

# Exaggerated ivory prices can be harmful to Elephants

by Dan Stiles, Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne

The TRAFFIC press release on the report into Vietnam's ivory market<sup>1</sup> unleashed a wave of misinformation that has been quoted in countless places (see box for a small sample). Unfortunately, the press release was never shown to the report's author before publication; otherwise the prices that led to the misinterpretation would not have been released in that way.

High wholesale prices of over \$1,000/kg for raw ivory only occur in Asia for very large tusks, tusk tips, or when tusks are in unusually short supply, and must not be taken out of context and quoted as the norm. The \$1,500/kg was a claim made in an expensive tourist boutique about Asian tusks imported to Vietnam from Laos, and the higher \$1,863/kg was a retail price in an antique shop for a 200g polished tusk tip cut from a captive Asian elephant.

The report pointed out that no African raw ivory was seen during the survey in Vietnam and that raw ivory was very scarce at the time, which resulted in wholesale prices of Asian raw ivory in the country being probably the highest in the world. The prices certainly did not refer to African raw ivory, nor were they indicative of prices elsewhere in Asia. As for the tusk tips, these were retail prices, not wholesale, and tusk tips are not representative of average raw ivory prices. The report's author acknowledges here that he

'An assessment of the illegal ivory trade in Vietnam said Vietnamese illegal ivory prices could be the highest in the world, with reports of tusks selling for up to \$1,500/kg and small, cut pieces selling for up to \$1,863/kg.' TRAFFIC press release, February 16, 2009.

'TRAFFIC says that tusks can sell for as much as \$1,500 (£1,000) a kilo in Vietnam and small pieces of worked ivory for more than \$1,800 a kilo.' BBC Wildlife, April, 2009.

'The price of illegal ivory is, according to TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring organization, a staggering \$1,500 a kilo.' Born Free press release, 15 April, 2009.

'Demand ... drove the wholesale price for high-quality ivory from \$200 per kilogram in 2004 to \$850 per kilogram by 2007. The price doubled again by 2009 [\$1,700/kg].' Sam Wasser, et al., *Scientific American*, July, 2009.

'Although it is difficult to price ivory exactly recent reports indicate that it can be sold in China for as much as \$1,700/kg.' International Fund for Animal Welfare press release, 17 March, 2011.

should have explained the prices in more detail in the Vietnam report.

A later TRAFFIC survey in Thailand found no large tusks on the market, only smaller tusks. The report said: "Small tusks less than five kg cost from \$286-429/kg in early 2008"<sup>2</sup>. Why is it that these lower correct prices were not quoted by NGOs, scientists or the media? The answer is that only exceptionally high prices are selected by those wishing to draw attention to elephant poaching in order to gain more publicity. Unfortunately, inflated prices may have the opposite effect by tempting more poachers and traders into the ivory business.

Again, in the August 2011 edition of *Vanity Fair*, which has a huge global circulation, the editor of Alex Shoumatoff's article stated that raw ivory in southern China at the factory level was said to fetch \$700 a pound, which is \$1,540/kg. This figure came from an indirect source, not from factory staff, and is more than double the price ivory traders and ivory factory managers state they have actually been paying in southern China, according to a survey conducted by Martin and Vigne in January 2011.<sup>3</sup>

The CITES Secretariat has also been concerned about inaccurate high prices being quoted in publications. In August

<sup>1</sup>Stiles, D. (2008). *An assessment of the illegal ivory trade in Vietnam*. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia.

<sup>2</sup>Stiles, D. (2009). *The elephant and ivory trade in Thailand*. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia.

<sup>3</sup>Martin, E. and Vigne, L. (2011). *The ivory dynasty: A report on the soaring demand for elephant and mammoth ivory in Southern China*. Elephant Family, the Aspinall Foundation and Columbus Zoo and Aquarium.



This is the famous Daxin ivory display room at their ivory factory in Guangzhou.

PHOTO BY: LUCY VIGNE

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2011, it said: “The Secretariat has consistently, over a long period of years, warned against quoting what appear to be grossly-inflated figures (and many in the NGO community agree that they do not actually reflect what is commonly paid in the black market), as this must inevitably help prompt speculative poaching”.

There has indeed been an increase in prices for raw ivory in the last few years in Asia and this suggests growing demand, particularly in China. Factors causing this include increasing prosperity, fashion, competition, perceptions of future value, etc. The rising prices are also due to factors affecting supply, such as government seizures and associated risks including bribes and concealed shipping. Because price is such an important indicator of demand and market trends, we would recommend that a thorough study from direct sources (poachers, traders, factory managers and carvers) be

conducted to investigate price trends, both in Asia and Africa.

There are methodological difficulties in collecting accurate raw ivory prices. Some investigators pose as ivory buyers, or as agents of other dealers, or less commonly say that they have tusks to sell. Sometimes investigators say they are simply collecting information for personal research on this traditional art form or perhaps for a book, stressing that they have no connection with government or law enforcement agencies. The 'buying' ploy will produce more cooperation from the informant as there is a financial interest. If the 'researcher' hat is worn, the informant will sometimes expect to be paid.

Problems that present themselves in collecting ivory price data include:

- (1) Trust - the informant must believe that you are who you say you are, and are not associated with law enforcement or other threats.

## CONSERVATION



PHOTOS BY: DAN STILES

**TOP:** The middleman in a Vietnamese village near Hanoi wanted US\$ 870/kg for the 3 kg tusk said to be from Laos.

**INSERT:** These tiny tusk tips were selling in Viet Nam for the equivalent of more than US\$ 1,600/kg each. The prices were starting prices in a retail shop and were not representative of raw ivory prices.

- (2) Knowledge - the informant should have accurate information on current market prices. It is common to receive a great range of prices from informants, partly due to limited informant knowledge.
- (3) Variability - there might actually be great variability in prices, as a result of variable sources of ivory and compartmentalised supply chains. This occurs particularly with an illegal commodity in which co-conspirators maintain secrecy.
- (4) Truthfulness – the informant should reveal actual prices eventually. There is always a degree of negotiation in any

business transaction. Thus, if the investigator is posing as a potential buyer, the first asking price will often be inflated. If the investigator is wearing the researcher hat, in which no negotiation takes place, s/he should assess the person's truthfulness through conversation and repeat questioning. It helps if the investigator is experienced and has knowledge of what reasonable prices to expect, though s/he should keep an open mind.

Collecting, analysing and reporting prices of a commodity such as raw elephant ivory, which is usually illegal,

pose other problems. The first factor to note is where in the commodity chain the price is collected. This is almost never specified in NGO and press reports. An individual tusk has many prices as it travels from the poacher, through middlemen and possibly through various countries, to workshops. The geographical location of the tusk as it moves along the chain influences the price as it is subject to transport and handling costs.

A second factor is the size of the tusk, again rarely specified in NGO and press reports. In general, the larger the tusk, the higher the price per kg. We would recommend four categories: small (< 5



**Table 1. Recent wholesale average raw ivory prices in Africa in US dollars**

Location	Year	Level	Average of all sizes	0-5 kg	5-10 kg	10-20 kg
<b>CENTRAL AFRICA<sup>1</sup></b>						
Cameroon, SE	2010	Poacher	33	26	26	40
Congo, north	2010	Poacher	21	12	20	31
DRC, NE	2010	Poacher	34	16	29	56
Cameroon, Yaounde	2010	Middleman	41	33	40	50
DRC, Kisangani	2010	Middleman	97	50	90	150
<b>EASTERN AFRICA</b>						
Kenya, north <sup>2</sup>	2008	Poacher	33	-	-	-
Kenya, south <sup>2</sup>	2009	Poacher	38	-	-	-
Kenya, SE <sup>3</sup>	2010	Poacher	43	-	-	-
Kenya, SE <sup>3</sup>	2011	Poacher	67	-	-	-
Tanzania, north <sup>2</sup>	2009	Poacher	63	-	-	-
Ethiopia, Addis Ababa <sup>4</sup>	2009	Workshop	81	81		

**Table 2. Recent wholesale average raw ivory prices in Asia in US dollars**

Location	Year	Level	Average of all sizes	0-5 kg	5-10 kg	10-20 kg
China, south <sup>5</sup>	2010	Workshop	-	750	900	-
Japan <sup>6</sup>	2009	Middleman	-	278	333	-
Philippines <sup>7</sup>	2009	Workshop	320	-	-	-
Philippines <sup>7</sup>	2010	Workshop	446	272	409	625
Thailand <sup>8</sup>	2008	Workshop	-	358	-	-
Vietnam <sup>9</sup>	2008	Workshop	791	791	-	-

**N.B:** The prices are averages for each weight class; the actual price for an individual tusk could be somewhat more or less than what is indicated in the tables.

**Sources for tables**

1. Stiles, D. (2011). *The Elephant Meat Trade in Central Africa: Summary Report*. Occasional Paper 45, IUCN.
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5. Vigne, L. and Martin, E. (2011). Consumption of elephant and mammoth ivory increases in southern China. *Pachyderm* 49: 79-89.
6. Vigne, L. and Martin, E. (2010). Consumer demand for ivory in Japan declines. *Pachyderm* 47: 45-54.
7. Information from craftsmen and retailers in Manila to E. Martin.
8. Stiles, D. (2009). *The elephant and ivory trade in Thailand*. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia. All prices are from Asian ivory. No pieces larger than 5 kg were found.
9. Stiles, D. (2008). *An assessment of the illegal ivory trade in Vietnam*. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia. All prices are from Asian ivory. No pieces larger than 5 kg were found.



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

Asian bulls can have large tusks, like this tusker in northern Thailand. These tusks would be worth up to \$40,000 sold to a Chinese ivory factory.

kg); medium (5-10 kg); large (10-20 kg); and very large (> 20 kg).  
The third factor is ivory quality. A tusk free of cracks, blemishes and signs of weathering or decomposition is worth much more than a flawed tusk. If the tusk is cut into pieces, the tip and solid centre are more valuable than the hollow end-section. There are other factors that can influence prices, but these three main ones account for about 90% of the variation.  
The best that an investigator can do is to record and report accurately the prices gathered from informants, taking into consideration the above factors. We would like to take this opportunity to present some raw ivory prices that we have collected from direct sources in the field in Africa and Asia from 2008 to 2011 (See tables).

The average of seven prices for small ivory in Vietnam is \$791/kg with the two tusk tips removed (as they were not wholesale prices), which fits with prices in southern China. One can see that there is an extremely large differential between prices in Africa and those in eastern Asia - the result, most likely, of a combination of supply shortages and transport expenses and risk factors in Asia.

We would urge those who are dedicated to reducing the scourge of elephant poaching to collect and report accurate data on ivory trafficking. With good data, scientifically informed policy can be formulated to achieve elephant conservation. ●

**DAN STILES** first came to Kenya in 1971 to assist on the Koobi Fora paleoanthropology project at Lake Turkana. He has 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.

**ESMOND MARTIN** has a PhD in geography from the University of Liverpool. He specialises in studying the illegal trade in wildlife products, especially rhino horn and elephant ivory. He began this research in the 1960s, examining the smuggling of ivory, mangrove poles, liquor and people in the Indian Ocean using traditional dhows. He has recently been studying the mammoth ivory trade.

**LUCY VIGNE** was born in Cape Town and brought up in London. She has a degree in Zoology from Oxford University. She has lived in Kenya all her adult life, working as the first Executive Officer for IUCN's African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group in the 1980s. She has been researching the ivory trade in Asia and Africa investigating ivory demand world-wide.