

Agony and ivory

As part of their investigation into the world's illegal ivory trade, **Daniel Stiles** and **Esmond Martin** discover whether Europe is to blame for recent elephant poaching.

When the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) banned international ivory trading in 1990, everyone thought the elephant was saved. World ivory markets crashed and elephant poaching decreased dramatically in many African countries. After the loss of more than half the African population, elephants have made a remarkable recovery in eastern and southern Africa. But poaching is still rife in Central and West Africa, however, threatening the endangered forest elephant. Where is this ivory going? Could it be Europe?

Leading up to and following the CITES ivory ban, public pressure and plunging demand forced most ivory factories and speciality shops to close. Surely ivory markets in Europe in the 21st century were finished. To our surprise, we found that some are not. More surprising still, we found that Germany

and the UK had some of the largest ivory markets in the world, bigger than most of those we found in Africa and Asia.

Europe has a long tradition of ivory use. Some 30,000 years ago, early *Homo sapiens* crafted fertility 'Venus' from mammoth tusks, while Elephant ivory objects have been found in Bronze and Iron Age sites. They were very popular with the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans, until elephants were wiped out in North Africa in the fifth century. Religious ivories appeared in France and Germany in the 10th century, while the Crusades in the 11th century increased the availability of African ivory. This encouraged the flowering of highly artistic ivory crafting in the Gothic Age from about 1250 to the 16th century.

European trade with Africa and its eventual colonization made enormous quantities of tusks available. Between 1890 and 1990



Martin Harvey/NHPA

millions of elephants were slaughtered to supply Europe, America and Japan with ivory. So it is understandable that the CITES ban would not stop all European ivory demand.

Undercover investigation

Posing as ivory buyers in 2004, we tracked down as many ivory outlets as we could in Germany, the UK, France, Spain and Italy. We counted the number and types of ivory items seen and recorded prices, interviewed vendors and owners about their business and views on the future of the industry. We also asked ivory craftsmen about their sources and spoke with relevant government offices and conservation organizations. On the whole, our fears were quashed – western Europe is a minor destination for the sale of ivory poached today in Africa and Asia.

But we did uncover serious weaknesses in government regulation of ivory markets and in vendors' compliance with laws implementing CITES regulations. Most ivory sold in shops and flea markets is undocumented. There is often nothing to prove that an item is legal – either a genuine antique or crafted from registered ivory imported prior to the CITES ban. Worked ivory from East Asia is a particular concern. Chinese and Japanese 'antiques' were numerous in many cities, but their prices were suspiciously low. We know from our surveys in Asia (*BBC Wildlife* March 2002 and November 2003) that carvers 'antique' items with chemicals or smoke and that elephant ivory is mixed in with mammoth ivory and bone carvings for smuggling. Customs officials and wildlife trade inspec-

Daniel Heudin/NHPA

Christophe Rauber/NHPA



The forest elephant *Loxodonta africana cyclotis* is a subspecies of the African elephant. It inhabits the forests of west central Africa, particularly in Congo Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Here, poverty and recent wars have left the elephant at the mercy of poachers (left).

The CITES ivory sales controversy

We began our investigations primarily to find out if the 1999 ivory sales from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe to Japan, sanctioned by CITES, would stimulate demand, as trade opponents claimed would happen. There was a fear of a new elephant holocaust.

Southern African countries have long lobbied to sell their stockpiles of tusks, accrued from natural mortality and the elimination of problem animals. They claim their elephant herds are growing to an unsustainable size due to good management and low poaching.

As a reward, they want to be allowed to sell the tusks and they pledge to

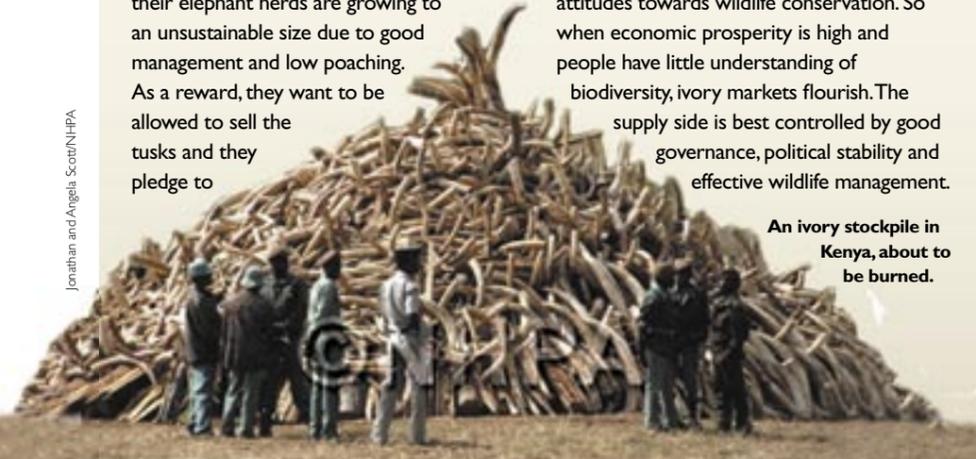
use the proceeds to further the cause of wildlife conservation. In 1999, they sold 50 tonnes of tusks to Japan. CITES has voted to permit a further 60 tonnes to be sold from Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.

After surveying the ivory markets of 33 key countries and territories in Africa, Asia and Europe, we've found no rise in ivory market activity linked to the sales.

Demand is governed by prosperity and attitudes towards wildlife conservation. So when economic prosperity is high and people have little understanding of

biodiversity, ivory markets flourish. The supply side is best controlled by good governance, political stability and effective wildlife management.

An ivory stockpile in Kenya, about to be burned.



Jonathan and Angela Scott/NHPA



Robert Ross/Sill Pictures

Carved ivory on sale in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2002.

Ivory in Europe – key findings

- Germany had 16,444 ivory items for sale in 185 outlets, more than seen in China, Japan, Nigeria and Cameroon, all considered main ivory markets.
- The UK, second in scale with 8,325 items, also had the largest number of ivory outlets anywhere we have surveyed, with 776.
- France was third with 1,303 items for sale in 71 outlets. About half were East Asian.
- Spain and Italy had surprisingly small markets, with 621 and 461 items respectively.
- German and French craftsmen have sufficient legal ivory stocks to last at least 50 years at current consumption rates. There were no ivory craftsmen in the UK, Spain or Italy, nor any raw ivory stockpiles.
- Ivory consumption has decreased in the five countries from over 10 tonnes in 1989 to less than one tonne annually today, about 300kg in Germany and 350kg in France.
- Raw ivory prices were lower in 2004 than in 1989, indicating lower demand (\$55-120 for tusks weighing 5kg and under, \$108-244

for tusks over 10kg). The prices were lower than in Asia and comparable to those in many parts of Africa.

- Government inspections of retail ivory outlets are rare.
- Seizures of illegal ivory imports are generally of small items for private use. There has been no seizure of a large raw ivory consignment since 1998.

Conclusion The five countries surveyed have ivory markets and craftsmen under control, but that worked ivory needs to be better documented and monitored.

tors need to verify that a Meiji figurine, for example, really is 19th-century in origin, and not made last year from a poached tusk.

The UK probably had the largest number of illegal ivory items for sale, but still under five per cent of all those displayed. Virtually all in Germany were legal, and the markets of France, Spain and Italy were so small that any illegal ivory sold would have minimal impact on elephant populations. Ivory prices, the numbers of ivory craftsmen, and the amount of ivory consumed in carving have fallen greatly since 1990. Informants we spoke to did not believe sales of southern African ivory stimulated ivory demand. Some even thought they could reduce poaching by increasing the supply of legal ivory. If ivory market scale can remain at the current level, Europe will pose no threat to elephants.

Esmond Martin (left) is a writer and television producer working in Bristol. Following rats onto **Daniel Stiles** (right) in the field is probably the nuttiest thing he's ever done.