

## REVIEW

# The ivory trade of Laos: now the fastest growing in the world

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin

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The latest in-depth regional study by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin, like its predecessors, is required reading for anyone trying to keep up with how the international ivory trade continues to fuel crisis-level elephant poaching. The veteran researchers have been collaborating since the 1980s on groundbreaking ivory surveys, and since 2011 have focused on China and its Asian neighbors, most recently Vietnam (2016).

These monographs are invariably sobering reading, marshaling meticulously gathered raw data to conclusively chart the ever-shifting commerce in ivory. The latest publication, on Laos, is also shocking. From 2013 to 2016, the land-locked Southeast Asian country became the world's fastest growing retail ivory market, bucking the growing global trend toward shutting down trade in elephant teeth.

This is one of several alarming findings Vigne and Martin uncovered in their late 2016 trip supported by Save the Elephants and the Elephant Crisis Fund, a follow up to their previous separate research efforts in Laos. Doing the dogged legwork the two have long been noted for, they counted 13,248 ivory items for sale in 81 retail outlets surveyed, from a thin ring for USD 3 to a pair of polished tusks for USD 25,000. Their 89-



Figure 1. Front cover of the report which has been translated into Lao.

page report features photos of row after row of pendants and bracelets, chopsticks and Buddhas on open display in the various locations they visited.

The source of this ivory is rarely local. A century ago Laos had tens of thousands of elephants, but now has less than a thousand, half of which are domesticated. “Most worked ivory for sale,” the authors write, “originates from elephants poached in Africa.” The mountainous country shares borders with China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. Ivory smuggling is rife. Laos has almost zero enforcement

of ivory regulations, announcing a single ivory seizure (two suitcases' worth) in 2016, after reporting none from 2004 to 2014.

In contrast, there have been numerous seizures of ivory in transit for Laos, notably in Thailand, including three shipments in 2015 of African ivory totaling more than six tons. In fact, following the imposition of government registration of ivory stocks in Thailand, Thai traders have been busy offloading their illicit ivory into Laos.

Vigne and Martin detail the sorry state of lax regulations countrywide, at one point witnessing a bribe. They report at one outlet “Laos customs inspectors came in and were paid USD 300 not to look at the things in the shops and to go away again as we

watched!” Little wonder that the country has been identified as a major hub for illegal international wildlife trade dealers.

Who buys the ivory on sale? Mostly, it’s the Chinese.

Vigne and Martin estimate that they account for 80% of ivory sales. Tourist arrivals in Laos have soared. In 2009, “the number of Chinese arriving in the country was 128,226; by 2015 the number had risen four-fold to 511,436.” What’s more, they found that the number of Chinese-owned shops selling ivory in Vientiane, the capital, and in Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, “had increased more than ten-fold from three in 2013 to 35 in 2016.”

The reason for this increase, the authors conclude, “was not the result of the proposed ban on ivory trade in China, which was announced later, but rather a consequence of China’s economic slowdown, which caused government loans to dry up around 2014 and 2015.” Up to that point, generous funding for apartments, hotels and road construction allowed some traders with cash to spare to buy African ivory, and smuggle it into Vietnam for illegal trade in China. When Chinese buyers failed to materialize, Vietnamese businessmen trafficked “worked ivory to Laos to sell in Chinese-owned retail outlets.” With growing numbers of Chinese tourists and workers in the country, sales boomed.

Although the ivory trade on the mainland is now being squeezed by the near-total ban imposed last year, it’s clear the Chinese themselves are still driving much of the sales region-wide. Even if only 1% of the Chinese population are potential ivory buyers, as researcher Gao Yufang of Yale University maintains, that still represents 14 million likely customers who are happy to pick up ivory souvenirs on trips abroad to countries like Laos, where smaller, jewelry-sized items can be acquired openly and easily hidden in luggage for the trip home.

The fact that traditional carving skills in Laos are dying out doesn’t deter shop owners, who’ve turned to machine made items. Computer-run machines can knock out any number of identical ivory or pendants, as Vigne and Martin explain, “enabling traders to turn over their large stocks of illegal raw ivory at a fast pace.” It’s a depressing thought that container loads of poached elephant

tusks are now used in the increasingly automated production of ivory baubles and bric-a-brac.

The authors’ trip to Kings Romans, a lavish resort and casino (think Las Vegas or Macau) in northern Laos, is the most eye-opening part of their report. Developed as a joint venture between the Laotian government and a Hong Kong firm specifically to cater to rich Chinese gamblers, Kings Romans operates in a special economic zone on the Mekong River that its critics describe as a “lawless playground.” (In fact the US Treasury slapped sanctions on it in January 2018, accusing it of involvement in drugs, prostitution, and wildlife trafficking).

For Vigne and Martin, it was an opportunity to examine the attitudes of the resort’s visitors, a mindset which makes them keen customers of illicit ivory. Their assessment is blunt: “It was clear that Kings Romans attracts the more ‘dodgy’ and wealthy Chinese who have no guilty conscience about consuming endangered wildlife products.” The fact that ivory sales are banned in China turns out to be no deterrent for those routinely attracted to taking a bet. “On the contrary, they seem to get a thrill from it, being gamblers and therefore the opposite of risk-averse, while vendors are delighted to cater to their expensive tastes.”

Many conservationists strongly believe that enforcement alone can’t shut off illicit trade in ivory completely; it has to be coupled with effective efforts at demand reduction that changes cultural attitudes. But strong enforcement against wildlife trafficking is indispensable, especially in contexts where appeals to vanishing species are doomed to fall on deaf ears. Lax enforcement, as the situation in Laos makes clear, is a recipe for failure.

Reading this study brings to mind a recent trenchant observation by Vanda Felbab-Brown of The Brookings Institution. She regards China’s recent ban on its legal ivory market as “crucial” but “insufficient” unless it also takes steps to dismantle its substantial illegal market. She suggests that in addition to “robust penalties for traders and speculators,” China ought to consider less onerous but “swift penalties for low-level buyers” attempting to skirt the ban. (In late March it was reported Chinese customs authorities had taken steps to crack down on ivory trafficking, specifically targeting Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos.)

*The Ivory Trade of Laos* exposes the country’s inadequate control of the illegal international ivory trade in data-rich detail. Vigne and Martin rightly conclude that Laos “has not been held sufficiently

accountable on the international stage for its significant role in the ivory trade.” One can only hope this publication will bring about global pressure on the government of Laos to end its flagrant disregard of ivory regulation.

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Esmond Martin was working on his latest joint report with Lucy Vigne, a study of the ivory trade in Myanmar, before his sudden death this past February. That study is expected out later this year. It may be the final monograph of his decades-long indefatigable research, which was often done in conjunction with others who shared his investigative passions—notably his wife Chryssee, Daniel Stiles, and Lucy Vigne.

Many knew him far better than I did, but he always made me feel like a friend and colleague and was invariably generous with his time and support. When I came to Kenya to do research for *Ivory's Ghosts* and first visited him, he promptly handed over a heavy stack of his invaluable reports and studies. He pointed me in the right direction, made numerous key contacts for me, and stayed in touch thereafter by email, and yes, letters.

No corner of the ivory world escaped his attention. In 2007 he came to the US to work on *Ivory Markets in the USA*, (co-authored with Daniel Stiles, who worked with him on a number of studies). He and I visited Ivoryton, Connecticut so I could show him the factory town that turned tusks into piano keys in the period before WWI. In turn, he allowed me to pepper him with questions for my research, and read parts of my manuscript, mercifully catching a number of fumbled facts.

It was all about the facts. Martin understood that for conservation policy to be effective, it had to be based on evidence, not assumptions or wishful thinking or uninformed speculation about on-the-ground conditions.

“Esmond was out in the field gathering data before CITES and many national wildlife trade laws even existed,” Stiles wrote me after his death. “He brought new understanding to what was going on.”