

GOING OUT OF BUSINESS

The Big Ivory Apple

An illegal market has not, as advertised, gone out of business.

By Daniel Stiles

In a 2008 publication, Ivory Markets in the USA, conservationist Esmond B. Martin and I reported on a survey we had carried out in the United States in the previous two years. We found that the U.S. had the second largest elephant ivory market in the world, and that New York City, which Martin surveyed, had by far the most ivory evident for sale of the sixteen urban areas (plus Vancouver, Canada) we investigated. I visited New York City in April this year and resurveyed the eight outlets that had displayed the most ivory in 2007. In the interim, the State of New York had introduced a law that requires all dealers in elephant ivory to obtain

a license. As of the end of 2012, sixty dealers had obtained the required licenses.

Three of the outlets in 2007 were multistoried markets that contained a total of 332 shops selling antiques and art. Of these shops, 50 displayed a total of 1,237 ivory items. The type of ivory pieces appeared to be genuinely old and therefore mostly or entirely legal ivory. In April 2013 I found that one of these multiple markets had closed and the other two now had only about 20 outlets selling fewer than 600 ivory items, or less than half the number previously recorded. More than half of the outlets selling ivory were not licensed to do so (I had a list to check against).

Turning to individual antique or home decoration shops, in



Elephant ivory figurine, left, is from a United States Fish and Wildlife Service display at Boston's Logan International Airport, cautioning travelers about importing objects made from endangered or protected species. Other photographs show objects of elephant ivory, mammoth ivory, and bone for sale in New York City and San Francisco.



2007 the 5 with the most ivory in Manhattan displayed a total of 6,681 ivory items (more than the total offered in 96 shops selling ivory in Beijing and Shanghai combined in a 2002 survey!). The shop with the most ivory was no longer in exist-

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)—supervised auction, in 2008, of 105 metric tons of ivory from southern Africa to China and Japan. According to activists opposed to legal ivory trade, that sale (and the one

southern African countries until at least 2017, and (2) the rejection at the CITES conference in 2010 of a proposal, by Zambia and Tanzania, that would have authorized those two countries to sell ivory.

Ivory traders now believe, no doubt correctly, that no new legal raw ivory will come on the market until 2018 at the earliest. To stay in business, therefore, they are now stockpiling as much ivory as they can. It is this that has spurred the current elephant holocaust. Most ivory consumers in eastern Asia, where publicity associated with the sales is much less than in the West, were unaware of the two CITES sales and, therefore, were not stimulated by them to buy ivory.

The solution to elephant poaching includes two components: supply legal raw ivory to traders to replace poached ivory, and mount sustained campaigns in Asia to drive down consumer demand for worked ivory. The latter was successful in the West; it should work in the East.

Even though the decline in New York City's ivory market scale is encouraging, I found a very troubling aspect concerning a particular type of outlet that sells ivory. There are several shops in New York that follow exactly the same pattern. As we described in our 2008 report:

They were usually in old buildings . . . and usually congested. They sell pseudo-European reproduction furniture—much of it heavily gilded—modern human full-size statues, glass or China vases and ornaments, and . . . Art Deco style human statuettes almost all with ivory faces and hands, Chinese ivory figurines or netsukes, and occasionally large ivory pagodas or scenic pieces with trees. Some of the small ivory ornaments were displayed in the shop windows. All these shops displayed signs advertising “major sale” or “huge discount” with reasons . . . such as “going out of business,” . . . “lease coming to an end” or “major renovations taking place.” Prices are usually reduced by 50–90% in order to attract customers.

To this description I would add that they always display a mixed assembly of elephant and (legal) mammoth ivory pieces, and large pieces made of composite bone. I suspect that these pieces are imported together in shipments from China and/or Hong Kong, which allows the illegal elephant ivory to be smuggled in along with the mammoth ivory pieces and bone pieces that imitate ivory. The Art Deco-style statuettes passed off as original sculptures by the Romanian artist Demetre Haralamb Chiparus (1886–1947) are fakes, starting at \$30,000, but can be bought for less than \$1,000 with bargaining.

There are about a dozen of this type of outlet in New York, targeting tourists. They have a relatively high turnover, and salespeople stated that they sell a lot of ivory. They are always “going out of business,” yet their ivory displays are always full. The salespeople said

that two to three years ago, Chinese citizens came to New York in large numbers and would buy every ivory piece in the shop, but that had now stopped. If Chinese buyers had cleaned out the ivory, where did the replacement ivory now on display come from?

I saw exactly the same style of shop in San Francisco in 2007. There were about ten of them scattered around the Fisherman's Wharf area, which is always crowded with tourists. Even the salespeople were very similar in both cities, always fast-talking men with New York, Eastern European, or Israeli accents. I would not be surprised if the same company owned them all. They claim that they are selling objects obtained from estate auctions, but the uniformity of garish style and the impossibly large number of “Chiparus” Art Deco figurines in the outlets argues against that possibility.

New York and San Francisco ap-

pear to be gateway cities for illegal elephant ivory import in the U.S. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the New York and California wildlife services have begun cracking down on illegal ivory sales in recent years, and some important arrests involving large quantities of ivory have been made. The job of enforcement is still incomplete, however.

A take-home lesson, at any rate, is that despite assumptions, China is not the only culprit promoting elephant poaching through its illegal ivory markets. The U.S. is right up there with them.

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On July 12, 2012, Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. (right) announced guilty pleas of two dealers for marketing illegal elephant ivory with a retail value of more than \$2 million.

tence in 2013, and the 4 remaining (none licensed to sell elephant ivory) now had a total of about 1,000 ivory pieces. One of these, a Chinese-owned shop, had gone from 850 elephant ivory items in 2007 to about 35. Almost all of the ivory now displayed in this outlet (about 150 pieces) was hippo (tooth) ivory.

If those eight outlets are representative of the general ivory market in New York City, there has been a massive decline in scale in a little over five years. And this decline took place during and after the

in 1999 that preceded it) must have stimulated ivory demand, and thus have contributed to the current surge in elephant poaching. The evidence from New York appears to contradict this claim.

It is my belief that the recent upsurge in elephant poaching has been caused by increased trader demand for raw ivory, not primarily by an increase in consumer demand for worked ivory. This increase in trader demand is a result of two main factors: (1) the decision by CITES in 2007 to not allow additional raw ivory sales from previously approved

