

REVIEW

Myanmar's growing illegal ivory trade with China

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin

Reviewed by John Frederick Walker

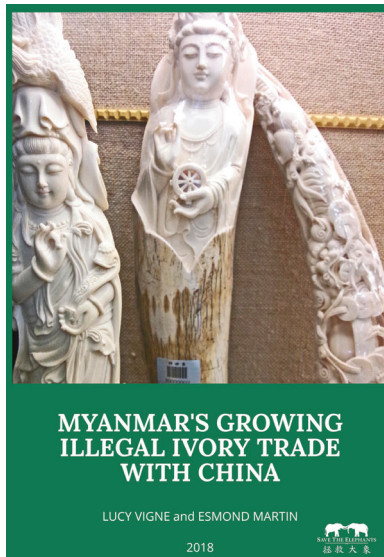
PO Box 709, Kent CT 06757, USA
email: johnfrederickwalker@gmail.com

This disturbing report is the last of the late Esmond Martin's collaborations with Lucy Vigne, who worked with him on a groundbreaking series of meticulously researched monographs on endangered wildlife trade studies, including analyses of Asian ivory markets covering three decades. Vigne brought this project to completion in 2018.

Vigne and Martin's fieldwork in Myanmar and its publication, supported by The Elephant Crisis Fund, run by Save the Elephants and the Wildlife Conservation Network, builds on the authors' previous work there, including Martin's research from 1995 on. It details indisputable evidence of a grim and growing situation: Myanmar's ominous illegal ivory trade with China.

Myanmar, formerly Burma, shares borders with Bangladesh, India, Laos, Thailand and China. After its independence from Britain in 1948, it was later shaped by its powerful military, which ran the country until the ruling junta was dissolved in 2011. Its military remains politically influential. Beset by ethnic strife (notably the persecution of the Muslim Rohingya) and inequality of wealth, the country ranks 145th in development, according to the 2019 UN Human Development Index.

Myanmar is a signatory to CITES, which means



it accepts that international trade in Asian and African elephant ivory is banned. However, from the report this looks like lipservice. Myanmar has long permitted trade in government-owned ivory and supported its traditional carving industry, as Daniel Stiles reported on in 2004 for TRAFFIC. Although the government began taking stricter measures on carving workshops after joining CITES, it remains possible to obtain legal raw ivory (trading at nearly USD 1,000/kg) from captive elephants. Myanmar has the world's largest population (over 5,000), largely

used for logging. The raw ivory they produce includes tusk tips that are cut off, as well as whole tusks from dead animals.

And wild elephants? Myanmar's shrinking forests harbor a diverse range of wildlife, including some 2,000 elephants. Trade in tusks from wild elephants is illegal, but such ivory can be slipped into its less-than-transparent domestic legal ivory market.

Vigne and Martin write that Myanmar "has been extremely lax in complying" with the provision of elephant product seizure data to ETIS (Elephant Trade Information System) as required by CITES. In 2017 the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation produced an action plan to protect its own remaining elephants, but implementation is

lacking. “While wildlife laws are often carefully updated,” authors report, enforcement is often missing, rendering them “meaningless.”

It’s a blunt assessment. “In the absence of adequate legislation,” they conclude, the “illegal cross-border trade in raw and worked ivory from Asian and African elephants is continuing largely unabated.”

Vigne and Martin’s survey, primarily conducted in late 2017, found over 14,000 ivory items on sale in 51 shops in five towns and cities they visited, including Yangon, Mandalay, Tachileik, Bagan, and Mong La. They spoke with traders and vendors (who often spoke freely), and found that what was on display was for the most part recently produced smaller items—figurines, name seals, combs, bangles and trinkets.

Larger pieces that traditional Myanmar carvers produce to show their skill, such as the elaborately carved tusks called “elephant bridges” showing marching herds dwindling in size as the tusk tapers off (an unfortunate image, to be sure), have fallen out of favor. They no longer appeal to Chinese customers, who currently buy roughly 90% of the worked ivory sold. Chinese tourists, it turns out, are primarily interested in small ivory items that are easy to squirrel away in their luggage on their return home.

China now largely shapes Myanmar’s ivory trade. The two countries share “a very long (about 2,170 km) and porous border,” with border cities close to China like Mong La, described in the report as “a notorious hotspot for open trade in endangered species and their products, including ivory.”

Mong La, which became a Chinese enclave after being granted autonomy in 1989, boasts “24-hour casinos, brothels, exotic foods, and shopping for wildlife delicacies,” saw a 63% increase in illegal ivory trade in three years from 2014 to 2017, a clear signal that there was “considerable cross-border smuggling both to and from China.”

The authors found that over a third of the ivory items seen in Mong La’s shops “appeared to be from African elephants.” According to vendors, ivory items openly offered were mainly produced by “Chinese carvers in China and Mong La, possibly using a combination of ivory from Myanmar elephants and from Africa.” In fact,

many of the objects on sale are mass-produced and come pre-carved from “Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, where large illegal shipments of ivory have arrived from Africa in recent years.”

Chinese vendors and Chinese customers openly buy and sell illegal worked ivory there with impunity. “The lack of law enforcement on both sides in this remote forested and mountainous area” enables “buyers of ivory items in Mong La to transport them in bulk into China. There is no need for them to worry about being caught breaking the law.” It appears that conservationists who hoped the shutting down of China’s legal domestic ivory market by the end of 2017 would shrink the country’s appetite for elephant teeth were overly optimistic.

The authors ask what will happen with “all the ivory items previously on display in licensed shops in China.” Their answer is obvious: “One option for traders would be to sell their stocks illegally in border markets such as Mong La, where there is an open market for sale of illegal worked ivory.”

Given the situation along the Chinese border, Vigne and Martin argue that it’s “not the local Myanmar ivory carvers with their small legal domestic ivory industry who are cause for concern, rather those involved in smuggling increasing amounts of mainly African ivory from Myanmar to China.” Vigne and Martin note that at the 16th Conference of the Parties of CITES in 2013, Myanmar was not included in the list of countries “of concern” for their involvement with the illegal ivory trade. This omission, they point out, is “probably because the illegal trade in worked African ivory in Mong La continues to operate largely under the radar.”

Why is so little attention given to this? “The Myanmar government,” the authors concede, “has a myriad of other major problems to tackle, including curbing human rights abuses, stopping civil insurrections and securing peace, and rectifying the impact of decades of economic mismanagement. For the government, the illegal wildlife trade pales into insignificance in comparison. There has simply been a lack of political will to curb the growing illegal trade in ivory and other wildlife products from local and global sources through Myanmar.”

For example, despite the urging of local NGOs, there’s little evidence of demand reduction campaign efforts—nothing like the posters put up in the markets and airports of Thailand that urge saving elephants by not buying ivory.

Still, the country hasn't totally ignored the illegal wildlife trade. Government authorities burned 1.4 tons of seized tusks, confiscated horns, tiger bones, bear skins and the like, in Naypyitaw, the capital, on 4 October 2018—just two days after this report was published. A second sizable bonfire of seized wildlife parts, including ivory, was organized by the Ministry in March, 2019. Myanmar's Natural Resources Ministry announced that the items were destroyed to raise public awareness about the illegal wildlife trade and increased poaching.

What effect these demonstrations will have remains to be seen. In the meantime, Vigne and Martin's sobering wrap-up will stand:

“Until there is more effective law enforcement against international trade, notably in the border areas, leading to the successful prosecution and prevention of wildlife crime kingpins, the benefits for traffickers will continue to outweigh risks of involvement in this illegal trade, and the outlook for many wild elephants in Asia and Africa will remain bleak.”

<https://www.savetheelephants.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Myanmar-Ivory-Report-2018-13MB.pdf>

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