

The decline in carving African and Asian elephant tusks in Nepal and the decrease in ivory items for retail sale in Kathmandu

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Abstract

The Nepal ivory industry has collapsed since early 2001, when the last survey was conducted. The few remaining craftsmen have stopped carving ivory. The number of shops selling ivory items has fallen from 57 in February 2001 to 19 in December 2012. During this period ivory items on display for sale in Kathmandu dropped from 1,546 to 208. Smuggled raw ivory from Africa and Asia used to come into Nepal via India, but both the India and the Nepal governments have improved their border controls. Wildlife law enforcement in Nepal has strengthened considerably since 2010 with the establishment of government committees and bureaus dealing with wildlife crime all over the country. All ivory is illegal to sell or to display in shops, and vendors are now reluctant to sell new ivory items and are trying to offload their last remaining ivory objects. Turnover is slow as customer demand has fallen, partly as Nepalese now prefer to buy gold items and also because foreign tourists (the main buyers) show little interest in buying ivory as the selection is poor and there is a greater risk entailed in smuggling worked ivory out of the country. Thus Nepal is not a threat to Africa's or Asia's elephants.

Résumé

L'industrie de l'ivoire du Népal s'est effondrée depuis le début de 2001, lorsque la dernière étude a été réalisée. Les quelques artisans restants ont cessé de sculpter l'ivoire. Le nombre de magasins vendant des articles en ivoire a chuté de 57 en février 2001 à 19 en décembre 2012. Pendant cette période, les objets en ivoire exposés pour la vente à Katmandou ont chuté de 1546 à 208. La contrebande de l'ivoire brut d'Afrique et d'Asie venait d'habitude au Népal via l'Inde, mais les gouvernements du Népal et de l'Inde ont amélioré leurs contrôles aux frontières. L'application de la loi de la faune au Népal s'est considérablement renforcée depuis 2010 avec la création des comités et bureaux gouvernementaux traitant de la criminalité de la faune dans tout le pays. Toute vente ou exposition de l'ivoire dans les magasins est illégale, et les vendeurs sont maintenant réticents à vendre des articles en ivoire et essaient de se débarrasser de leurs derniers objets d'ivoire restants. La rotation est lente car la demande des clients a diminué. D'abord, les Népalais préfèrent maintenant acheter des objets en or et aussi les touristes étrangers (les principaux acheteurs) montrent peu d'intérêt pour l'achat d'ivoire dont la sélection est limitée et il y a un risque de transporter l'ivoire travaillé à l'extérieur du pays. Ainsi Népal n'est pas une menace pour les éléphants d'Afrique ou d'Asie.

Introduction

Nepal has never been a major consumer of ivory compared with India, China and Japan for a variety of reasons, including the country's small population, the past government's policy of isolation, and general poverty of its people. Ivory has, nevertheless, been crafted in Nepal for hundreds of years, for the tiny elite made up of the royal family, the Rana dynasty (who ruled Nepal from 1846 to 1951), and a few wealthy businessmen. As there were no detailed

studies of Nepal's ivory craftsmen until 1982 and no retail ivory markets surveyed until 1998 (Martin 1998), statistics for early years are lacking. However, with the opening up of the country to international tourism in the 1960s and the subsequent increase in the number of souvenir and antique shops, especially in Kathmandu, ivory items became available to foreigners. In the early 1960s four main families were carving ivory in the Kathmandu Valley, the centre for ivory craftsmen in Nepal. In 1982 eight members of the main family of ivory craftsmen in the country

were carving ivory items. With the 1990 CITES ban prohibiting international trade in elephant ivory, the number of ivory craftsmen in Nepal declined sharply (Martin 1998). By 2001 the number of ivory artisans in the remaining carving family was only three. The number of retail outlets offering ivory in Kathmandu declined from 71 in 1998 to 57 in 2001 (Martin and Stiles 2002).

Methodology

Fieldwork for this study in Nepal took place in December 2012. We (Esmond and Chryssee Martin) surveyed most of the souvenir, jewellery and antique shops in Kathmandu to determine which ones had ivory items for sale, the types of items, where they had been made and the prices. Vendors were interviewed for information on their ivory business. One visit was made to Patan (an adjoining city a few kilometres east of Kathmandu, noted for its skilled craftsmen) to interview the last ivory-carving family. Government personnel, especially from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and the Forestry Department, were interviewed on the status of Nepal's elephants and trade in their products. We also talked with authorities on the tourist industry and with non-government organizations (NGOs) about elephant conservation.

Legislation and enforcement in Nepal

The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1973 prohibits the sale and display for commercial purposes of all elephant ivory without a special permit, none of which have been issued. Thus, all ivory items seen for sale in Kathmandu's retail outlets were illegal. In 1975 Nepal acceded to CITES, which from 1990 prohibited commercial imports and exports of all elephant ivory, including souvenirs.

There has been little elephant poaching for tusks in Nepal because there are few wild elephants in the country, somewhere between 109 and 142 in 2008 (Pradhan et al. 2011). They are generally in remote areas and difficult to find, penalties for killing them are severe, and other sources for raw ivory, such as illegal imports of African and Asian tusks from India, have been easier to access. There are also 215 captive Asian elephants in Nepal of which the government owns 94 (Dhakal et al. 2012), but these are well

guarded. During the financial years from 2009/10 to 2010/11 the DNPWC did not report a single elephant in Nepal poached for its tusks (DNPWC 2010, 2011). Wild elephants that approach farmland, however, are occasionally killed by villagers in retaliatory human–elephant conflict, a problem that is becoming more serious in the country (Bajimaya 2012).

Relatively little ivory (raw or worked) has been smuggled into Nepal in the last few years. Government statistics show that few seizures of any worked ivory are made by the Nepali authorities coming in or out of the country. Statistics from the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) of CITES have also recorded few seizures of ivory in Nepal. From 1989 to 2010 the number of ivory seizures from Nepal, according to the ETIS figures, was only seven for the entire 22-year period (CITES 2011). The Forest Department, which has the authority to inspect retail outlets selling ivory, rarely inspects the souvenir shops in Kathmandu. In the financial years of 2009/10 and 2010/11 not a single elephant product was seized by the District Forest Office (DFO) in Kathmandu, but in 2011/12 six people were arrested for possessing 650 elephant tail hairs, which were seized, and five people were arrested for possessing an elephant tusk and a bone from an unidentified animal, which was also seized (unpublished statistics, DFO, Kathmandu). Occasionally, the police do arrest people with illegal ivory. For instance, in January 2013 the police impounded a car and arrested the driver, who was in possession of seven strings of ivory beads in Boudha, a few kilometres northeast of central Kathmandu (*The Himalaya Times* 2013).

Results

Sources of tusks, prices and craftsmen in the Kathmandu Valley

In 2003 or 2004, the last member of the main ivory-carving family in Nepal stopped carving new ivory items at his home in Patan, although he continued to carry out repairs to ivory objects. He told us he gave up using ivory, but not other animal products, because raw ivory was difficult to obtain and expensive, and the sale of ivory objects was illegal. Moreover, his health was failing. It is unlikely that there are other craftsmen in Nepal carving ivory. Souvenir vendors told us that no new items were being made out of ivory in Nepal.

Before retiring, the Patan carver had been carving raw ivory into small boxes, prayer wheels, dice, religious figures and *phurpas* (traditional magic darts). He was getting raw ivory from African and Asian tusks imported from India, and African elephant tusk trophies from the Rana family in Nepal that they had obtained from sport hunting in Africa, tusks from wild elephants in Nepal dying of natural causes, and tusk tips cut off domesticated elephants in Nepal. He claimed he could still obtain raw ivory if he wanted, but it was difficult to get as few people are willing to sell it. He said the wholesale price in late 2012 was at least 40,000 Nepal rupees (NPR) per kilogram or USD 460 per kilogram sold in small pieces.

This 79-year-old man has two sons, one 57 and the other 55 years old, who said they stopped ivory carving at the same time as their father, carving instead wood and occasionally bones from domestic water buffaloes and deer antlers. They will sometimes repair old ivory items. A piece of deer antler about 10 cm long costs about NPR 1,000 (USD 11); water buffalo bones are usually free or NPR 2–4 (USD 0.2–0.5) for a similar-sized piece. They make from these antlers and bones prayer wheels, ear picks, Hindu gods, dice, small boxes and *phurpas*. However, they spend most of their time making wooden window frames. Their workshops are at their homes. They produce many of their items for shopkeepers in Kathmandu, taking advanced orders. The two sons are not training their children to be carvers as they do not see a future in the profession any more.

Retail outlets and prices for worked ivory in Kathmandu

We counted a total of 208 ivory items in 18 souvenir and antique shops and one jewellery shop (Table 1), 11 of which were in luxury hotels or attached shopping arcades, 4 in the area of Durbar Marg (near the Royal Palace) and 4 scattered elsewhere. We counted only items on open view, in keeping with other ivory



These ivory figurines and two ivory chess pieces were made in Nepal about 35 years ago. The 4-cm chess pieces were selling for USD 500 each in December 2012.

surveys in various countries conducted in recent years by Esmond and Chryssee Martin, Dan Stiles and Lucy Vigne. We asked vendors if they had other ivory items stored away and only one said he had a few old pieces. Numbers of items per shop ranged from 1 to 38. Of 180 identifiable objects, there were 69 figurines, 62 items of jewellery, 21 netsukes, 12 paintings and a variety of other items (see Table 2). Of 159 items where the country in which they had been made could be identified, 85 had been crafted in Nepal, mainly charms and figurines, and 42 in China, mainly figurines and netsukes. There were 13 Japanese figurines and netsukes that one vendor had brought back from Japan many years ago, 12 Indian items (mainly paintings on ivory slices), and 7 old Tibetan bangles (Table 2). Almost all the items were fairly old, crafted more than 15 years ago, according to the vendors. Only one shop vendor admitted to selling new ivory items—two netsukes that had been carved in China. Most of the items would have originated

Table 1. Number of shops and ivory items seen for retail sale in Kathmandu in 1998, 2001 and 2012

Year	Shops (no.)	Items (no.)
1998	71	1,454
2001	57	1,546
2012	19	208

from African ivory, especially those from China, India and Japan, and a large number from Nepal.

The souvenir and antique shops are patronized mostly by foreign tourists. The main buyers of ivory items were Chinese, then Europeans and a few Japanese. Retail prices for similar types of ivory objects vary considerably based on shop location (luxury hotel shops being the most expensive), country of origin (Japanese items being generally more expensive), quality of workmanship, size, age (antiques being more expensive), and bargaining

ability of the customers. The most expensive item was a 20-cm female goddess intricately carved in Nepal in the 1970s for sale in a luxury hotel shop, and the cheapest were thin rings (Table 3). The most numerous items for sale (28%) were religious and human figurines (see Table 4).

Ivory look-alike materials

No mammoth ivory items were on display for sale in Kathmandu. This material is common in China and

Table 2. Number of ivory items crafted in various countries for sale in Kathmandu in December 2012

Item	China	India	Japan	Nepal	Tibet	Country unknown	Unidentified	Totals
<i>Jewellery</i>								
Bangle	3	2	—	8	7	1	—	21
Charm	—	—	—	25	—	—	—	25
Necklace	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Pendant	—	—	—	4	—	—	—	4
Ring	—	—	—	11	—	—	—	11
<i>Figurines</i>								
Human/ religious figurine	19	—	4	24	—	3	—	50
Animal figurine	4	—	4	4	—	7	—	19
<i>Tusks</i>								
Bridge	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
<i>Miscellaneous</i>								
Box	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Chess piece	—	—	—	—	—	5	—	5
Cigarette holder	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	3
Crucifix	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Netsuke	12	—	5	1	—	3	—	21
Painting	—	10	—	2	—	—	—	12
<i>Parsa game stick set</i>								
Pen holder	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
<i>phurpa</i> dart	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Walking stick handle	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Window frame	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Unidentified	—	—	—	—	—	—	28	28
Totals	42	12	13	85	7	21	28	208

Table 3. Retail prices for ivory items in Kathmandu in December 2012

Item	Size (cm)	Range (USD)	Average (USD)
<i>Jewellery</i>			
Bangle	0.5–1.5	52–316	244
Charm	1–2.5	15–30	23
Ring (plain)	0.3	12–15	14
<i>Figurines</i>			
Human/religious	5–9	103–1,264	458
	10–15	40–2,874	960
	16–20	210–5,747	2,115
Animal	4–6	138–3,061	1,185
<i>Miscellaneous</i>			
Netsuke	4–6	138–977	418
Painting	8 x 15	—	280
	8 x 23	—	650

USD 1 = Nepalese rupees (NPR) 87

Table 4. Ivory items for retail sale in Kathmandu in December 2012

Item	Percentage of total
Human figurines/religious	28
Charms	14
Bangles	12
Netsukes	12
Animal figurines	11
Paintings	7
Rings	6
Chess pieces	3
Pendants	2
Miscellaneous	5

Hong Kong as a substitute for elephant ivory but is not frequently seen elsewhere in Asia. One man tried to sell us an elephant ivory horse with rider, pretending it was mammoth ivory, as unlike elephant ivory, mammoth ivory is legal. We saw many items made of bone, resin and plastic, which sometimes looked quite like ivory, but the vendors rarely tried to sell these as ivory.

Vendors’ views on the future of sales of ivory items in Nepal

Retail shop owners were pessimistic about the future of the ivory business in Nepal. Many of the souvenir shops that used to sell ivory items have recently been demolished for road expansion and the new shops have higher rents, putting vendors off from selling ivory items as their turnover is slow—because of the decline in demand, they said. Many vendors wanted to sell off their ivory items as soon as possible and not restock their shops with any more ivory. Almost all the vendors knew that the sale and the export of ivory items, including older ones, were illegal. Most salesmen pretended that their ivory objects were old or antiques, saying they did not require government documentation, which is of course not true. Furthermore, some

of the vendors suggested to their customers various ways of how to send their ivory items abroad: small items should be hand carried, while large pieces could be sent in the regular post out of Nepal. In general, although vendors say officials rarely inspect the shops for ivory, restrictions and complications trying to sell ivory to reluctant customers is putting vendors off from doing so, and they see little future in ivory sales in Kathmandu.

Discussion

Since the last retail ivory survey was conducted in Kathmandu in 2001 (Martin and Stiles 2002), there has been a sharp decrease in the number of shops selling ivory items, from 57 to 19. The number of ivory items seen for retail sale has also declined sharply during this period (Martin and Stiles 2002), from 1,546 to only 208. There are several reasons why. First, the last Nepalese carvers stopped crafting ivory items around 10 years ago, and no new carvers have taken up the profession as they see no future in it. This is largely because it has become more difficult to obtain elephant tusks because the Indian government tightened its controls on illegal exports of African and Asian ivory, and the wholesale price for good-quality tusks steadily rose from USD 166–207/kg in 2001 to at least USD



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This old master carver no longer uses ivory but still carves water buffalo bone figurines part time. Inset: This is his unfinished figurine of a goddess.

460/kg for tiny pieces in 2012, giving less incentive to carvers to buy them.

The domestic demand for ivory items has dropped partly because the Nepalese now prefer to buy gold jewellery. Foreign visitors are the main ivory buyers, but despite a significant rise in their numbers, from 361,237 in 2001 to 736,215 in 2011 (Nepal 2012), they are buying less ivory because there is now a more limited choice of items and many of the foreign visitors cannot afford luxury ivory items. Vendors said sales of souvenirs in general have declined, and according to government statistics the average tourist spent only USD 38 a day in 2011, down from a peak of USD 73 in 2008 (Nepal 2012). Numbers of richer tourists have declined proportionately, compared with growing numbers of poorer Indian and Sri Lankan tourists visiting the birthplace of Buddha (Lisa Choegyal, tourist expert, pers. comm., December 2012). During this 11-year period the number of Chinese visitors increased from 8,738 to 61,917. The Chinese in Nepal,

however, are nearly all tourists, unlike those in Africa, who are mostly contract workers and who are the main buyers of new ivory. Thus, unlike in Africa, there are no chopsticks and name seals offered for sale in Kathmandu, and most Chinese are not interested in the other available items.

A significant factor that has been reducing ivory demand even further is that the Nepal government has recently established several new committees to combat wildlife crime. These include the National Wildlife Crime Control Coordination Committee, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau Central Level and the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau District Level; the last has 19 such bureaus in various parts of Nepal. These committees have successfully increased law-enforcement efforts to reduce wildlife crimes. The government has arrested a growing number of people dealing in wildlife products during the last three years and has imposed severe sentences on them (Acharya and Kandel 2012; Martin et al. 2013). These actions have consequently discouraged shop owners from illegally importing, selling and exporting ivory objects (Acharya and Kandel 2012; Martin et al. 2013). A further reason for the decline in ivory sales is that the Nepal media have become more active in exposing wildlife criminals; thus many vendors no longer want to take the risk of selling ivory in fear of being scathingly publicized.

Conclusion

The approximate 125 wild and the 215 trained elephants in Nepal are not at risk of being killed for their ivory. Raw elephant tusks from both Africa and Asia have become more difficult to smuggle into the country, as has worked ivory from other Asian countries; increasing prices have been another deterrent against bringing ivory items from other countries. Sales of raw and worked ivory, both old and new, are illegal and have declined sharply in Nepal since 2001. Nepal's last family of ivory artisans based in the Kathmandu Valley, after many generations of carving ivory, are no longer producing new ivory items; no new artisans are taking up the profession, due to lack of demand for worked ivory in Nepal.

Since 2001 the retail sale of ivory items in Nepal has seen perhaps the most drastic recent decline in Asia. Vendors said turnover of worked ivory in their shops is very slow. Only 208 ivory objects

were counted on display in December 2012, down by over 85% compared with 12 years ago. Vendors are not replenishing their stocks because Nepalese and foreign customers hardly ever buy the few ivory items still available. The government's increased and successful efforts to reduce wildlife crime, notably the illegal trade in ivory, are working. Thus, with the collapse of the Nepal ivory trade, elephants in Africa and Asia are not likely to be poached to meet any demand in Nepal.

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