

Vietnam's Illegal Ivory Trade threatens Africa's Elephants

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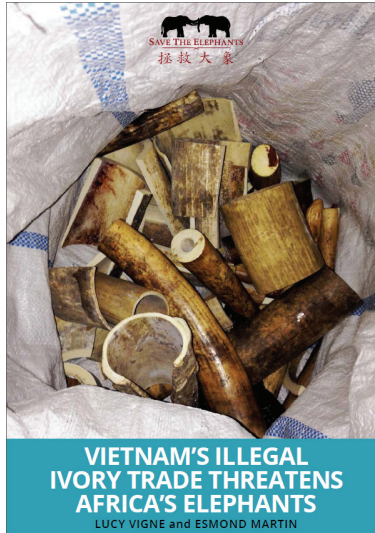
Martin and Vigne have been collaborative researchers for the best part of three decades, investigating the global ivory and rhino horn trade.

Amid concerns that Vietnam was a “significant transit country for ivory”, Vigne and Martin carried out their latest survey of Vietnam’s ivory market in November/December 2015, twenty-five years after Martin first visited the country in 1990; and again in 2008.

Their survey reveals shockingly that while markets are being discouraged in China—a complete ban comes into effect in December 2017—and loopholes closed, the Chinese are openly buying kilos of ivory from neighbouring Vietnam. Youyi Guan is the main exit point, although the 700 km border shared between China and Vietnam is completely porous. Intelligence is insufficient and law enforcement inadequate at all the Customs posts on both sides of the border, incentivising Chinese to return home “laden” with ivory items.

In fact Vigne and Martin expose in their report that “Vietnam’s illegal ivory trade is one of the largest in the world”. They counted 16,099 ivory items in 242 open outlets across Vietnam in 2015, up from 2,444 in 2008, therefore 6.6 times higher. Furthermore, “the number of large seizures of ivory going to Vietnam increased considerably in 2015—further evidence that Vietnam [is] a hub for ivory”.

Findings in the report reveal that much of the trade is done in small pieces, even shavings are ground into powder for traditional medicine, making it “easy to carry for tourists”. Many of the ivory pieces being carved are designed with the Chinese consumer in mind, who prefer Buddha statuettes and floral designs, and intricately carved long



pendants. In 1991 the Chinese elite resumed buying ivory in Vietnam, and one vendor stated that his main customers were “Taiwanese and ambassadors” (See colour plates: page viii).

Although Vietnam did not become a member of CITES until 1994, an ivory trade ban was put in place in 1992, and legal internal trade closed the same year. However confusingly, “one provision allowed internal trade in ivory obtained before the government’s legislation of 1992, that banned internal trade”. Vigne and Martin agree that: “the laws are not clear enough” and there is a contradiction

in intent. The Vietnamese government has been keen to promote the production of handicrafts in northern villages around Hanoi to increase prosperity; artisans are able to make ivory items with ivory sourced from recently poached African elephants. Of concern is that the Vietnamese public seem to be unaware about the severity of situation. The Vietnamese do not associate worked ivory with elephant tusks from living animals and have little knowledge about the threat of the illegal trade on elephants. Neither was there any public information indicating that ivory could not be taken out of Vietnam. There were no warnings about purchasing ivory for export, and artisans seemingly had no sense about the illegality or immorality of their work.

While 2014 saw the approval of a general wildlife decree increasing the fine to USD 25,000 “for poaching, harvesting and trading, processing and keeping wild animals”, Vietnam has continued to be one the largest importers of illegal tusks in the Far East. In July 2015, 387 kg of tusks were seized at the Cambodia/Vietnam border post Ha Tien. In three separate seizures in August 2015, 593 kg of ivory and 142 kg of rhino horn arrived from Mozambique; 2,000 kg of tusks from Nigeria; and

another of 1,023 kg (origin not disclosed) were all seized in the port of Danang.

Background research explains that carved ivory is not a traditional artefact, nor raw ivory a commonly worked material in Vietnam prior to the 19th century, except for a minute amount of decorative ear plugs worn by the Mnong tribe who have had domesticated elephants since historical times. Unlike surrounding countries, Vietnam's introduction to artisanship in ivory seems to have begun during the French Colonial period (1883-1954), with the manufacture of name seals and religious items.

The development of ivory manufacture practically ceased in 1954 after the Viet Cong ousted the French, decreasing from 6,000 kg per year prior to this, to just 100 kg per year up to 1990. The communist government nationalised business and tourism collapsed. Ivory artisanship was not to resume in any significant way until 15 years after the Vietnam War, when tourism once again began to flourish. Struggling with desperate poverty, the economy was restructured by the new Vietnamese government in the 1980s; prior to the liberalisation of the economy the per capita income was USD 98 per day. Not just Africa's elephants have suffered since then, Vietnam's natural resources are also under pressure.

Comparative data from previous surveys (including interviews with other reliable researchers, Stiles and Liu) reveal that the market also dipped post CITES 1989 ban. By 2008 the price of raw ivory had increased again to USD 500-1,500 per kg, up from 200 kg in 1990—"serving as an incentive to poachers to kill elephants".

By 2014, the price had escalated, while raw ivory barely increased: USD 845-1,032 per kg, worked ivory doubled in price. In 2008 a bangle sold for USD 50-95 and in 2011 the same sized bangle was USD 150-200. (Bangles are usually made from the slender tusks of female elephants known as *Calissia*). However, the price of raw ivory has decreased between 2010 and 2015. The market is saturated with newly obtained (i.e. poached ivory), additionally there has been a slow-down in the Chinese economy. Furthermore, the picture when considering the wholesale price of ivory shows a slowing down in price. Between 1990 and 2008, the price had increased by as much as 8.4 times, and raw ivory by (7.3 times). However, between

2008-2015, the price had only increased 1.7 times with the wholesale price of raw ivory remaining almost the same.

Vigne and Martin's reports make for essential reading for two reasons. Firstly, the Vietnam reports represent a longitudinal study, and include reliable comparative data on Vietnam's ivory production in three significant periods 1990 (following state expulsion of Viet Cong from Vietnam); 2008 when the current poaching crisis commenced in Africa, and in 2015 when the market became saturated in Vietnam, due to the availability of new (i.e. poached) African ivory.

The second reason is that with knowledge of essential facts, INGOs working on demand reduction strategies can know where to target their efforts, and what the most advantageous actions are to commit resources to. If the world is made aware of the severity of the situation in Vietnam, the Vietnamese government will be forced to take note through publicity campaigns—changing policies and closing legislative loopholes (ivory from pre-1992 domesticated elephants can still be sold) hopefully reducing the threats to African elephants. We are informed that the Vietnamese government is sensitive to "critical world opinion".

Perhaps missing from the academic report (a Vietnamese translation was printed and distributed) are images of poached elephants. The carnage caused by poachers when they massacre whole herds of elephant, young calves, pregnant females and old alike need to be impressed upon consumers and government officials used to turning a blind eye. The point needing amplification is that elephants are highly intelligent mammals who live in family groups. Their external teeth may have beauty but you cannot extract them from a live elephant—elephants are being slaughtered in high numbers to feed an insatiable appetite for trinkets, souvenirs and religious items, predominantly by the Chinese *neuveau riche*. The images chosen of inert ivory displays, the beauty of creamy polished jewellery and intricately fashioned tusks, distorts the ugly truth.

It is not easy to critique reports of this stature. Vigne and Martin are exceptional investigative researchers. The facts are clearly documented; most of the research is robust primary field research. For instance, vendors' stated that ivory pieces were old, when obviously to Vigne and Martin's trained eyes, they were not.