BOOK REVIEW

The Ivory Dynasty: A report on the soaring demand for elephant and mammoth ivory in southern China, by Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne*,* London, Elephant Family, The Aspinall Foundation and Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, 2011, 20 pages

Making a Killing: A 2011 Survey of Ivory Markets in China, by Grace G. Gabriel, Ning Hua and Juan Wang, Yarmouth Port, MA, USA, International Fund for Animal Welfare, 2012, 21 pages

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I have been patiently waiting 10 years for someone to carry out an ivory trade survey in China to see what has been happening there since I surveyed three key Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) in 2002 (Martin and Stiles 2003; Stiles and Martin 2003). It is odd that it took so long, considering that China imports, processes, consumes and exports more new ivory than any country on Earth—a good bit of it in contravention of CITES regulations.

In fairly quick succession, Martin and Vigne published the results of their early 2011 survey in Guangzhou and Fuzhou in southern China, and Gabriel et al. published the results of their 2011 survey in Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Putian, Shanghai and Beijing.

The first thing that strikes the reader when going through the two reports is the difference in style and content. Martin and Vigne's report is balanced, devoid of rhetoric and full of quantitative data. Their primary objective is to provide to interested parties solid information on the status and trends of various aspects of the ivory industry in southern China. They present the number of retail outlets selling ivory, the numbers and types of items seen, number of carvers and prices of raw and worked ivory, broken down into useful categories. In addition, they provide an assessment of how well ivory dealers are observing recent regulations that aim to prevent the use of illegal raw ivory smuggled into China deriving from poached elephants. They also present useful information on elephant ivory alternatives, such as mammoth ivory and bone.

The IFAW report is polemical, blames the 2008 ivory sales in southern Africa sanctioned by CITES for an upsurge in demand in China, and is almost devoid of quantitative data, even though the report states that their anonymous investigators collected data similar to that of Martin and Vigne. If they collected the data, why didn't they publish them? The primary purpose of their report apparently is to lobby against future international regulated raw ivory sales, leaving the status quo of unregulated ivory.

The ivory price data IFAW does present is impossible to evaluate because, unlike Martin and Vigne, they do not specify what type of ivory they are referring to, where the prices were collected or whether they were for legal, government-owned tusks or private, illegal tusks. Even the price table they present has problems. They state that raw ivory prices had risen 50% in 2011 from CNY 10,000 to CNY 15,000/kg, the latter amount they say being equivalent to US dollar 1,322/kg. The US dollar equalled an average approximately CNY 6.4 in 2011, which would make CNY 15,000 equal to USD 2,344/kg. How did they arrive at USD 1,322/kg? The highest price Martin and Vigne found was USD 900/kg for larger tusks, a considerable discrepancy. There were other problems with the IFAW price data.

Martin and Vigne visited 119 retail ivory outlets and six ivory factories in Guangzhou and Fuzhou, while IFAW, with more than double the number of investigators, visited only 42 outlets and two factories in those cities (including Putian, near Fuzhou).

The two reports present similar information concerning the degree of observance by retail outlets and factories of ivory control regulations, though IFAW was more complete and detailed in this area of concern. IFAW reported that 101 of the 158 ivory facilities that they visited in the five cities were unlicensed by the government, therefore illegal, with Beijing alone having 88. Martin and Vigne did not explicitly report on this concern but did state that only 25 retail outlets had been registered by 2010 in all of Guangdong and Fujian provinces, therefore implying that most of the 119 outlets they visited were unlicensed. Both reports described numerous instances of problems with compulsory ID cards, which are supposed to accompany most ivory items. The misuse of ID cards can allow th illegal ivory to pose as legal ivory—a valid point raised by both reports and an issue that certainly needs attention, along with the proliferation of illegal ivory factories and outlets, which IFAW states is a result of the 2008 CITES-authorized ivory sale from southern Africa to China and Japan. The two reports also noted that the mixing of elephant and mammoth ivories in sales displays posed a problem in recognizing legal ivory for both consumers and law enforcement.

IFAW provided useful information about ivory sold over Chinese Internet websites, which is, to the credit of China, illegal. They monitored 13 websites that sell antiques, art and consumer goods. They found 17,847 ivory items for sale on 12 of the websites in only one week, indicating that the Internet is indeed a serious problem that is difficult to control in terms of illegal wildlife trade. When the government started cracking down, website sellers began using code words to indicate that they were selling ivory without using the word itself.

The two reports differed substantially in their treatment of rising demand for ivory in China. Martin and Vigne concluded that demand for elephant and mammoth ivory had risen since Martin's 2004 survey of Guangzhou, based simply on the greatly increased number of items seen for sale. They explained increased ivory demand in Guangzhou as due to greater wealth and increased demand for luxury items in general. They noted that ivory demand had dropped in less wealthy Fuzhou since 2004, as it had in Japan. In Japan, ivory has fallen out of fashion and the recession has pushed down demand for ivory.

IFAW stated: 'The sale approved by CITES in 2008 spurred production and trade of ivory products in China and stimulated the demand for ivory from a growing class of wealthy consumers that covets ivory products as collectables and investment vehicles.' They provide no evidence for their assertion or that the ivory-buying public was even aware of the 2008 sales. In 2007 IFAW sponsored a Public Opinion Poll on Elephant and Ivory Trade. A heated anti-trade campaign was going on at the time. Did they ask the Chinese public if they knew of the impending sales? If they did, the results were not presented in this report. They did report that the poll showed that seven out of ten Chinese do not know that ivory comes from dead elephants. Yet we are to believe that they knew about the sales and from this knowledge were stimulated to go out and buy ivory.

The IFAW report also stated: 'The intention of the stockpile sale was to flood the market with legal ivory in order to reduce its price. ... The influx of legal ivory into the market in China has spurred demand, pushed up prices and created a gray market...' I know of no one who thought that this one-off sale would 'flood the market' or lower prices. Only a sustained, regulated sales regime could do that. The Chinese government has limited ivory for processing to 5 tonnes annually, about 120–130 kg a year for licensed factories. The government has also raised the price of the ivory it sells from the southern African auctions to more than five times what they paid for it. I would hardly call that flooding, and IFAW elsewhere in its report recognizes this:

'The factory owner in Fujian complained that the 120 kg government ration would only last two months in his factory. To generate enough profit to keep the factory in operation year-round, the owner insisted that it had to carve smuggled ivory.' Martin and Vigne reported similar instances. This clearly indicates that the lack of legal ivory is spurring elephant poaching to provide supply.

The IFAW report provides abundant information about the desire for worked ivory by China's affluent class as a traditional prestige item and as a 'white gold' investment superior to fickle stocks and real estate. These factors alone are enough to explain the rising demand for ivory in wealthy parts of China. The figures on 2008 sales are not necessary, unless there is an ulterior motive. Why didn't the sales have the same effect in Fuzhou or Japan? Or in Thailand or Viet Nam, where I found that ivory markets had contracted since 2001 (Stiles 2008, 2009)? The truth is that the sales had little or no effect and that even if the two one-off sales (one also in 1999) had not occurred, exactly the same demand pattern would be observed today.

I found one aspect of the IFAW report inexplicable. It stated: 'Elephant range States have to close domestic ivory markets and improve enforcement to control elephant poaching.' Yet for China, where most of the ivory consumption is, IFAW does not call for closing the domestic market, only for improved control procedures. Why do the authors think it is fair for Africa to lose the economic benefit from its ivory but that China can continue to profit from it?

The IFAW report did have useful information about factors affecting ivory demand, problems in the ivory control system in China's and Internet sales, but if the reader wishes to have objective, reliable ivory market status and trend data, I would recommend the Martin and Vigne report. If the reader wishes an anti-ivory sales propaganda tract, I recommend the IFAW report.

How long will I have to wait now to see a proper ivory market study of Beijing and Shanghai?

References

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