The African elephant is an instantly recognisable symbol of the natural wonders of our continent. The most mega of the earth’s terrestrial mega-fauna, these behemoths have stirred the imaginations, emotions – and adrenal glands – of humans for centuries. But our relationship with them is – and has been since before the time of the Romans – tainted by our obsession with their teeth. In pursuing the magnificent tusks that we carve and admire (and occasionally use), humans have slaughtered elephants in their millions.

After a brief respite following the carnage of the 1970s and ‘80s, which halved the population, elephants are once again in the crosshairs. In an attempt to get to grips with the scale of the crisis, science editor Tim Jackson interviewed scientists, researchers, NGOs and policymakers across the conservation and trade spectrum, and filed this special report.

TEXT BY TIM JACKSON
For more than 10 000 years, humans have coveted ivory - and elephants have paid the price. As far back as AD 77, the Romans had wiped out North Africa’s elephant population. By AD 1000, Islamic states had taken control of the East African ivory trade, while ivory from West Africa (the ‘Ivory Coast’ was aptly named) made its way across the Sahara Desert to the Mediterranean by caravan. During the 19th century another major peak in demand occurred with the industrialisation of Europe and the US, and again in the 1970s when demand from Asia took its toll, particularly on the herds of East Africa.

1970
Demand for ivory escalates, particularly through Central and East Africa, and poaching becomes rampant.

1976
Total exports of raw ivory from Africa are thought to be 991 tonnes, accounting for the deaths of an estimated 59 000 elephants a year.

1976-1980
Hong Kong and Japan import 83 per cent of Africa’s raw ivory.

1978
In the US the African elephant is listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

1979
Iain Douglas-Hamilton (Save the Elephants) estimates a minimum African elephant population of 1.3 million.

1980
Some 6890 tonnes of ivory – representing approximately 37 500 elephants a year – is exported from Africa.

1989
• In the decade prior to 1989, East Africa loses almost 400 000 elephants; just 155 000 remain. The continental estimate has more than halved to about 600 000. The elephant population in Tanzania’s Selous Game Reserve declines from 109 000 in 1977 to 30 000. Uganda fares badly too, with numbers falling from 17 600 to just 1 600 during the same period. In Kenya, the population plummets by more than 80 per cent between 1977 and 1989, from 120 000 to 15 000.

• At a meeting in Switzerland, CITES bans all international trade in ivory from African elephants. The ban is not supported by many African countries, on the grounds that it will provide a loophole for poached ivory to enter the international market.

1990
The international ban on ivory trade is partly successful as elephant populations in several, but not all, range states begin to recover. In some countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the rate of poaching is thought to have slowed to about 20 per cent of pre-ban numbers for the period to 2007. The Republic of Congo, Angola, Central African Republic (CAR) and Zambia continue to lose a significant number of elephants, with civil war and corruption playing a key role.

1992
The Zambian government burns nine tonnes of ivory.

1997
Across much of Africa elephant numbers are increasing, paving the way for a partial lift of the ivory trade ban. CITES, through its Conference of the Parties (CoP), allows Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe to downlist elephants from Appendix I (which prohibits international trade) to Appendix II (which permits regulated international trade under special conditions) and to sell 50 tonnes of raw ivory to Japanese traders. The sale is opposed by many African countries, on the grounds that it will provide a loophole for poached ivory to enter the international market.

1999
Japan purchases 49.57 tonnes of ivory from the stockpiles of Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe as agreed at CoP.

2000
The South African elephant population is downlisted from Appendix I of CITES to Appendix II.

2002
• CITES gives conditional approval for Botswana, Namibia and South Africa to sell 60 tonnes of stockpiled ivory pending future review. The conditions include the establishment of an adequate system to monitor poaching, and that Japan (the only designated buyer) provide assurances that it will control the use of the ivory and prevent its re-export.

• A massive shipment of 6.5 tonnes of poached ivory (300 tusks) leaves Malawi, but is seized by Singapore customs. DNA forensics show the ivory originated in Zambia.

2004
Under pressure from CITES, China recognises the need to regulate its domestic ivory market. The country implements an ivory product registration and certification system, measures it believes will secure its ability to buy ivory at CITES-approved sales in future.

2006
• A shipment of 3.9 tonnes of ivory is seized in Hong Kong. The shipment comes from Cameroon, but genetic testing suggests that the tusks originated in Gabon.

• According to data from the CITES-backed Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), there is a marked upswing in seizures of illegal ivory shipments worldwide. The trend is also noted by the Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) programme, which starts recording a steady increase in the levels of elephant poaching across Africa.

2007
CITES approves the auction of 108 tonnes of ivory to Japan and China from Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, but institutes a nine-year moratorium on any future ivory sales. Again, many African elephant range states oppose the sale: China, which had anticipated a regular supply of legal ivory, feels betrayed.

2009
• As per the 2007 CITES decision, China imports 62 tonnes of ivory.

• Customs officials around the world confiscate more than 16 tonnes of elephant ivory. In fact, 2009–2011 are three of the top four years for the largest quantities of ivory seized since the 1989 trade ban.

2010
• CITES upholds the nine-year moratorium on legal ivory sales and does not approve proposals by Tanzania and Zambia to downlist their elephants to allow them to sell ivory stocks. Some observers believe that depriving China of access to legal ivory until 2018 stimulates a surge in poaching.

2011
• More than 24 tonnes of ivory are seized, representing some 2 500 elephants. It is the worst year on record for large-scale ivory seizures since 1989.

• Demand in China for ivory continues to increase: an auction newsletter reports 11 100 ivory pieces auctioned in the country for US$95-million, an increase of 107 per cent over the previous year.

• An IFAW employee stands amid ivory confiscated in Singapore.
In May, the US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee’s Congressional hearings on 'Ivory and Insecurity: The global implications of poaching in Africa’. Testimony is provided by John Scanlon (CITES), Iain Douglas-Hamilton (Save the Elephants) and Tom Cardamone (Global Financial Integrity).

That same month, officials in Colombo, Sri Lanka, confiscate ivory from government stockpile, a move that flouts CITES regulations. The use of ivory in religious ornamentation, particularly by Catholics and Buddhists, comes under the spotlight as it is said to exacerbate poaching.

Between May and July, thieves steal ivory from government stockpiles in Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique, flagging concerns for the security of official stores.

In June, Gabon’s government burns 4.5 tonnes of ivory in an effort to clamp down on the rise in elephant poaching in the country.

The following month, Kenya’s government publicly burns an elephant ivory stockpile that was seized in Singapore in 2002 by the Lusaka Agreement Task Force. Authorities estimate that about 300 elephants were killed to produce the shipment, which is estimated to be worth US$16-million.

In October, Hong Kong custom officials confiscate 1.9 tonnes of ivory shipped from Tanzania and Kenya, the city’s biggest-ever ivory seizure.

Speareheaded by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in November the US State Department launches a major foreign policy initiative, Wildlife Trafficking and Conservation: A Call to Action, in which it pledges to pursue a global strategy to protect wildlife.

The same month, Cameroon responds to the massacre at Bouba N’Djida by deploying 600 soldiers from its elite Rapid Intervention Battalion to stop elephant poachers from Chad and Sudan entering the country. Throughout Africa, more and more rangers and army personnel are seconded to fight the ivory trade, increasing pressure on state coffers.

In December, in the wake of its failure to curb poaching, Tanzania withdraws its application to sell 100 plus tonnes of stockpiled ivory to China and Japan. Malaysia seizes 1,500 pieces of tusks – the largest haul in the country’s history – that were shipped from Togo before transiting in Spain. The consignment was en route to China.

In February, Gabon declares that poachers have killed 11,000 elephants in the Minkébé National Park since 2004, most in the past five years.

At the CITES CoP in Bangkok in March, Thailand promises to amend its laws to put an end to the ivory trade in the country. Thailand has one of the largest unreported ivory markets in the world, and is second only to China as an ivory consumer.

As CoP gets underway, the Public Library of Science publishes the results of the largest-ever survey of forest elephants. It shows that a staggering 62 per cent of the total population has been killed for their ivory in the past decade.

In February, four Chinese nationals caught smuggling decorative ivory pieces, as well as 9.5 kilograms of raw ivory in Kenya, are each fined US$340. The light penalty, typical of those in many other African states, outrages conservationists across the world.

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For the decade and a half following the 1989 CITES ban, elephant poaching appeared to abate. But since 2006 there has been a steady acceleration in the widespread killing of the animals. In 2011 TRAFFIC, the IUCN/WWF-backed organisation that monitors the illegal wildlife trade, recorded 13 large-scale seizures, each containing more than 800 kilograms of ivory, that weighed an estimated 23 tonnes – and represented about 2,500 dead elephants. The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) believes that more than 25,000 African elephants, some five per cent of the entire population, lost their lives to poachers that year.

Recently, the IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group (AESSG) sent a questionnaire on poaching levels to 12 countries. The answers revealed that poaching had indeed risen in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), Cameroon, Kenya, Gabon, Mozambique, the Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Zambia. With the possible exception of Namibia’s Etosha National Park and the Kruger National Park in South Africa, the illegal ivory trade permeates populations across the continent. Here we highlight the marked differences in poaching rates within Central, East, West and southern Africa, and individual countries.

Central Africa

Most poaching has occurred in Central Africa,” says Tom Milliken from TRAFFIC. “One credible source says there are only five places left in the entire DRC that have more than 500 elephants.” The poaching was big enough to force 15 to 20 years ago people were talking about 100,000 elephants in that country alone.” The region provides ideal cover for poachers and which is further facilitated by low levels of law enforcement, political instability and collaboration with armed forces and militia groups. Conditions also make it difficult to assess population status, so keeping track of events is extremely challenging.

Gabon If you were to guess which Central African country is home to the most elephants, chances are you wouldn’t say Gabon. The country holds just 13 per cent of Africa’s equatorial rainforests, yet now claims over half of the continent’s forest elephants, some 40,000–50,000 individuals according to the Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux, the Gabonese National Parks Agency. In the past 18 months two massacres have dented these figures. In 2011, 27 elephant carcasses discovered in the open savanna areas of Wonga-Wongue Wildlife Reserve alluded to even worse image hidden in the park’s forested areas. In February this year, Minkébé National Park put rounds – host to the largest population in the country – reported that it has lost more than 11,000 elephants since 2004.

Cameroon Although there have been more catastrophic killings, the death of several hundred elephants in Boba N’Djida National Park put the ivory crisis on many people’s agendas. “We don’t know the exact population, but think it was mostly wiped out – precise numbers talk about 350–450 elephants killed,” says Olfr Druyt of LAGA Wildlife Law Enforcement.

The country is no stranger to the ivory trade. It was singled out in 2002 for having Central Africa’s largest domestic ivory market. Today, the main threat to its elephants probably comes from the east, where groups of homemen from Chad and Sudan have infiltrated its parks. “My understanding of the estimates suggests there are 2,000 savanna elephants left in northern Cameroon, far fewer than its remaining, forest elephant population in the south-east,” says Bas Huijbregts from WWF. “Apart from that big incident in Boba N’Djida, these populations have not suffered too much from poaching...” In the forests, however, the situation is really, really bad. A study, just published, using the largest dataset on forest elephants ever compiled, shows that across their range in Central Africa, 62 per cent of all forest elephants have been killed for their ivory in the past 10 years.

Central African Republic (CAR) Until the turn of this century much of the country’s north and east was thought to be elephant range. ‘Over the past decades, poachers have wiped out elephants across large swathes of CAR,’ says Huijbregts. ‘The elephant population in the north-eastern part of the country, which numbered around 35,000 in the 1970s, has effectively been massacred, with only 100 or so individuals remaining.’

Chad Elephant numbers in Chad were estimated at around 40,000 some 20 years ago, now there are fewer than 2,000. Zakouma National Park hosts the largest remaining population, which has collapsed by 90 per cent since 2005. By 2011 only 450 animals remained. Poaching, however, has slowed dramatically since African Parks took over the park’s management in 2010.

Republic of Congo Based on the CITES quota system, Congo was the largest African exporter of ivory between 1986 and 1989. Today most of the country’s remaining elephants are found in the Nouabalé-Ndoki and Odzala-Kokoua national parks and their surrounds. And they are taking a beating. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) estimates that about 5,000 elephants – almost half the population – have been killed by poachers around Nouabalé-Ndoki in the past five years. Odzala-Kokoua faces a similar situation. Elephant numbers there are estimated to have fallen from about 13,000 in 2008 to 9,000 today.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) The elephant population of Africa’s second-largest country is currently estimated at no more than 10,000 animals. Elephant numbers today are reduced and scattered in the remaining elephant landscapes,” says John Hart of the Lukuru Foundation. “Many of these areas are logistically difficult and remote, while some are occupied by malus and brigands.” In fact, the decline in numbers can be linked with unrest that predates 2006, with the country’s violent eastern region being particularly vulnerable to poaching. “Trends in Okapi and Garamba [national parks], as well as information from elsewhere, show that the carnage got under way during the civil war [1998–2005], with increasing poaching from 2008 onwards as the country stabilised and the Chinese arrived,” Hart continues. “Today all major elephant populations have poaching issues, while several parks – Virunga, Okapi, Sanga – have made major investments to safeguard their elephants.” In 2005 African Parks took over the running of Garamba National Park, which harbours the DRC’s largest population, at a time when there were widespread incursions by Sudanese poachers.
EAST AFRICA

South Sudan: Ironically, five decades of conflict were kind to South Sudan’s elephants. WCS reports that the civil war stifled development and preserved the largest intact savanna in East Africa. Since the 2005 peace deal, however, the ready availability of weapons has enabled increasingly organised armed groups to traffic ivory. ‘The elephant population, estimated at 130 000 in 1986, has crashed to 5 000 if South Sudan is lucky,’ says Paul Elkan, WCS director for the country. He warns that if poaching continues at present rates, elephants could disappear from South Sudan within the next five years.

Ethiopia: has lost nearly 90 per cent of its elephant population since the 1980s, with the total number estimated at 1 200 in 2007. In the 1990s, elephants were found in 16 areas ranging over 94 000 square kilometres, by 2006, fragmented herds were found in just nine areas over 29 000 square kilometres.

Tanzania: holds by far the majority of East Africa’s elephants – around 80 per cent – and the second-largest savanna population after Botswana. Most of its elephants occur in the Ruaha-Rungwa and Selous ecosystems. There has been a huge increase in illegal elephant killing in Tanzania over the past few years, says Howard Frederick, an aerial survey specialist. ‘Poaching is bad in the Selous region now, shifting in the past three years from western Tanzania. The government is making a strong anti-poaching push, but the areas are huge.’

Determined how many elephants are being killed and how many remain is a challenge. A 2006 count made by the government through the Tanzanian Wildlife Research Institute (TAWIRI) in the Selous region suggested a population of around 74 000 elephants, though confidence limits (that is, the probable range) were wide; three years later WCS and TAWIRI counted just 41 000 elephants for the same area.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

Kenya: Despite widespread publicity to the contrary, Kenya has fared relatively well as poaching levels escalate through East Africa. Nonetheless, figures from Kenya Wildlife Service indicate that poaching levels are steadily increasing – the Kenya Wildlife Service indicate that poaching levels across the country, he continues, ‘It is a widespread problem impacting all of Kenya’s elephants, with hotspots in the Taita-Taveta from the Kenya coast and within the Laikipia-Samburu populations. Nowhere in Kenya is immune to this threat.’ The killing of 12 elephants in Tsavo East National Park in January 2013 was the largest single incident in the country since the 1980s.

Uganda: is home to more than 4 000 elephants and the population is considered stable at the moment. ‘Poaching of elephants in Uganda has increased in the last three to four years in the main protected areas of Mumuni Falls, Murchison Falls and Queen Elizabeth national parks,’ says Charles Tumwesigye, Director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority. The recent increase in elephant poaching is highly organised, with big businessmen using locals to kill elephants in return for money once they’ve delivered the ivory to buyers. The numbers of the people behind this activity are hard to track due to intelligence and arrested, and there is a general reduction in elephant killing in Uganda now.’ Even so, 2011 was the worst year for the country’s elephants in recent years, with 2012 also showing high levels of illegal killing.

Botswana: Our 2010 survey estimated that there are between 120 000 and 140 000 elephants in Botswana, says Mike Chase from Elephants Without Borders. ‘The Botswana elephant population has increased over the past three years, with 2012 rising from 289 in 2011. Aerial surveys in the northern Samburu-Laikipia region suggest the population decreased by more than 1 000 in just four years to 2012, although drought accounted for more than half the fatalities.

According to Ian Craig of the Northern Rangelands Trust, ‘Elephant poaching is at its highest level numerically in northern Kenya since the early 1980s. It is not yet a crisis, nor at the same level of the 1970s and ’80s, but this is purely due to the strong response from the Kenyan government and a greater awareness among Kenyans of the value of wildlife, and hence less of a window of opportunity to allow corruption to cover large-scale poaching.’ Commenting on poaching levels across the country, he continues, ‘There has been a huge increase in poaching is a much higher risk area. Here the majority of the country’s elephants are found, is a much higher risk area. Here the number of elephants poached increased from fewer than 10 in 2011 to 78 in 2012.

Zambia: The Luangwa and Zambezi valleys and the Katwe area are home to Zambia’s major elephant populations. ‘The population in Katwe is presently considered stable,’ says Jeremy Pope from The Nature Conservancy’s Zambia programme. Lower Zambezi National Park, with roughly 2 000 elephants, shows a slight upward trend. According to Ian Stevenson of Conservation International, since 2009, with increased protection, elephant populations have continued to grow.

Further north, the Luangwa valley hosts the country’s largest population of elephants, with an estimated 18 500 in 2008. Speaking for North Luangwa, one of two national parks that protect the area, Ed Sayer of the Frankfurt Zoological Society says, ‘The elephant population has been increasing since 1989, coinciding with a law enforcement presence. Even so, since 2007 there has been an increase in poaching, primarily in areas bordering the park.’ The DFS maintains that overall the Luangwa valley elephant population is dropping, although current data suggest that North Luangwa is stable.

Zimbabwe: The last complete aerial survey of elephant range was carried out in 2001, when the population reached about 90 000, so there is little in the way of recent reliable information on current poaching trends in Zimbabwe,’ says David Cumming from the University of Cape Town. He reports that there have been more recent region-specific surveys, for instance for the middle Zambezi valley and Gonarezhou National Park, but that none has produced any alarming carcass ratios (the number of elephant carcasses as a proportion of the total population).

Mozambique: ‘Northern Mozambique holds the highest concentration of elephants in the country – some 13 000 according to the latest survey. Greater Limpopo, Gorongosa and Chimanimani national parks follow in numbers,’ says Roberto Zullo of WNF. ‘The most recent survey from the north suggests more than 2 500 elephants have been killed there in the last 10 years. Poaching is highly organised – helicopters out of Pembia airport are report- ed to be used to move both local and foreign poachers, though no actions have been taken against them.’ Zullo cites lack of capacity by law enforcement bodies, corruption and a weak judiciary system as contributing factors.
**ASSAULT**

From corrupt militias to poverty-stricken people eking a living at the edges of protected areas, the ivory trade entices many different people for lots of different reasons.

**BLOOD IVORY**

White gold or blood ivory? Ivory means different things in different hands but, in wildlife trafficking circles at least, an elephant is a commodity. And how and why it is harvested can take widely divergent paths.

Today organised crime takes a front seat in the illegal killing of elephants, as it does for rhinos. Among the most notorious poachers on the continent are armed militias who supposedly kill elephants to fuel their own conflicts. To them, ivory is a means towards a more bloody and brutal end that serves to destabilise some of Africa’s most fragile regions and provide the catalyst for even greater conflict. This is blood ivory.

Arguably the most notorious group thought to be caught up in this trade is the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which has operated in northern Uganda. Members of the United Nations Security Council are so concerned about the destabilising effect that LRA leader Joseph Kony and his cronies are having in the region that a special UN-backed mission was deployed to secure the area for the 2010 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

The connection between the LRA, ivory and arms remains speculative though. ‘The evidence that the LRA is killing elephants in Garamba is very, very strong – we know they are there,’ says Paul Ronan from The Resolve, an advocacy group looking to end the illegal ivory trade and the conflict in the region.

‘There have been several allegations claiming that known militant organisations are engaged in elephant poaching and ivory trade. INTERPOL takes these very seriously and is looking into them,’ says Bill Clark of INTERPOL. He confirms that the Kenya Wildlife Service has claimed that al-Shabaab is involved in the ivory business.

**HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE**

Groups of armed horsemen from Sudan rank among some of Africa’s most notorious elephant poachers. Operating during the dry season, they travel more than 1 000 kilometres westwards in large raiding parties, reputedly with tusks of elephants in tow to transport ivory back. Last year they carried out the well-publicised massacre in Botua N’Djida National Park in north-eastern Cameroon. They are responsible for the deaths of a massive number of elephants, decimating populations in countries such as Chad and CAR.

‘The method of poaching elephants here in Chad is unlike anything we have ever seen across before,’ says Lorna Labuschagne, who works there for African Parks. ‘They use horses and heavy-calibre rifles and herd the animals towards marksmen. They open fire indiscriminately, killing a lot of animals outright and wounding many more – we talk of massacre sites here and that is exactly what they are,’ she continues. ‘We found 19 carcasses at one site and seven at another, and a baby elephant was also killed here. In other words a pretty devastating means of killing. They used the same techniques in Cameroon.’

The organisation gained further insight into their methods when they raided a camp near Zakouma National Park last year. ‘We confiscated 1 000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition. That’s not for a short hunting trip. When you’ve got 1 000 rounds of ammunition, you’re going to harvest,’ says Fearnhead. The poachers were well-equipped – other items in their possession included a satellite phone, cellphones and solar chargers. ‘Over a period of six weeks to two months they gathered an enormous amount of ivory – basically shot...'

**About every six weeks we rescue someone who has escaped from the LRA, so we have a very regular insight into what [it is] doing in Garamba**

The evidence that the LRA might be involved in the illegal trade in ivory, but there’s no confirmation yet that it is doing so,’ says Paul Ronan from The Resolve, an advocacy group looking to end the illegal ivory trade and the conflict in the region.

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Unless the tusks are very large — bigger than 20 kilograms each — the meat of the elephant is worth more than its ivory, but its sheer mass makes realising this value logistically difficult.

The equipment retrieved contained fur, teeth and tusks, a majority of which were from an elephant that had been killed in the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania. 'We have photographs from their cellphones showing they knew exactly what they were doing,' says Peter Fearnhead, director of the Selous Conservation Project (OCP), which had dared to investigate into the illegal trade in Tanzania and Zambia. 'The poaching today is done by the local communities surrounding the park, but most of these people are not the culprits but rather the victims.'

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benefit of an illegal activity — and criminals who operate above the law,' says Mary Rice, executive director of the Environment Investigation Agency (EIA).

Given the rewards poaching can bring, the temptation is often overwhelming and the penalties for getting caught are likely to be lower than the rewards. A sensationally high fee of US $120,000 was paid to the Congolese national police for the arrest of a poacher, while Kenya Wildlife Service lost six poachers to the ivory trade and five rangers to poachers, including our own ecoguards — that is allowing the trade to happen. At present the majority of our intelligence indicates mainly West Africans and Chadians as the traders.'
Lagos may claim the dubious honour of boasting the largest ivory market in Africa, but there are other notorious hotspots. Martin is convinced that Khartoum is richest in providing a market for ivory poached up to 10000 kilometres away. ‘Khartoum gets raw ivory from South Sudan, Central Africa and Kenya. The city is supplied by Sudanese horsemen returning here from further west,’ he says. Like most other domestic ivory markets, sales here are made mostly to Chinese nationals. The Sudanese capital also serves as conduit to Cairo, another major African market, though in recent years the route has been throttled to some extent by an increase in border security.

Cairo, of course, is situated well outside the range of African elephants but, despite a decline since the 1990s, it remains one of the largest ivory markets on the continent. Trading in ivory is banned here too but, again, as Martin and Vigne discovered during their investigation in 2011, the laws are not enforced. Raw tusks are carved, albeit crudely, and sold. Many of its patrons used to hail from Spain, Italy and the US, but Chinese nationals are now the principal buyers, with Egyptians and Gulf Arab States increasing in prominence.

Elsewhere, Ethiopia’s Addis Ababa market fluctuates in size and importance (it was thriving when TRAFFIC conducted its last survey in 2008), Maputo in Mozambique hosts southern Africa’s largest market and ivory is still being sold openly in the DRC capital of Kinshasa. Ofir Drori is unequivocal about the role of African dealers in the ivory trade. ‘It is a domestic market and ivory is domestic – it doesn’t exist. I would state this categorically: No ivory is sold that does not leave the country. The prices you have inside a country and the prices you pay outside – there is such a huge gap that is indicative that the money to buy any ivory to be left in the country.’

To fight such malpractice, TRAFFIC, working with the Western Africa Trade in Endangered Species (WACITES), has been working with the five West African countries and regional organizations in the region to reduce the number of seizures. They have succeeded, says Drori, in forging a new regional approach to tackling the issue of illegal trade.

Illegal ivory trafficking route

While the number of seizures has been reduced, city authorities in Ghana, Nigeria, and Mali have evidence of thousands of ivory shipments detected by trade officials, which have not been apprehended. The ivory is believed to be heading to markets in China and the Middle East. A market that is not regulated by authorities is at great risk of losing its legitimacy as a trade partner.

At the same time, there has been a dramatic increase in seizures of ivory in East Asia. Since 2007, the number of seizures has doubled each year, according to TRAFFIC and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In 2010, 74383 kg of ivory was seized, the most ever recorded. The number of seizures has increased by more than 300% from 2009, when 29931 kg of ivory was seized.

Anyone doing the buying, says Drori, is at risk. ‘You can be trusted. This is a business where people screw one another over, so trust is a big deal. This is why there is such an increase in seizures. If the prices would go up and up and up, this trade would not just go on until all the elephants have been killed. And the prices would go up and up and up.’

TRAFFIC’s Tom Milliken, who also heads the Biodiversity Crime Unit. ‘Since 2009 there has been a drastic increase in the number of elephant ivory cases – 99% of the ivory seized in the Western Cape since 2002.’

From the continent’s savannas and forests to the markets of Lagos, Kinshasa and Cairo, through the ports of Mombasa, Dar es Salaam and Cape Town and on to Asia, the movement of ivory involves thousands of people, complex organisation, and complicity and corruption at every level. When it comes to elephants, West Africa is an enigma. The region has very few of the animals, yet it hosts a booming trade in ivory. This anomaly was first given wide- spread attention in a 2003 report by TRAFFIC and the Air Dron of LAGA’s Wildlife Law Enforcement is quick to confirm that its findings remain relevant today. ‘There are many countries in West Africa with only 20–30 elephants left. Of course they have more ivory than elephants!’ For says, ‘Guinea has 30 elephants if we are lucky – we seized more ivory than that from a single dealer. Togo has a very tiny population; Sierra Leone has no elephants remaining whatsoever, and neither does Ivory Coast. These are all countries that are active in the trade in a very serious way.’

Last year wildlife trade researchers Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne surveyed numbers of Chinese nationals in the country, from an estimated 2000 in 2001 to 100000 by 2007. ‘Ivory is cheap here compared to in China. Much of it is taken out by pocket or in hand baggage.’ Similarly, Angola hosts an increasing number of Chinese nationals – some 300 000 are currently working in the country. ‘Luanda used to be a big ivory market – we have no recent information, but there’s no reason to think it isn’t still,’ says Martin. Angola has few elephants itself, so it is likely that demand is satisfied by the DRC.
ON LEAVING AFRICA, SHIPPING ROUTES ARE often tortuous and difficult to trace. The 1,500 pieces of tusks intercepted in Malaysia last December, for instance, left the West African port of Lomé in Togo and transited in Algeciras, Spain, before moving on to Malaysia.

‘All the large-scale ivory seizures seem to be heading towards China, whether they are confiscated there or not,’ says Milliken. Six or seven years ago the country intercepted a series of shipments and, since then, its law enforcement has actively targeted containers coming from Africa carrying descriptions of certain products. ‘I will say that China has really upped its law enforcement – and so the criminal syndicates have adapted,’ he explains. ‘So they might, say, try to get the container into Malaysia, change the documentation so it looks like the consignment is originating from Malaysia, and then send it on to China.’

The choice of countries serving as transits depends on conditions at the time. Milliken refers to a case in April 2011 when 707 ivory tusks were seized just inside Vietnam’s border with China, its destination. ‘Vietnamese authorities have got quite a bit better at controlling ivory flow through the country,’ says Simon Hedges from the Wildlife Conservation Society. ‘What seems to be happening as a result is that both Laos and Cambodia are becoming important transit routes. Thailand too, because ivory is like water – it will follow the path of least resistance.’ That would explain the emergence of Cambodia’s only deep-water port at Shihanoukville as a substitute trade route.

And although China is considered the worst protagonist, it is by no means the only end-user nation. ‘While countries like Malaysia are primary transit points, China and Thailand are the main markets since the demand in Japan has really fallen off,’ says Hedges. ‘There’s a tiny bit of end use for ivory in the Philippines, and Laos is selling increasing amounts of ivory to tourists.’ It remains to be seen what effect Thailand’s recent announcement of a ban on its domestic ivory trade will have on routes and supply.

Who are the ivory merchants?

‘You cannot assume that all the syndicates are in the Far East,’ says Ofir Drori. ‘Some of them are based here in Africa.’ In 2006 Hong Kong customs seized 603 tusks in a container from Cameroon. Ostensibly it was filled with timber, but a false compartment hid a mountain of ivory. The find prompted a high-level collaboration between authorities in Asia and Cameroon, and their subsequent investigation uncovered two more containers, similarly rigged, that had been used by the same syndicate to smuggle ivory. Tusks from 900 dead elephants could be transported at a time and, based on fragments discovered inside, the containers were regularly recycled.

The shipments were linked to the notorious Teng group, long suspected of being involved in various criminal activities. ‘These are people who used to export 600 tusks out of Douala in Cameroon to the Far East every two months,’ says Drori. ‘For two-and-a-half years they – Taiwanese nationals and one Filipino – used an import–export company operating out of a normal house in an upmarket residential suburb in Yaoundé as a front.’ In the 1980s, the same syndicate had operated in a similar way in Nigeria.

‘So here is a criminal syndicate that has been making around US$4-million every two months for years, has been linked to money laundering and drug trafficking, and has been doing this since the 1980s. It’s the only ivory cartel in the world being prosecuted, but now its leaders have fled Cameroon and are on the run,’ says Drori.

He believes there are at least five more syndicates like the Tengs in Africa that have evaded authorities. ‘It reminds me of the arms trade. Imagine what it takes to gather 600 tusks every two months, and to have done this since the 1980s without any interruption. You need to employ hundreds of poachers and carefully coordinate them. You have to control dozens of corrupt colonels and magistrates to secure your business. You need a hierarchy inside your operations – one very strong person at the top who enforces this discipline, and [makes sure that] anyone who steals disappears. This is what the Mafia looks like.’ Drori’s frustration bubbles over. ‘So many seizures and still no heads of syndicates in jail. It is an amazing fact; it is an amazing failure.’
In recent times the main ivory markets have been centred in the Far East: China for its sheer size and voracious appetite for the product; Thailand, where the market, for different reasons, is big too; and Japan, once a big league player, but now showing a diminishing demand. So what makes these markets tick?

**THAILAND**

Thailand has a poor track record when it comes to the ivory trade. ‘Thailand has one of the largest unregulated ivory markets in the world and the largest in South-east Asia,’ says Tom Milliken of TRAFFIC. Although this fact is well known in wildlife trade circles, it comes as a surprise to most people. ‘While trade in Thailand is smaller than that in China, it still exerts huge influence,’ continues Milliken. ‘I’d say there is perhaps a 25 per cent/75 per cent split in trade between Thailand and China.’ And given the size of the Chinese market, that’s huge.

So why is Thailand such a global player in the illegal ivory trade? The country owes its dubious notoriety to its own legislation, which sanctions trade in ivory from domestic, working elephants, although not wild Asian elephants. This industry is wholly unregulated, so there are no checks into the origin of the ivory, which can legally be displayed and sold in Thai markets. The consequence? Perfect conditions for laundering African ivory, which is consumed by Chinese, which means that it stays in China for the most part. But in Thailand most of the buyers are European, North American and Australian tourists,’ says Milliken. ‘With so many foreign visitors, a healthy percentage of the seizures made in the US, Europe and Australia are trinkets from Thailand.

The most obvious way to curb the trade would be to regulate the industry, which would be difficult to enforce, or to shut it down completely. ‘There’s no provision within the legislation at the moment to discriminate against African ivory, so the whole system here needs better legislation and enforcement, DNA testing and legal protection of products from African elephants,’ says Elisabeth McLellan of WWF. ‘There are a lot of provisions that need to be in place to make a workable system in Thailand. And because there are so many requirements, we are saying that a ban is the best way out of this situation.’

In 2002, the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) was established to combat the illegal ivory trade. ‘We will amend the trading system in the country have failed to produce results. ‘For more than a decade there have been requests from CITES to address some of these issues and these have not been implemented to a necessary level,’ continues McLellan. At the opening of the CITES Conference of the Parties held in Bangkok last month, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra promised to end the nation’s involvement in the trade. ‘We will amend the national legislation with the goal of putting an end to the ivory trade and to be in line with international norms,’ she said. While her statement is potentially seen as a big step forward, it is not clear how it may affect domestic ivory trade in the country and, given its poor history of following up on such promises, when those changes might be implemented.

**JAPAN**

‘Japan is a story of demand reduction,’ says Milliken. ‘In its heyday the Japanese market consumed 300 tonnes of ivory a year, easily. Now the dealers tell me they are using between five and 10 tonnes that are coming from legal stocks of ivory – and that they had lots of stock when the ban came in.’ The ETIS data confirm that Japan isn’t a major country of concern. ‘For about a decade now we haven’t seen any large-scale ivory seizures directed to Japan.’

According to wildlife trade experts Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin, who surveyed the Japanese ivory markets in 2009, this dip in demand can be explained, in part, by the country’s economy, which has been in recession since 1990. ‘Fewer Japanese people are buying luxury ivory goods,’ they point out. ‘The Japanese are steadily becoming more westernised and ivory has therefore become less fashionable.’

In fact when Vigne and Martin carried out their survey, some 80 per cent of tasks were being used to produce signature stamps called hankos. But that has changed. ‘The seals were used to sign everything from pay cheques and bank transactions to documents for buying a car. But Japan has recently passed legislation making name seals obsolete. ‘Now people use signatures,’ says Milliken. These days, the most common material for hankos is horn from the Asian domestic water buffalo.

Other factors that have reduced demand include strict government regulations that, unlike those in China, act as a deterrent to ivory carvers and vendors. And with the exception of antiques, the export of ivory is also prohibited in Japan in line with the 1990 CITES ban, which means foreign visitors may no longer buy these items to take home. More recently, Tomoaki Nishihara from the Wildlife Conservation Society has looked at demand. ‘In Japan there is constant and stable demand for “hard” or forest elephant ivory.’

**In Japan there is constant and stable demand for ‘hard’ or forest elephant ivory**

Above: Forest elephants. The dense tuffs of these elusive pachyderms, which inhabit the rainforests of West and Central Africa, are in regular demand on the Japanese market.

Left: A haul of ivory that was confiscated in Singapore and returned to Tsavo East National Park, Kenya.

Opposite, above: Thailand hosts one of the largest and most active ivory industries in the world. Its customers include Western tourists, as well as those from the US, Europe and Australia.

Opposite, below: The Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has pledged to end her country’s involvement in the ivory trade.
forest elephant ivory,’ he says. One particular item that uses this so-called ‘hard’ ivory (the ivory of forest elephants is more dense than that of savanna elephants) is the bachi, the plectrum of a shamisen, a popular traditional Japanese musical instrument. A single bachi uses one large tusk – weighing 15-plus kilogrammes – to manufacture. ‘This trend differs from that in China, which has a higher consumption of ivory but where no preference for soft or hard ivory exists,’ Nishihara explains. And while there is no strong evidence that ivory from forest elephants is being smuggled into Japan, he is worried that the remaining stocks of hard ivory in the country will not be sufficient to meet demand. While this might work in theory, in practice the system is widely abused. According to IFAW’s 2011 report ‘Making a killing’, which looked into the ivory trade in five coastal cities in China, there were nearly twice as many unlicensed ivory dealers as licensed ones. Of the 158 ivory carving and retail outlets surveyed, 101 had no licences. Illegal laundering of ivory is rife even in supposedly legal facilities too – 60 per cent of licensed retailers violated the system in some way to launder contraband ivory. Taken together, the unlicensed and non-compliant ivory facilities outnumbered legal ones nearly six to one. The registration system is abused too. Every piece of ivory weighing more than 50 grams requires an identification card and yet IFAW found that 20 of 32 accredited retail shops did not have the required cards to match their ivory products. And in many licensed shops, vendors discouraged customers from taking the identification cards that corresponded to the item purchased. ‘When people sell a piece of ivory they hang on to the permit and use it as many times as they want. So effectively you can launder poached ivory through the legal system; it has all the appearance of being legal, but it’s from an illegal source,’ confirms Knights. Ivory sales have surged too. The total number of ivory items auctioned on record in mainland China in 2011 was more than double that of the previous year. According to an auction newsletter, 11 100 ivory pieces were reportedly auctioned in 2011, with an estimated price of US$95.4 million. That’s 170 per cent more than the 2010 figure.

‘In China economic growth is incredibly fast, and so education, awareness and general worldliness are not keeping pace,’ says Knights. People there have simply not been aware of the situation for elephants in Africa. ‘Cutting demand will be key to saving the continent’s elephants, a message that is conveyed by WildAid’s mantra ‘When the buying stops, the killing can too’. ‘Our conclusion is that if you don’t stop the market, whatever you do in Africa, you’re not going to stop ivory leaking out,’ Knights declares. ‘We’ve recently done a survey of the three main cities in China (Beijing, Shanghai and Changzhou) [that demonstrated that] 50 per cent of the people are not aware there is any sort of elephant poaching problem in Africa. 50 per cent of people have no idea how to differentiate legal from illegal ivory, and 50 per cent think that the ivory comes from natural elephant mortality.

But that’s not to say things can’t be turned round. ‘A lot of stuff I think the rest of the world takes for granted in terms of ivory and elephant poaching has just not been publicised in China,’ reckons Knights. He’s heard some people saying ‘people have been educated and it hasn’t worked’, but they really haven’t been educated. It hasn’t been seen as an issue that pertains to China.’ How to get that message across, though, remains one of the principal challenges. One of the biggest successes to date has been WildAid’s ‘Mom, I got teeth’ posters, which depict an elephant mother and her calf walking into the sunset across the African savanna. Displayed at airports and in subways in major cities across the country, the posters aim to raise consumer awareness about the fact that every piece of ivory comes from a dead elephant – if you don’t buy ivory, the animals won’t die. In 2011, the campaign message was adopted into China’s national college entrance exams, which were taken by nine million applicants. WildAid has recently launched an ivory awareness campaign on the back of their successful shark-fin drive. They plan to get into consumers’ faces. ‘It doesn’t matter what CITES does or what biologists say or what conservationists write. At the end of the day it’s about the economics,’ claims Knights. ‘The only way to intercede is to inject yourself into the economics and that is basically why we are using advertising techniques. We sell conservation in the same way that Nike sells sneakers. We use celebrities, we use slick advertising, we try to get repetition in your face all the time and to brand conservation as a positive attribute and consumption as a negative one.’

Knights likens this to a new war, a contemporary battleground for conservation. ‘Reports, biology, international conferences are the old world – it’s obviously all important and it’s great – but global economies are moving so quickly, especially in the case of China. Not only is the pace very fast, but the scale is vast, not like any other phenomena we’ve seen on the planet before.’ ‘Anything that gets caught up in that maelstrom is going to be problematic. And so all we can do is try to keep pace by using the very techniques that are growing the economy – advertising space, video billboards – we’re trying to utilise that to put a different perspective on things.’

Part of the change that China needs is a growing consciousness about consumerism. ‘We’ve been lucky enough to get some of the most prominent Asian voices, such as (basketball star) Yao Ming and actor Jackie Chan, on our side to tell people: ‘Hang on a minute, this is not a good idea’.’ Short of an economic collapse in China, the two elements most likely to reduce demand to the benefit of Africa’s elephants are an ivory registration and certification system that works and a change in consumer attitude towards ivory.
the way AHEAD

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

Throughout Africa, protecting elephants is being given greater priority. ‘More rangers are being put on the ground and many are better equipped.’ In Central Africa, Chad, Gabon, Cameroon, Botswana and Namibia, the army has been called in to supplement anti-poaching efforts. Gabon has reportedly more than quadrupled its park staff in the past three years and has increased its budget 15-fold to pursue poaching gangs, while Cameroon sent in additional troops and increased its budget 15-fold to pursue poaching gangs, while Cameroon sent in additional troops and increased its budget 15-fold to pursue poaching gangs, while Cameroon sent in additional troops and increased its budget 15-fold to pursue poaching gangs.

In countries such as Cameroon, poaching gangs can come and go at their total discretion, we know that begins to provide safe havens for other sorts of threats to people and governments,’ she added. ‘This is a global challenge that spans continents and crosses oceans, and we need to address it with partnerships that are as robust and far-reaching as the criminal networks we seek to dismantle.’

But between the countries involved in the ivory trade, both in Africa and the Far East, these kinds of partnerships are tenu-ous as best. ‘Obviously, there isn’t enough cooperation, that’s why the situation is so serious,’ says Bill Clark, Wildlife Crime Officer for INTERPOL. ‘We are aware of this and are taking substantive steps to enhance it.’

In 2012 the organisation ran Operation Worthy, involving 14 countries across East, West and Southern Africa and targeting criminal organisations involved in the illegal ivory trade. To date, it has resulted in more than 200 arrests and the seizure of nearly two tonnes of contra-band ivory. It brought together some 300 officers from a range of agencies, including police, customs, environmental agencies and the way AHEAD

Doing Demo is not to fight it in real time and that’s what we do.’

PUNISHMENTS TO FIT THE CRIME

The case of the Chinese nationals let off on a US$340 fine for smuggling ivory through Kenya (see photo, page 34) highlights the need for Africa to treat wildlife crime more seriously. In too many countries, even if an ivory poacher or trader is arrested and tried, poaching is regarded as nothing more than a petty offence. In South Sudan lack of adequate legal recourse is a real problem. Gabriel Changson Chang, the country’s wildlife, conservation and tourism minister, is quoted as saying ‘We have apprehended so many poachers, caught red-handed ... but because of this legal vacuum it is very difficult to prosecute them.’

There is, however, a growing realisation of the seriousness of wildlife crimes, partic-ularly when big business is involved. Kenya’s new Wildlife Bill, currently under review, proposes stiffer penalties for poaching, including for ivory-related convictions, and Uganda is considering amending its Act that poaching carries a minimum fine of US$75,000 and a 10-year prison sentence.

The Republic of Congo may implement similar measures. ‘Facing to corruption lev-els, we are pushing very hard for a presi-dential decree to create a National Prosecuting Unit on endangered species, with a dedicated prosecutor empowered to argue cases in court regardless of their position,’ says Leon Lamprecht, who works in the country for African Parks.

In the wake of its shocking poaching sta-tistics this year, Gabon’s government has increased penalties – new legislation will up the prison term for commercial ivory poaching to three years, 15 if organised crime is involved.

HEARTS & MINDS

While bolstering conservation services and bringing in the army are important, there are other potential solutions that could work on the ground. ‘Low-tech solutions can be just as useful, as shown by the suc-cess of the community conservation move-ment in the north of Kenya and in Namib-zia,’ reasons lain Douglas-Hamilton of Save the Elephants. In Kenya, Ian Craig oversees the Northern Rangelands Trust and has first-hand experience of the bene-fits of community engagement. ‘They’re seeing better security for themselves, [and] money being generated from tourism going into education, water projects. Where these benefits are clear and to communities, elephants are being success-fully protected by local people,’ he says. If value in activities other than poaching can be found, then the incentives to kill elephants are reduced. ‘Commercial hunt-ers are the proximate cause of elephant poaching in Central Africa and according to them, they would stop killing elephants if alternative sources of income were avail-able,’ says Dan Stiles in his IUCN report ‘Elephant meat trade in Central Africa’. ‘Special efforts should be made with these hunters to provide education, training and employment as an incentive to cease kill-ing elephants.’

But, competing with steadily increasing ivory prices is difficult. ‘During a recent visit to Mozambique, we were told that some individuals are leaving secure and relatively well-paid jobs in the tourism and hunting industry in Niassa [National Reserve] to work as ivory hunters – at best they work as guards; at worst they are poachers,’ says David Santiago Garcia of the African Parks Foundation.

CORROBORATING COOPERATION

‘Trafficking relies on porous borders, cor-rupt officials and strong networks of organ-ised crime,’ all of which undermine our mutual security,’ said then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2012, as she called for a global effort ‘to dry up the demand for trafficked wildlife goods. ‘Where crimi-nal gangs can come and go at their total discretion, we know that begins to provide safe havens for other sorts of threats to people and governments,’ she added. ‘This is a global challenge that spans continents and crosses oceans, and we need to address it with partnerships that are as robust and far-reaching as the criminal networks we seek to dismantle.’
protection agencies, veterinary services, airport security, ministries of tourism and national prosecuting authorities. In 2010 the International Consortium to Combat Wildlife Crime (ICWC), a collaboration between CITES, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the World Bank and the World Customs Organization, was established with the aim of supporting wildlife law enforcement at both national and international levels. One concern it hopes to address is the dearth of law enforcement actions that follow large-scale ivory seizures.

Even at a national level, there is a need for more coordinated law enforcement efforts between appropriate organisations. Bas Huijbregts elaborates: ‘With more arrest rates there is increasing information coming from poachers, so we’re getting a picture of at least part of those networks.

The problem is that it is fragmented because law enforcement agencies do not really collaborate. We’ve consulted with INTERPOL and, through TRAFFIC, we’re pushing Central African governments to set up national coordination units that would bring in all the information and then to follow through on the investigations.’

**FOLLOW THE FORENSICS**

In 2001 Sam Wasser from the University of Washington, US, started a genetic map of Africa’s elephant populations. Given that DNA can be extracted from tusks, it is now possible to overlay DNA profiles from confiscated ivory – and to work out where it was poached. Among other successes, his laboratory’s work has been crucial in tracing two large seizures back to their origins – the one mostly from Zambia, the other from Gabon. INTERPOL is acutely aware of the value genetic evidence provides for an investigation.

‘I would like to see it used much more,’ says Wasser. ‘If it were a requirement that seizure agencies incorporate DNA analysis into their many routine procedures,’ says Bill Clark. ‘It is not absolutely simple – sampling must conform to an established protocol and with both scientific and forensic requirements. ivory, even small samples, requires CITES applications and certificates, while analyses cost money. Also, Asia needs to work more closely with Africans when a seizure is made.’

Recently, Hong Kong expressed reluctance to hand over samples for forensic testing while criminal investigations are still open, even though the results could prove useful for prosecutions. It’s symptomatic of a trend that frustrates Wasser. ‘The problem is that most countries have been very resistant to turning over their seizures for DNA testing. When we do get samples to test, it is often a year or more after the event,’ he says. ‘It’s been a case of attrition and many NGOs and other organisations have finally realised that serious pressure needs to be applied to get these countries to do the right thing.’

Wasser works closely with INTERPOL and NGOs that support DNA testing. ‘It’s time for a change. DNA testing is one sure method of targeting the hotspots and directing enforcement to areas being targeted repeatedly. However, CITES has yet to seriously advocate this approach.’

**CALL IN THE DOGS**

The use of sniffer dogs to detect ivory in transit is becoming more widely recognised as a weapon in the arsenal against the trade. Since Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) introduced sniffer dogs at Kenya’s airports in 2009, they have netted more than eight tonnes of raw and worked ivory. Their use is starting to take off in southern Africa too. ‘Our sniffer dogs are trained to detect both rhino horns and ivory, and are currently deployed at various cargo warehouses at OR Tambo International Airport in South Africa,’ says Kirsty Brebner from the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT). ‘We will soon be expanding to other potentially high-risk areas.’

With the assistance of TRAFFIC, it looks as though Mozambique may shortly approve the use of sniffer dogs too, while cities such as Lusaka may also see their deployment.

**SECURING THE STOCKPILES**

Elephant range states keep stockpiles of their ivory. Tanzania, for instance, holds more than 100 tonnes, which it considered applying to CITES for permission to sell, while Zimbabwe’s vaults contain 50 tonnes. These stockpiles comprise ivory retrieved from elephants that have died of natural causes or, in the case of countries like South Africa, through culling, as well as that seized from poachers. With permission from CITES, this ivory could be sold legally. (Anything confiscated from poachers is excluded – doing otherwise would open up potential laundering routes.)

Keeping a stockpile of ivory is a risky business. ‘Having a stockpile in any location is always a concern,’ says the International Fund for Animal Welfare’s (IFAW) Carole Ge Gabriel. ‘Last year stockpiles were stolen in Tanzania and Zambia. It’s important to maintain security, because employees were implicated in both the ivory thefts – an indication of the level of corruption in those countries.’

Fortunately, Mozambique also lost ivory out of supposedly secure facilities. In several Asian countries too, including Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia, confiscated ivory has gone missing.

What to do? There seems to be no clear directive, though destroying the ivory is one option. Last year, both Kenya and Gabon burned government-held stockpiles. While neither country had any intention of applying to sell the ivory, at least now it can’t fall into the wrong hands.

**CONSUMER CAMPAIGNS**

Essentially, if there were no demand for ivory, elephants would not be killed. Or, as Iain Douglas-Hamilton puts it, ‘The root of the problem lies in excessive demand; attempts to save the elephants will fail unless it is tackled. Appetite for ivory can be changed, as it was in the West and in Japan, but such shifts take time, and awareness of what is happening to elephants must rapidly be shared in ivory consumer countries in the East.’

Getting that message across is something his organisation, Save the Elephants, has worked closely on, together with the charity WildAid.

Using celebrities in campaigns isn’t a new idea, but it works. Take Yao Ming – former NBA basketball star, flag bearer for China at both the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games and commentator on the games for Chinese television. In 2012 he travelled to Africa for the first time to learn about and raise awareness of the plight of Africa’s elephants and rhinos.

The campaign and public service announcements received widespread coverage in China, assisted by Yao’s popular blog, read by more than a million people in the country. In it he writes, ‘After witnessing how illegal ivory was obtained, I really was speechless … it was a harrowing experience I never want to repeat, but something that everyone thinking of buying ivory should see – the wastefulness of these animals cruelly slaughtered just so that a small part of them could be used. Would anyone buy ivory if they had witnessed this?’

Douglas-Hamilton sums up what many of us feel. ‘Yao’s emotional response to living, breathing, playing elephants and to horrific faceless carcasses revealed the powerful communality of human responses and awareness needed to save elephants.’