

New research explains dramatic reduction of ivory trade in Japan

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With implications for global wildlife trade, research from the University of Stirling and National Institute for Environmental Studies (NIES), Japan has shown how Japan, once the largest consumer country of ivory,

stopped being a destination for the product.

While a global trade ban signed in 1980 was extremely important, an interplay of cultural and [economic factors](#) also had a large impact, the researchers found.

Poaching for [ivory](#) has led to African and Indian elephants becoming endangered, with fewer than 500,000 left in the world, according to WWF. The biggest destination markets in the world are now China and nearby Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Dr. Laura Thomas-Walters, from Stirling's department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, who led the research, said, "Our research identified market drivers that led to a reduction in demand for ivory, despite the high cultural value it has had in Japan for more than 1,000 years. Understanding what can cause a decline in wildlife trades is vital, as many continue to cause devastating biodiversity losses worldwide."

Dr. Thomas-Walters worked with NIES in Japan, as well as the universities of Kent and Oxford, to analyze data from the last 40 years, since Japan signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) global trade ban in 1980.

Dr. Thomas-Walters said, "Although the CITES ban was extremely important, other elements came together in Japan, particularly during the 1990s. There was an [economic recession](#), which fueled a cultural shift away from the conspicuous consumption of expensive goods like ivory artifacts, jewelry or furniture.

"We also found that demand for ivory in Japan was passive, which means that, if it was on sale, people would buy it, but if it wasn't they wouldn't seek it out, unlike in countries like China, where there is a thriving black market.

"We found that that anti-ivory campaigns by NGOs following the CITES ban, although they may not have influenced consumers directly, put indirect pressure on retailers, which further reduced the presence of ivory in shops."

Trust in government 'important'

The researchers used a combination of data analysis, stakeholder interviews and literature review to test different hypotheses for the reduction in ivory imports, finding, for example, that high profile spokespeople had not been particularly effective, whilst trust in government was important.

Dr. Thomas-Walters said, "We found that respect for the legitimacy of government authority in Japan increased the effectiveness of the trade ban. Where governments are seen to have legitimate authority, people tend to obey, whereas in other countries where respect is lower, black markets flourish."

Dr. Takahiro Kuba, from NIES, said, "This research, carried out with diverse stakeholders, confirmed the decline in demand for ivory for [luxury items](#)—hanko stamps for signing correspondence, for example. In addition, sluggish economic growth will accelerate the decline of the domestic market. Policymakers thus need to take account of this diminishing domestic demand when collaborating globally over sustainable management of ivory."

There remains a domestic market for ivory in Japan, but the researchers concluded that this was no longer important in terms of global trade, because it involves exchanging historic rather than current imports. "Of course, it remains important to ensure that [border security](#) stays tight," Dr. Thomas-Walters added.

The paper, "Understanding the market drivers behind the reduced demand for ivory products in Japan," is published in the journal *Conservation and Society*.

More information: Laura Thomas-Walters et al, Understanding the Market Drivers Behind the Reduced Demand for Ivory Products in Japan, *Conservation and Society* (2022). [DOI: 10.4103/cs.cs.155.21](https://doi.org/10.4103/cs.cs.155.21). [conservationandsociety.org.in/ ... rticle.asp?id=360609](https://conservationandsociety.org.in/article.asp?id=360609)

Provided by University of Stirling

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