

Kenya jails Chinese ivory smuggler in landmark ruling

August 22 2013, by Peter Martell



Kenya Ports Authority workers and Kenya Wildlife Service rangers supervise the counting of the ivory tusks at Mombasa Port on August 21, 2013. Kenya sentenced a Chinese ivory smuggler to two and a half years in prison Thursday in a landmark ruling hailed as sending a powerful warning to poachers and smugglers.

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The illegal ivory trade, estimated to be worth between \$7 billion and \$10

billion a year, is mostly fuelled by demand in Asia and the Middle East, where elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns are used in [traditional medicine](#) and to make ornaments.

"A precedent has been set by this sentencing, it is a sign that our judiciary is waking up to the scale of the crisis and the damage that is being done to our animals," Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) spokesman Paul Udoto told AFP.

Chen Biemei, 30, was jailed for 31 months for trying to smuggle 6.9 kilogrammes (15 pounds) of worked ivory she had disguised as 15 bags of macadamia nuts.

Chen, who pleaded guilty, was nabbed on August 14 as she tried to fly to Hong Kong.

Despite a surge of rhino and elephant killings across Kenya—and elsewhere in Africa—previous cases have seen smugglers escape with minimal fines and then set free.

In March, a Kenyan court handed a relatively small fine of less than \$350 to a Chinese [smuggler](#) caught with a haul of more than 400 finger-length ivory pieces.

Such fines pose little if any [deterrence](#), as experts say a kilogramme of ivory has a black market value of roughly \$2,500.

A total of 17 people from six different countries have been arrested trying to smuggle ivory out of Kenya since the beginning of this year, according to KWS.

"It is the longest such sentence I have seen for a long time," Udoto said. "Now those who want to damage our wildlife must also test our [prison](#)

[system.](#)"

Last year [poachers](#) slaughtered 384 elephants in Kenya, up from 289 in 2011, according to official figures, from a total population of around 35,000. More than 160 elephants have been killed so far in 2013, the KWS says.

Saving wildlife is crucial for Kenya, a top safari destination and heavily reliant on tourism for foreign currency earnings.

The sentencing comes as Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta wraps up a state visit to China, where among a raft of economic and trade deals signed included one also to boost "wildlife protection".

Kenyatta's wife Margaret is spearheading an anti-poaching drive aimed at saving elephants and rhinos.

Kenya's government has also said it plans to bolster lenient sentences for wildlife crime in a bid to stamp out a spike in elephant and rhino poaching. The KWS is meanwhile boosting its anti-poaching force, said to be facing increasingly well-equipped and ruthless hunters.

Demand for [ivory](#) and rhino horn comes primarily from China, conservationists say, and many accuse the Chinese authorities of not doing enough to stop the illicit [ivory trade](#).

Africa is now home to an estimated 472,000 elephants, whose survival is threatened by poaching as well as a rising human population that is causing habitat loss.

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Citation: Kenya jails Chinese ivory smuggler in landmark ruling (2013, August 22) retrieved 26

April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-08-kenya-chinese-ivory-smuggler-landmark.html>

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