying power. While the West is still a major ivory market, China's *nouveau riche* are emerging, ominously, as increasingly important ivory consumers.

Tokyo-Osaka area, many thousands fewer than would have been expected in 1989. Most of these were jewellery and name seals called *hankos*. About 80 per cent of all ivory worked in Japan goes to make *hankos*.

Gyokusho Suzuki, a specialist in carving figurines, revealed that the membership of the Tokyo Ivory Carvers' Friendship Association had plunged 80 per cent since 1980. "I'm afraid the association may soon become extinct," he said. Other ivory associations in Japan have also reported sharp declines in membership.

Worked ivory retail sales in Japan were estimated at between £200 and £300 million in 1988, but ivory association members reported that sales had plummeted to £24 million in 2001. In the 1980s, Japanese carvers sculpted about 300 tonnes of ivory a year, the most of any country on Earth. While we were carrying out our survey, Kazukiyo Okada, the executive director of the Japan Ivory Association, pronounced, somewhat gloomily, that they could now survive on a supply of only 15 tonnes a year. The CITES ban certainly seems to have had its desired effect in Japan.

But where do they find 15 tonnes of raw ivory a year? Japanese ivory associations have always been very cagey about their members' stockpiles, and the total quantities have never been released. Ivory registration rules in Japan are complex, which leaves loopholes here and there. Hisako Kiyono, who works for the wildlife-trade-monitoring network Traffic, has been following the Japanese ivory industry for some years now. She estimates Japan held 89.5 tonnes of raw ivory in July 2001. We looked at Kiyono's stockpile estimates year-on-year and the ivory consumption rates reported by the associations to us, and there is a significant discrepancy. Some ivory was still coming in. Masayuki Sakamoto, of the Japan Wildlife Conservation Society, thinks the excess stocks were smuggled in, and indeed, several shipments of illegal ivory to Japan have been intercepted in the past few years.

**Tusk force.** Anti-poaching units, such as these Kenyan Wildlife Service staff, face an increasingly uphill task stemming the tide of elephant killings.

## State of the world's elephants

*Wild elephant numbers are poorly known and the numbers are hotly disputed by wildlife experts. The numbers for Africa are based on the IUCN-UNEP African Elephant Database 1998. The report does not give numbers for some countries. Those for Asia are 1995 estimates from WWF.*

Central Africa	34,500-125,500	Most in DRC and Gabon
Eastern Africa	106,500-125,200	Most in Tanzania and Kenya
Southern Africa	213,900-236,700	Most in Botswana and Zimbabwe
West Africa	3,100-12,800	Most in Burkina Faso and Ghana
Total	358,000-500,200	
South Asia	22,550-28,200	Most in India
Mainland South-east Asia	9,735-10,800	Most in Burma
Island South-east Asia	3,300- 6,800	Most in Indonesia
China	350	
Total	35,935-46,150	

The situation we found in Taiwan and South Korea was more encouraging, from an elephant's point of view. These two countries were active in ivory trading and carving up until about 1997, but then, with the combined effects of increasing national and international pressure against the ivory trade and the Asian economic crash, interest in ivory waned. Taiwan's domestic market was very small in 2002, and most of the carved ivory came from China's Ivory Triangle, while South Korea's was non-existent.

The overall picture for East Asia is that ivory markets are smaller today than prior to 1990. China has changed from a large, state-owned and essentially legal ivory producer to a smaller, private and mainly illegal ivory manufacturer. Much of the ivory is purchased by foreigners. The quantity of ivory seizures lead us to think that it is the largest ivory processor in Asia today. Japan is close to

too much ivory, CITES has allowed another 'one-off' sale of 60 tonnes after May 2004, subsequent to certain conditions being met. Japan will probably be the buyer.

Do these 'one-off' ivory sales stimulate ivory demand, leading to increased poaching? This is a question that sparks heated debate in conservation circles today. The evidence simply is not there to answer it, yet.

But we now have baseline data for 51 urban ivory markets in Africa and Asia. A second round of surveys should be able to show the direction of ivory demand, which will go a long way to answering the question: to trade or not to trade. ■

**Esmond Bradley Martin** has studied the illegal trade in wildlife products for more than 30 years and has worked all over Africa and Asia, monitoring the trade routes and markets for elephant ivory.

**Dan Stiles** is an anthropologist and archaeologist who started out working with the Leakeys in East Africa. Trade in animal and plant products has been a main interest of his for more than 20 years.

