

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Polishing off the ivory trade: surveys of Thailand's ivory market*

Naomi Doak, 2014

TRAFFIC International, Cambridge, UK

A current survey of Thailand's ivory market is certainly needed, because Thailand has what is probably the second largest illegal ivory market in the world after China, and the country has been under intense scrutiny and criticism by CITES. The 65<sup>th</sup> CITES Standing Committee meeting held in July 2014 gave Thailand until 30 September 2014 to submit a revised National Ivory Action Plan, the original being deemed deficient, which should include a list of actions to be achieved by 31 March 2015 to regulate domestic ivory trade. It also requested that a progress report on these actions should be submitted by 15 January 2015. Failing this, Thailand could face a CITES trade suspension, which would be catastrophic for the country's economy.

It is surprising, therefore, that TRAFFIC published a report that is so deficient in so many respects. First, the title is misleading. The report only concerns Bangkok. The important ivory manufacturing and worked ivory supply centres in central Thailand were not visited, nor were Chiang Mai and Mae Sai in the north, traditionally important ivory selling centres because of their high tourism profile.

Previous published reports on Thailand's ivory market (Martin and Stiles 2002; Stiles 2004; Stiles 2009) included crucial raw and worked ivory price data, counts and proportions of the different worked ivory types, numbers of ivory workshops and craftsmen, sources of raw ivory, and nationalities of the principal buyers. None of these scale and trend indicator variables were collected, which limits the value of the TRAFFIC report substantially.

TRAFFIC explained to me that this report was not intended to be a comprehensive study covering most aspects of the ivory industry in Thailand, but rather,

'It was our initial intention to assess ivory turnover in key locations in Bangkok, thus the reason for repeated monthly surveys in key markets' (TRAFFIC, in litt., August 2014). In addition, TRAFFIC explained that, '...the Thai government has articulated policy commitments to CITES concerning the future of ivory trade in their country and our report was focused upon examining that commitment since it was made at the last Conference of the Parties in terms of retail availability of ivory in Bangkok, which we feel is representative of general ivory trade and market patterns across the country.' None of the objectives communicated to me by TRAFFIC are contained in the report itself, but with TRAFFIC's clarification my apparently misplaced criticisms above should be disregarded.

The data collected were the number of outlets selling ivory, the number of pieces displayed, and the number of bangles counted in 12 survey periods between January 2013 and May 2014. The report stated that data on all carving types were collected, but they were not presented in the report.

The data analysis concluded that there was a significant overall increase in the number of outlets selling ivory and the number of ivory items for sale over the course of the 17-month survey period.

Table 1, which according to the heading presents the 'Number of surveyed Bangkok retail outlets and surveyed retail outlets selling ivory' is, according to my communications with TRAFFIC, incorrect. The table does not include the hundreds of outlets that actually were visited. There is also an incorrect statement in the Methods section: 'Initial surveys focused on 119 shops from ten general locations around Bangkok identified in previous work...' In fact, in the first survey period (January 2013) only 71 of these 119 shops could be found. The table shows that 61 ivory outlets were found in total, but they were a combination of outlets on record as having ivory from previous surveys

made between 2004 and 2008 (the 71 in black in the table), and new outlets found during the January 2013 survey (i.e., the 61 in red in the table includes both). It cannot be ascertained from the report how many of the 119 were ever found, because new outlets found in previous surveys were added to the 'Outlets with ivory' category in each subsequent survey, if I understood TRAFFIC's explanation correctly.

Table 1 gives the impression, if read and analyzed according to what is stated in the report, that the increase in number of ivory outlets and pieces is largely a function of finding more of the previously known outlets containing ivory. TRAFFIC assures that this is not the case, and that sampling coverage remained consistent over the course of the entire survey period.

The report concludes that the increase in ivory outlets and pieces 'is strongly indicative of a growing market'. It is, in fact, an unprecedented growth never seen before in any repeated ivory survey reports on record. In less than a year and a half, the ivory market grew from over 5,700 pieces to over 13,200 pieces. January 2013 must have represented a serious slump in market activity for some reason, which is not explained in the report. Martin and Stiles (2002) reported 38,510 ivory pieces in Bangkok in 2001 and Stiles (2009) found over 12,500 items in 2006/7. The trend was downwards until January 2013, with less than half the number of ivory pieces and only 40% of the outlets seen six years earlier. Suddenly, in February 2013 the market jumped in scale and continued its upward trend in growth to May 2014.

No explanation is given in the report for this extraordinary growth over a relatively short period. Oddly, the Market Research: Results section concludes, 'Results from the latest surveys were similar to those from earlier work (Martin and Stiles in 2001, and Stiles in 2006–2007 and 2008), with 167 individual locations identified in total but with an increase in the number of locations across the duration of the surveys.' The massive growth rate is not similar to results found by Martin and Stiles.

An important finding was that there are many more ivory outlets in Bangkok than the 39 that are registered with the government, as the law requires. The number of outlets found selling ivory in any one survey varied from 61 to 120, up to three times the legal number.

In the Discussion, there is no clear comparison of the current data with the same variables seen in previous surveys. How does 2013–2014 compare with 2007–2008 (Stiles 2009)? A table would have been useful.

Other deficiencies: a number of source citations are given in the report, but there is no References section. A few acronyms are presented, but there is no acronyms section to decipher them (what is WARPA?). TRAFFIC admitted that these were oversights, a result of efforts to complete the report in time for release at the CITES 65<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee meeting.

Overall, this is a disappointing report. However, even with the methodological problems, the TRAFFIC survey of Bangkok's ivory market demonstrated that Thailand is not complying with CITES resolutions or living up to commitments it has made to control its domestic ivory market. Thailand still faces a CITES trade sanction if it does not address the unregulated ivory market, and calls for domestic ivory trade in the country to be closed entirely look increasingly justified.

## References

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