

Large Quantities of Illegal Ivory for Sale in Sudan



Dr Esmond Martin, 14 March 2005

Introduction

The data represented here complement a series of three earlier ivory market surveys covering Africa, South and Southeast Asia and East Asia. Quantitative detailed information such as this is pivotal to attempts aimed at assessing the scope and mechanics of international ivory trade, as well as determining trends, through reliable indicators. Because of a direct link between market demand and elephant poaching, this latest study of the ivory markets in Sudan has clear implications for the conservation of all elephants.

Expanding Markets

The ivory markets in the Khartoum area along the River Nile in Sudan has recently grown into one of the largest in the world. In a survey carried out in February 2005 by the wildlife trade specialist, Dr Esmond Martin, he counted just over 11,000 ivory items in 50 souvenir shops in Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North. The results of an earlier survey conducted by Martin in 1997 showed that fewer shops offered fewer ivory items for sale.

Military at the Centre of Illegal Killing

Tusks for the craftsmen in Khartoum and Omdurman (the traditional Arab city across the Nile from Khartoum) come mostly from recently poached elephants in southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Other tusks originate from the Central African Republic (CAR), Kenya and a few possibly from Chad. According to Sudanese artisans and shopkeepers, poachers are mainly members of the Sudanese Army who possess the necessary firearms and ammunition. They also have access to government transport to move tusks to Khartoum and Omdurman. Vendors, traders and craftsmen have stated that only a small number of businessmen are involved because the cost of private motorized transport from the south to the northern part of the country tend to be prohibitive.

Ivory Prices on the Up

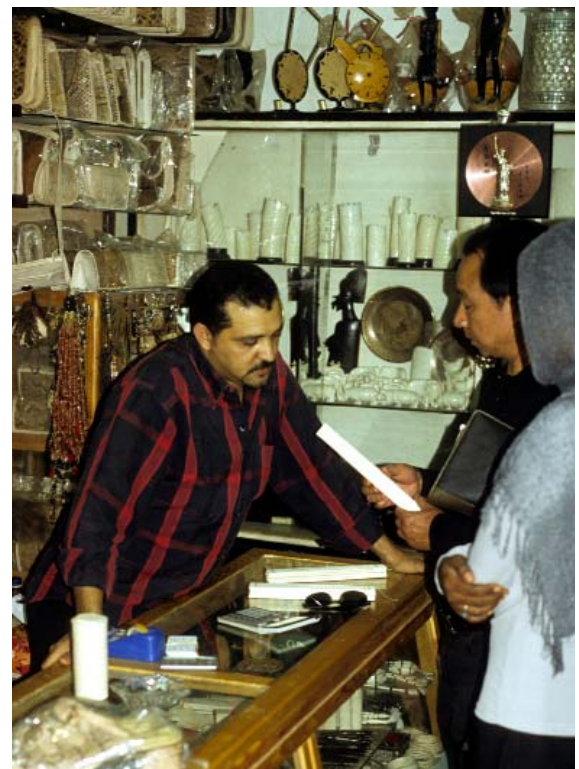
The Army and the few private traders sell tusks wholesale to the owners of workshops and souvenir outlets in Khartoum and Omdurman for US\$44-148/kg, with an average price of US\$105/kg, depending on the quality and weight of the tusks. Comparable prices found in a similar survey from 1997 ranged from US\$15.50-US\$43.60. These latest figures therefore represent a considerable price increase for raw ivory. Poor quality, small tusks and occasional scraps are sold wholesale for US\$6-105/kg (average price US\$57/kg).

Product Range

There are about 150 ivory craftsmen, mostly in Omdurman. They use hand tools and electric drills and work six full days a week. They are paid for what they produce, earning about US\$8-12 a day (about the same as skilled workers). Polishers and assistants earn less than half.

Ivory craftsmen produce mostly jewellery and figurines. The quality of the figurines ranges from fair to poor, compared with Zimbabwe and South Africa, where the best African ivory figurines are produced. Almost all of the items are small to facilitate smuggling from Sudan to the customers' home country.

The 50 souvenir shops carried from 2 to 1,021 ivory objects. The most numerous, in descending order, were animal figurines, pendants, rings, bangles, human figurines, earrings and chopsticks, amongst other items. Retail prices were low because the raw material is cheap and labour is inexpensive. A simple ring, for instance, costs US\$2, a four-centimetre pendant US\$3, and a pair of chopsticks US\$13.



The Chinese Connection

About three-quarters of all the ivory items are bought by Chinese nationals. Other buyers included a few South Koreans, Gulf Arabs and Saudis, probably in that order. Several thousand expatriate Chinese live in Sudan, working in the petroleum, construction and mining sectors. The Chinese frequently visit souvenir shops, spending their leisure time choosing souvenirs - mainly ivory - to buy. They particularly favour ivory figurines, jewellery, name seals, cigarette holders and chopsticks. It is interesting that the ivory carving industry in this area, although over 100 years old, with items made mainly for the British in the past, has undergone significant changes. Following the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) imposed ban on international trade in ivory in 1990, western buyers reduced their purchases by over 75%, and the number of carvers in northern Sudan almost halved to just over 100. However, the subsequent arrival of 1000 Chinese labourers and South Korean businessmen in the 1990s who, unconcerned about the CITES agreement, purchased ivory for personal consumption as well as export. In the last ten years or so, artisans have tailored their carving to the demands of Chinese workers in Sudan, by manufacturing chopsticks and name seals.

Illegal Sales and Trade Routes

The sale of these ivory items is legal in Sudan, provided the shopkeeper has a government licence and the ivory items have been carved from old (pre-CITES ban) ivory. More specifically, the sale of items made from tusks of recently killed Sudanese elephants is not permitted, nor is it legal to sell items from imported tusks that date after the 1990 CITES ivory trade. Almost all the ivory items for sale today, however, originate from new tusks. Government officials rarely inspect the shops to check whether ivory is legal or not. As is the case for ivory trade the world over, all ivory, whether it be tusks or ivory items (except antiques with proper permits) bought by tourists or for commercial use, cannot be exported or imported by countries complying with CITES. This means that nearly all the ivory items bought in Sudan since 1990 have left the country illegally.

Sudan not only has one of the largest retail markets for ivory in Africa, but raw tusks are also moved through Khartoum and Omdurman to Egypt, where there is a flourishing ivory trade also. In 1998, around 100 Egyptian craftsmen processed these tusks, brought to Egypt through Sudan in trucks or on camel-back. The markets in Cairo, Luxor and Aswan had over 20,000 ivory objects for sale in 1998, making them one of the largest in the world. To this day, ivory trinkets are still plentiful in the curio shops.

Impact on Elephant Populations

The unregulated ivory trade in Khartoum and Omdurman, both for local markets and as an entrepot to Egypt, has had a devastating effect on elephants, especially in Central Africa. In the 1990s, Sudanese and nationals of the CAR decimated elephants in eastern CAR for their tusks. Today, the killing has moved on to northern DRC. In the past year, Baggara horsemen from Sudan have been entering the DRC's Garamba National Park, killing many elephants. As part of this wholesale slaughter, the northern white rhino too has virtually been obliterated. There are no reliable figures on elephant numbers in Sudan, as surveys have been impossible in the war-torn south. But we know that from a population of perhaps 133,000 in 1976, numbers fell to about 40,000 in 1992.



Conclusion

The driving force behind these elephant killings, especially in the recent past, is directly linked to the activities of the Chinese. Not restricted to Chinese expatriates in Sudan, they extend to traders in China who buy these tusks and encourage the trade. China has been the largest importing nation of illegal tusks since the mid 1990s, with the majority originating from Central Africa.

In order to battle against this illegal trade it is imperative to tackle the Chinese, both with regard to buyers of trinkets in Sudan and the traders who purchase the raw ivory for China's craftsmen.

At the 13th CITES Conference of the Parties held in Bangkok in October 2004, an action plan to control the trade in African elephant ivory was approved by all African elephant range states, including Sudan. As part of this agreement, range states are obliged to comply with CITES requirements on internal ivory trade controls and report to the CITES Secretariat by 31 March 2005.

Sudan's unregulated markets for new and therefore illegal tusks from Sudan and neighbouring African countries, must be controlled not only to comply with CITES, but to protect all elephants from further illicit killings. It is unlikely that this illegal trade can be brought under control without international pressure on China to stop its support of ivory trade.

