



ALL PHOTOS BY: DAN STILES

Poverty, Corruption and New Asian wealth

The **perfect storm** battering African Elephants

*The Congo Basin has long been a source of ivory for the world's markets. **Dan stiles** assesses the impact that the trade has had on elephants.*

Ivory trading is not a new phenomenon in the Congo Basin. Little is known about the history of ivory in the sub-region but when the Portuguese first arrived on the west coast of Cameroon and the Congos in the early 16th century, they found rich traditions of sculpture, including small ivory fertility and fetish figurines, ancestor images, amulets and larger side-blown horns. The Portuguese and, later, the Belgians and French stimulated Central African ivory carving thanks to their predilection for collecting. Craftsmen began producing carved tusks, figurines and busts, Christian religious objects and more utilitarian items such as salt cellars and utensil handles to sell to the acquisitive intruders.

Up to the 16th century, Asia, the Middle East and Europe obtained most of their African raw ivory from the 'Swahili Corridor' in eastern Africa, though by the 13th century some was obtained from West Africa in trans-Saharan trade. After Europeans began trading with West and Central Africa in earnest from the late 16th to early 19th centuries, most European raw ivory originated in West Africa. By the end of the 19th century, Europe was importing thousands of tonnes of African tusks every year, resulting in steep price rises for the 'white gold'.



This craftsman in Douala worked in the open in 1999. Today he would be hidden behind closed doors.

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Except for the coastal strip, the Congo Basin remained largely unknown to the outside world and little raw ivory was obtained from the region until the 19th century. With European colonisation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, administration was put in place, roads were built, towns and Christian missionary stations were established and river traffic was developed – all of which resulted in a great increase in the exploitation of natural resources, including

ivory. Eastern Congo attracted expeditions from Zanzibar, Mombasa and Bagamoyo and thousands of porters carried tusks by foot from the Mountains of the Moon to the east coast.

Ernst Moore, an American ivory trader based in Mombasa in the early 20th century, supplied ivory to insatiable ivory factories in Connecticut. He recorded tusks weighing over 70kg coming from the Congo. Moore estimated that 30,000 elephants were



Side-blown horns made from tusks have a long history in the Congo Basin.

Of the 2,648 tonnes of raw ivory thought to have been exported from the DRC, approximately 73% was undeclared and illegal, much of it smuggled through neighbouring countries for onward export. This amount constituted over a third of all raw ivory exported from Africa in this 10-year period.

slaughtered each year between 1905 and 1912 to satisfy ivory demand, and that was when a 15kg tusk was considered 'small'.

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In 1989, the Ivory Trade Review Group (ITRG), working under the auspices of the IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group, unveiled the results of a continent-wide survey of the ivory trade in Africa. The purpose was to gather sufficient data to allow the Parties to CITES to make an informed decision on whether to instigate a moratorium on international trade in ivory. The data showed that the single

most important source of ivory in Africa during the two decades preceding 1989 was the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The total volume of ivory exported from the six main Congo Basin countries was almost 3,000 tonnes between 1979 and 1988. Examination of export records indicates that the average tusk weight was probably around 10kg, which would mean the exported ivory represented the deaths of approximately 150,000 elephants over 10 years.

The ITRG found an active local ivory industry operating in Central Africa in 1989, with virtually no government regulation controlling the origin of the raw ivory used or the export of worked pieces. Ivory factories supplying local and foreign demand were established in the 1980s in Congo-Brazzaville and

the DRC with Chinese investment, and several thousand ivory carvers were working throughout the Congo Basin.

Since the CITES ivory trade ban, which came into effect in most countries in 1990, Central Africa has continued to be active in smuggling ivory out of the sub-region. Wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC has reported almost 1,000 cases of seized ivory, weighing over 49 tonnes, from 1990 to 2010 originating in Congo Basin countries. These totals under-represent the real flows of ivory as many shipments successfully reach their destinations.

In 1999, Esmond Martin and I carried out an ivory market survey to assess the impact of the CITES ban in Africa. We concluded that ivory market scale and activity had declined considerably since the CITES trade ban in 1989 in Central Africa (and elsewhere). Where comparable data were available, raw ivory prices had dropped, the estimated weight of worked ivory seen for sale was less and the number of retail outlets selling worked ivory as well as the number of carvers and workshops had all decreased. The main cause was the drop in demand for ivory in Japan, Europe and the USA because of the negative publicity generated by the CITES trade

ban, and the effectiveness of the ban itself.

In 1814, there may have been 1.4 million elephants in the Congo Basin, according to a study by Milner-Gulland and Beddington. By 1989, the ITRG estimated the number had plummeted to about 172,000. The IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group assessed a probable number of over 46,000 in 2006, which has certainly fallen further since then due to rampant poaching by Sudanese in the Central African Republic, Chad and northern Cameroon, and by the usual suspects elsewhere in the sub-region.

In 2010, I coordinated a study for the IUCN in four Congo Basin countries (see SWARA 34:1). We found that raw ivory prices had moderately increased since 1999, but were still lower than in 1989 in inflation-adjusted terms. Preliminary information gathered in Yaoundé, Douala, Brazzaville and Kisangani suggested that numbers of retail outlets, ivory objects for sale and craftsmen were significantly lower than in 1989, and still below those seen in 1999. In Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville, worked ivory and ivory workshops had gone largely underground since 1999 because governments and NGOs had begun serious campaigns to control ivory trafficking. Worked ivory was still openly sold in DRC, but carvers told me that ivory was too expensive for them now because Chinese businessmen were buying up all the tusks for export.

Hunters and middlemen quoted in the IUCN study reported that tusk prices had been rising in recent years, which increased the motivation to hunt elephants (see Stiles, Martin and Vigne in this issue). Hunters said higher prices were due both to greater risk and to increased demand, the latter often from East Asian buyers. A significant trend is that more tusks are being exported and fewer are worked locally, compared to earlier times.

Most Congo Basin elephant hunters are subsidised by *commanditaires*, people who hire and supply hunters to bring back tusks. This provides an additional incentive to hunt elephants because others cover investment costs for hunters. When asked what might persuade them to stop hunting



Middlemen would sell these <5 kg tusks in Yaounde for about US\$ 33/kg and in Kisangani for US\$ 50/kg. In China or Viet Nam workshops would pay more than 1500% mark-up for them.

3,000
The total volume in tonnes of ivory exported from the six main Congo Basin countries between 1979 and 1988.

elephants, many hunters said they would be willing to quit if alternative employment could be found.

Poverty and corrupt government officials largely drive elephant poaching in Africa, while consumer demand in eastern Asia is a third main driver – together, these factors create a perfect storm that is battering elephants. Elephant poaching is only one of many natural resource depredations caused by mismanagement, corruption and an insatiable demand for wildlife products, timber and minerals. Unless good governance and respect for the law can be put in place, I am afraid

the prognosis is not good for Africa's elephants, and other natural resources.

Still, compared to the late 19th century and up to 1989, since 1990 global ivory consumption has dropped considerably. However, there are worrying signs that it is on the rise again, mainly in parts of eastern Asia. All efforts should be made to stamp out the demand through public awareness and education campaigns. It worked in Europe, the USA and Japan. Let's hope it works in China. ●

DAN STILES first came to Kenya in 1971 to assist on the Koobi Fora paleoanthropology project at Lake Turkana. He taught at the University of Nairobi from 1977-1981 then worked for UNEP and other UN agencies for several years. He has researched extensively in Africa and Asia on forest and drylands natural resource utilisation. Since 1999, he has been carrying out ivory trade studies and currently is co-ordinating an IUCN elephant meat and ivory study in Central Africa.