
BOOK REVIEW

The South and South East Asian Ivory Markets

by Esmond Martin and Daniel Stiles

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In a perfect world, we would be able to track down herds of elephants in the wilderness areas of Africa and Asia to study their behaviour, take photographs and enjoy the playfulness of their 'tiny' babies. People would also be able to use domesticated elephants for peaceful work without doing any harm to the animals. In a perfect world, some of the tusks could be traded and used by skilful ivory carvers to produce timeless pieces of art to be admired and treasured by rulers, gentry and their subjects alike. Reality mars this picture of relative equilibrium. The immense and endless herds have gone forever through human greed and encroachment of habitat and they are not likely to return in their old glory. Fortunately, elephants are still to be found in their original habitat, maybe half a million in Africa and 50 thousand in Asia, but this represents such a small fraction of former abundance that the decline of the past decennia has to be stopped or reversed. That requires an incredible international effort on all fronts.

The poaching of elephants in their natural habitat is an unquestionable threat. The animals are killed for their tusks, which are either carved for the local market or traded and sold elsewhere, all with large economic returns. The international trade is prohibited among countries that have acceded to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), while internal trade and sale are often restricted or forbidden under

national laws. However, conventions and laws are not always easily enforced, and the impact of the policies must be monitored regularly to ensure their effectiveness or to pinpoint possible weaknesses. Esmond Martin and Daniel Stiles set out to provide the baseline data necessary for this assessment. Following their previous report, *The Ivory Markets of Africa* (reviewed in *Pachyderm* no. 29, p. 61), they now focus their attention on the countries of South and South East Asia, which have significant numbers of elephants and which sell ivory items. I am pleased that previous discrepancies in methods and questionnaires have been ironed out, resulting in a uniform and well-reasoned dataset.

From November 2000 to March 2001, the two authors individually studied the shops and markets of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. The result of their investigations is laid down in this handsome book of 89 pages, with informative drawings by Andrew Kamiti and four pages of colour photographs of ivory for sale. Moreover, the book is available from the publishers without charge except for shipping. Ideally, this book should find its way to the desk and later the shelves of all those who are interested in elephants and their preservation.

A thorough investigation of eight Asian countries in five months is a daunting task, which the authors have tackled with their usual resourcefulness and ini



This elephant in Angkor Wat, Cambodia, has had its tusks cut off—in the region, a popular way of obtaining ivory to carve.

tiative. Usual, because especially Esmond (Bradley) Martin is no newcomer to this field, having monitored and explored the trade of ivory and rhinoceros horn in many incisive and crucial surveys. We would not have the knowledge about the reasons for the decline in elephant numbers without his continuous focus for over 30 years. All the information engendered by this research is still available as most of it has been published in a wide range of books, reports and papers, the latter mainly in *Pachyderm*, *Swara*, *Oryx*, *International Zoo News* and *BBC Wildlife*. The expertise gained over this long period of dedicated research is again evident in *The South and South East Asian Ivory Markets*. In planning this survey of ivory trade in Asian countries, the authors used their past experience to the full, which helped to make wise use of time and public funding.

It is valid to ask why the survey was limited to the eight countries mentioned above. The authors explain at length (p. 9) why India was excluded from their

survey. With the CITES ban on international trade of ivory of 1990 and the total ban on the sale and display of ivory items in India from 1992, ivory items have disappeared from view in the shops. A few ad hoc observations in the 1990s showed that very few items were still available in Delhi and Bombay, which led the authors to conclude that India is no longer an important trading place of ivory. I wonder how the simple imposition of a few laws, even if combined with strict enforcement and heavy penalties, can result in such a total reversal of the trade. If shopkeepers can make money out of ivory items in Thailand, so can their counterparts in India.

It is a pity that India was not included in this comprehensive survey, because if the trade has disappeared, it would have been demonstrated beyond all doubt and it would have allowed a straightforward comparison with the results from other countries. The reduction or abolition of trade in ivory has been the focus of major international concern in many places. Possibly the Indian authorities have made the right policies and have achieved what has been a dream in many other countries. Others could learn from their example. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines were excluded from the survey, because previous experience has shown that the number of ivory items for retail sale in these countries is in fact really small.

The practical knowledge of the two authors not only influenced the choice of countries to be surveyed but also greatly helped to limit the research to those towns and villages where there is a substantial carving industry or a lively market in ivory items. For instance, in Thailand one of the authors visited Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phayuha Kiri, evidently because these are the main ivory centres of Thailand. I wouldn't know if the choices were correct and valid, but one may imagine that they are the best possible within the normal restraints of travel and limited funding. It is quite likely, therefore, that they selected the best places to be surveyed in order to gain insight into the current status of the trade and to provide the baseline data that are needed to shape future policy.

The detail of the observations and the accuracy of the statistics in this book is astounding. I can best illustrate this by picking one example. Martin was in Bangkok for 14 days from the end of February to the middle of March 2001. It is a city of 7.2 million inhabitants, which in 2000 had a large share of Thailand's 9.5 million foreign tourists. Obviously, the

number of small craft shops catering for this tourist market is almost impossible to count. Determined to get the correct data, Martin did his work and came up with incredibly detailed statistics. He found 164 shops selling ivory items, both antiques and new items. In total, they sold 38,510 objects. We gain an idea what these objects were, that is, 85% consisted of jewellery items like bangles, earrings, necklaces, pendants and rings; next were numbers of chopsticks, cigarette holders, ear picks and name seals. We also learn what they would cost, how old they could be and where they were carved. The statistics for the other towns in Thailand and for the other countries covered by the survey are

equally detailed and carefully presented, both in tables and in the text. A few inconsistencies in the numbers were seen and the presentation of the same facts in both text and tables would not always have been necessary. Fortunately, these minor shortcomings do not detract from the usefulness of the book for both the details and the greater picture.

The summary shows that Thailand is by far the largest consumer of ivory items, selling 83.9% of the 105,081 items found across the region. The authors discuss the meaning of their observations and the trends in great detail. It is important to discover who buys the ivory, because there will always be a supply when the demand is lucrative enough. The authors found that the main buyers are tourists and businessmen from Europe (France, Germany, Italy), Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore and the United States, in order of importance. This shows that better enforcement of the laws in these importing countries combined with continued education can still have great impact on the survival of the elephant. It also shows the importance of regular standardized surveys across many countries to understand the trends and the trade routes.

Daniel Stiles



In Myanmar these days ivory craftsmen are encouraging a movement towards a Burmese national style of ivory sculpture.

Martin and Stiles achieved their primary objective by creating a database with details of the present state of the ivory trade in the major markets of the South and South East Asian countries. Within the multitude of figures and trends and statistics, it would be easy to lose sight of the larger picture. The authors carefully and confidently guide us through this forest. The Discussion and Conclusion at the end, together with the Executive Summary at the beginning, are required reading and especially useful for those who may not have time to study the details contained in the body of the text. They can read this knowing that the conclusions are based on careful investigation.

This report should be read by those interested in elephants, in nature conservation, in trade in wildlife products, and by everybody intending to attend the forthcoming CITES meeting [November 2002, Santiago, Chile], where once again, almost inevitably, the sale of ivory will be discussed. The outcome of the debate is important to many Parties. For all those concerned with ivory trade, the baseline data are now available in this carefully written and well-produced text.