

Elephant-size loopholes sustain Thai ivory trade

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Legal loopholes and insufficient law enforcement mean that Thailand continues to harbour the largest illegal ivory market in Asia, says a new report from the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC.

The report also raises concerns that legal provisions governing trade in domesticated elephants are providing cover for illegal trade in wild-caught, highly-endangered Asian elephants from both Thailand and neighbouring Myanmar.

TRAFFIC's survey documented over 26,000 worked ivory products for sale in local markets, with many more retail outlets dealing in ivory products than were observed during market surveys carried out in 2001.

Market surveys found 50 more retail outlets offering ivory items in Bangkok and Chiang Mai in 2008 than the previous year. However, overall there was less worked ivory openly on sale than in 2001.

"Thailand has consistently been identified as one of the world's top five countries most heavily implicated in the illicit ivory trade, but shows little sign of addressing outstanding issues," said Tom Milliken, of TRAFFIC, which oversees a global monitoring programme, the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

"Thailand needs to reassess its policy for controlling its local ivory markets as currently it is not implementing international requirements to

the ongoing detriment of both African and Asian Elephant populations," said Milliken.

"Since 2004, the Thai government has only reported two ivory seizure cases totaling 1.2 tonnes of raw ivory."

Thailand's capital, Bangkok, a major tourist destination, has emerged as the main hub for illegal ivory activities, accounting for over 70 percent of the retail outlets in Thailand offering ivory items for sale.

The report includes new information on ivory workshops—eight in Uthai Thani, one each in Chai Nat and Payuha Kiri, and three in Bangkok—between them employing dozens of carvers in the production of ivory jewelry, belt buckles and knife-handles. Much of the ivory being worked is illegally imported from Africa.

Some workshop owners boasted close ties with European knife makers, while others reported sending ivory, steel and silver items to the US for sale in gun shops.

"The Thai Government needs to crack down on this serious illegal activity and stop allowing people to abuse the law," said Dr Colman O'Criodain, WWF International's analyst on wildlife trade issues.

"A good first step would be to put in place a comprehensive registration system for all [ivory](#) in trade and for live elephants".

The study also uncovered reports of traders buying wild-caught elephant calves for use in Bangkok as "beggars" on the streets in major tourist centres, or selling them to elephant camps and entertainment parks.

Hundreds of live elephants are known to have been illegally imported from Myanmar in recent years, to be sold to elephant trekking

companies catering to adventure tourism in Thailand. The capture of wild elephants has been banned in Thailand since the 1970s, but such trade usually goes undetected because domesticated [elephants](#) do not have to be registered legally until they are eight years of age.

The study also found that over a quarter of all live elephant exports from Thailand between 1980 and 2005 could have been illegal due to incomplete and inaccurate declarations made on the documentation required under CITES.

"There must be greater scrutiny of the live elephant trade if enforcement efforts are to have any impact at all," said Chris R. Shepherd, TRAFFIC Southeast Asia's Acting Director.

"Thailand and Myanmar should work together, and with urgency, to address cross-border trade problems," he added.

Source: World Wildlife Fund

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