

HK nabs \$5.3M in ivory, rhino horns, leopard skins (Update)

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A photographer takes pictures of illegal ivory after a press conference in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2013. A shipment of illegal ivory, rhino horns and leopard skins worth \$5.3 million was seized in Hong Kong's second big bust of endangered species products in a month. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Hong Kong customs officials have seized a shipment of illegal ivory, rhino horns and leopard skins worth \$5.3 million in the territory's second big bust of endangered species products in a month.

The haul is also the latest in a string of big ivory seizures over the past year in the southern Chinese city.

Acting on a tip from customs officials in mainland China, authorities at Hong Kong's port confiscated 1,120 ivory tusks, 13 rhino horns and five leopard skins weighing a total of 2,266 kilograms (4,997 pounds), said Vincent Wong, customs' head of ports and maritime command.

They were found Tuesday in 21 crates hidden in a container full of wood that originated in Nigeria, he said. Wong said the shipment changed vessels in Shanghai before arriving in Hong Kong, but he did not believe the former British colony was the final destination.

Wildlife activists say China's growing presence in Africa is to blame for an unprecedented surge in poaching of elephants for their tusks, most of which are believed to be smuggled into China and Thailand to make ivory ornaments.

According to CITES, the international body that monitors endangered species, the illegal trade in ivory has more than doubled since 2007.

Ivory can fetch up to \$2,000 per kilogram (\$910 per pound) on the black market and more than \$50,000 for an entire tusk.



Crates full of illegal ivory are displayed during a press conference in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2013. A shipment of illegal ivory, rhino horns and leopard skins worth \$5.3 million was seized in Hong Kong's second big bust of endangered species products in a month. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Last month, more than 2 tons of elephant tusks worth an estimated \$2.25 million found in a container from Togo were confiscated by Hong Kong customs officials, who said it was the city's biggest ivory seizure since 2010. In January, officials confiscated an ivory shipment worth \$1.4 million that came from Kenya, which followed two big ivory seizures last fall.

Demand for rhino horn is driven by the belief in Asia that the ground-up horn cures diseases, which is not supported by medical evidence. Rhino horn is made of keratin, a tough protein found in human fingernails.

No one has been arrested.



Camera men take video of illegal ivory after a press conference in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2013. A shipment of illegal ivory, rhino horns and leopard skins worth \$5.3 million was seized in Hong Kong's second big bust of endangered species products in a month. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Under Hong Kong law, anyone found guilty of trading in products from endangered species faces up to two years in prison and a fine of up to \$645,000.

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