

## The Role of Lao PDR in the Ivory Trade

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### INTRODUCTION

There is limited information on the ivory trade in Lao PDR but the presence of Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus* populations and a geographic position—situated between the world's largest ivory traders Thailand and China—as well as the presence of ivory for sale in the country, may suggest an emerging role for the country in the international ivory trade. Six towns known for their involvement in wildlife trade were surveyed in order to quantify the levels of open trade in ivory. In three of these towns, ivory was observed for sale, with the vast majority in Vientiane. Here, 2391 pieces of ivory, including bangles, earrings, name seals and raw tusks, were openly offered for sale in 22 outlets. Information from vendors indicated that the ivory originated from Lao PDR and not from neighbouring countries (Thailand, Viet Nam) or Africa, but forensic analysis would be necessary to determine the origin of the ivory more precisely. Prices were advertised in US dollars or Chinese Yuan Renminbi, clearly suggesting an international clientele, a fact confirmed by most vendors. However, recent seizures data also suggest that Lao PDR may also be playing a transit country role for African ivory.

### BACKGROUND

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is one of the smaller South-east Asian countries. Landlocked, Lao PDR borders Myanmar and China to the north, Viet Nam to the east, Cambodia to the south and Thailand to the west. The historical distribution and population numbers of Asian Elephants in the country remain unclear, but it appears the species was once broadly distributed (Santiapillai and Jackson, 1990; Duckworth *et al.*, 1999). At present, Asian Elephants are widely but very patchily distributed in Lao PDR, with two viable populations probably remaining (Choudhury *et al.*, 2008)).

Despite a previous abundance of elephants in the country, Lao PDR does not appear to have been a major centre for ivory carving or ivory trade. It has instead suffered a loss of elephants due to illegal poaching to meet demand for ivory from neighbouring Thailand (Martin, 1992; Anon., 1993). Poaching of elephants has been reported from various places in Lao PDR, including two separate incidences in Sayaboury province, along the border with Thailand, in 2008, where a total of five elephants were found dead with bullets to the head and feet. Two of these elephants were wild and three were privately owned animals. All five were male and had had their tusks removed (Anon., 2008). Although most ivory taken from illegally killed elephants in the early 1990s was smuggled to Thailand, there was some small-scale



IVORY FOR SALE AT A HIGH-END HOTEL IN VIENTIANE, LAO PDR, IN 2011.

PHOTOGRAPH:  
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trade noted in Lao PDR (Martin, 1992; Anon., 1993; Nash, 1997). Srikosamatara *et al.* (1992), surveying the capital Vientiane and the Thai-Lao PDR border in 1990–1991, found little evidence of trade in ivory, other than one specialized shop owner in Vientiane who sold mainly to Thai customers. In the early 1990s, Martin (1992) found approximately eight shops in Vientiane and 12 in the former capital Luang Prabang selling small quantities of ivory, mostly to foreigners, especially from Thailand. In January 2001, Martin and Stiles (2002) surveyed Vientiane and Luang Prabang for ivory. A total of 1424 ivory items were found for sale in 63 outlets, the vast majority of these in Vientiane (1346 items in 53 outlets). Most pieces were small and with few carvers active, they concluded that the demand for ivory in or from Lao PDR was limited. The small scale of the internal trade is probably explained by the fact that ivory does not feature prominently in traditional Laotian arts and crafts.

More recent studies have suggested an increase in the processing and sale of ivory within Lao PDR. In November 2002, Shepherd (unpublished data) surveyed 159 jewellery and souvenir shops in Vientiane, four of which were found to have ivory for sale, and 137 shops in the Morning Market (Talat Sao), where five more outlets had ivory for sale (Table 1). The jewellery shops in the city sold small amounts of ivory, including eight carved tusks or 'bridges' (USD200/each in one shop). Three other pieces (two bracelets and one pipe) were said to have been carved in China. One shop in the Lao Plaza Hotel offered two carved tusks for sale. Vendors in the Morning Market had the greatest number of ivory items for sale (93 pieces) including uncarved tusks (USD1900/pair) and bridges (USD700/pair). According to a vendor selling a pair of the uncarved tusks which had originated from an elephant that had died in Lao PDR, the shop used to sell more ivory but it had become increasingly difficult to obtain stock. This dealer also reported that when more ivory was available, carvers from Viet Nam would come to Vientiane to do the carving. The majority of buyers were said to come from Thailand but also included diplomats and embassy staff from Thailand and the USA.

Type	2002		2011	
	number	shops	number	shops
<b>CARVED IVORY</b>				
pendant	78	2	521	12
earrings (pair)	2	1	513	5
bracelet/bangle	7	3	335	14
bead necklace			176	10
ring			102	7
figurine			79	9
broach			69	6
chopsticks (pair)			20	4
cigarette holder			11	2
name seal			10	2
hair piece			6	1
knife handle	1	1		
pipe	1	1		
carved tusk/bridge	12	4	4	2
<b>RAW IVORY</b>				
tusk piece			5	1
tusk tip	3	2	5	2
raw/uncarved tusk	2	1	2	2

**Table 1. Ivory for sale in Vientiane, Lao PDR, in November 2002 and August 2011 illustrating the increase in the sale of carved ivory over time.**

Year	Shops	Characterization	Reference
1990	8	Shops selling ivory, largely to foreigners	Martin, 1992
1990	1	Single shop specializing in carvings, ivory originating from Laos and carved in Viet Nam; Thai clientele	Srikosamatara <i>et al.</i> , 1992
1991	1	As above	Srikosamatara <i>et al.</i> , 1992
1999	0	No ivory recorded	Nooren and Claridge, 2001
2001	53	Most shops displaying small quantities; ivory originating from Lao PDR carved in Lao PDR by Vietnamese carvers; Chinese and Japanese clientele	Martin and Stiles, 2002
2002	9	As above, but clientele mostly Thai	C.R. Shepherd, unpublished
2011	22	Most shops displaying small quantities, shops in luxury hotels displaying large quantities; ivory originating from Lao PDR carved in Lao PDR and Viet Nam; Chinese clientele	present study

**Table 2. Summary of ivory trade in Vientiane, Lao PDR, based on observations and subsequent discussions with vendors; shops indicate number of shops or outlets that offered ivory for sale.**

Country	City	Year	Outlets	Pieces	Reference
Lao PDR	Vientiane	2011	22	2 391	present study
China	Guangzhou	2011	80	6 437	Martin and Vigne, 2011
Viet Nam	Ho Chi Minh City	2008	49	1 776	Stiles, 2008
Thailand	Bangkok	2008	57	11 270	Stiles, 2009
	Phayuha Kiri	2008	8	4 310	Stiles, 2009
	Chang Mai	2008	19	2 877	Stiles, 2009
Myanmar	Tachilek	2006	23	4 519	Shepherd and Nijman, 2008
	Yangon	2006	40	1 904	Shepherd and Nijman, 2008
	Mandalay	2006	17	1 821	Shepherd and Nijman, 2008
Cambodia	Phnom Penh	2001	54	1 683	Martin and Stiles, 2002

**Table 3. Overview of the results of the most recent surveys of major ivory markets in Lao PDR and neighbouring countries.**

Stiles (2008), in a report on the ivory trade in Viet Nam, found that most of the new ivory originated in Lao PDR. Thailand, while illegally importing most of its ivory from African countries, also imports, or used to import, ivory from Lao PDR (Nash, 1997; Stiles, 2009). Furthermore, at an international exhibition of traditional crafts in Bangkok in 2006, the Lao exhibition displayed carved ivory as examples of Laotian craftsmanship (Stiles, 2009). These observations suggest some level of ivory carving and trade in and from Lao PDR, but there is limited contemporary quantitative data available to assess the true scale or trends over time.

At present, several of Lao PDR's neighbours, especially China and Thailand, are recognized as having major ivory carving industries and are the largest end-use markets in the global illegal ivory trade (Milliken *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, surveys conducted in towns in Lao PDR's neighbouring countries close to its borders (e.g. Mae Sei and Chiang Khong, Thailand; Tachilek, Myanmar; Ha Long City, Viet Nam; Kunming, China), suggest frequent, albeit illegal, transfer of ivory between nations (Shepherd and Nijman, 2008; Stiles, 2008, 2009; Nijman and Shepherd, unpublished data). With this information at hand, the authors conducted a survey of the ivory trade in Lao PDR to provide data on current levels of trade, the origin of the ivory being used and recommendations to curb the illicit commerce.

### Regulation of ivory trade in Lao PDR

Asian Elephants are "totally protected" in Lao PDR and no trade in them, or their parts, is permitted (Nash, 1997). Internationally, Asian Elephants have been listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1975, which prohibits international commercial trade of live specimens, their parts or derivatives. This includes the trade in raw ivory, and all products made out of ivory. Lao PDR only became a Party to CITES in 2004, long after all of its neighbouring countries had joined the Convention. Despite being Parties to CITES, national laws governing domestic trade vary across countries. All domestic trade in ivory is illegal in Viet Nam and Cambodia (Martin and Stiles, 2002), while domestic trade in ivory from captive Asian Elephants is legal in Thailand, presenting a major regulatory loophole through which vast quantities of African Elephant ivory are laundered with relative impunity (Stiles, 2009). Domestic ivory trade is illegal or semi-legal in Myanmar (due to gaps in the current legislation) (Shepherd and Nijman, 2008) and domestic trade in registered (African Elephant *Loxodonta africana*) ivory, when properly labelled, and sold through a government-authorized retail outlet, is legal in China (Martin and Vigne, 2011). Hence, while there is legal and sometimes strictly regulated trade in ivory in neighbouring countries, all ivory trade in Lao PDR is forbidden and no commercial export of ivory from Lao PDR is permitted.

### METHODS

In August 2011, the following towns were visited: Huay Xai and Donsao Island (both across the Mekong River from Thailand), Boten (on the border with China), Luang Nam Tha, Muang Sing, and Vientiane. Locations surveyed included sites where ivory was thought or known to be crafted or sold, based on previous studies or guidebooks and websites reviewed.

Ivory was found for sale in market souvenir stalls, antique shops, souvenir shops, jewellery and gem shops and luxury hotel shops. Whenever possible, items were inspected physically to verify that they were carved from elephant ivory (as opposed to mammoth ivory, or animal bone, for example). Vendors of ivory appeared to be aware that trade in ivory was illegal, and during the survey many would not allow photographs to be taken, even though their goods were openly displayed. However, photographs were taken when and where possible.

To complement the ground-level snapshot of trade activity, data were also compiled on ivory seizures for the period 2000 to 2011 from the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), the monitoring system to track illegal trade in ivory that TRAFFIC has developed and manages on behalf of the CITES Parties, and from the TRAFFIC Southeast Asia database (which contains, amongst other sources, verified media reports of seizures); from the UNEP-WCMC CITES Trade Database (2000–2009), and through correspondence with conservationists working in Lao PDR.

### RESULTS

#### Volumes in trade

A total of 2493 ivory items in 24 outlets was recorded, all of which was openly on display. No ivory was observed in Donsao Island, Muang Sing or Luang Nam Tha. In Huay Xai, one shop selling general wildlife products was displaying 10 ivory bracelets and 80 small carved ivory pieces for sale. Boten, recently developed by a Chinese business consortium as a gambling paradise, was largely deserted during this survey with all but one casino and a few shops and restaurants closed. One shop was found to be selling wildlife products, including 12 pieces of ivory. One gem or jewellery shop, closed during the survey, displayed signs of an African Elephant with large tusks suggesting ivory was once for sale (or is still for sale when the shop is open).

The ivory trade in Vientiane was unregulated and 22 outlets were found to offer ivory for sale (Table 1). In the Morning Market, traditionally a centre for ivory trade, six shops displayed ivory, totalling 142 pieces. The largest amount of ivory was observed in two luxury hotels. The Lao Plaza Hotel displayed 290 pieces in its four shops, and in the central lobby of the Don Chan Palace Hotel, two cabinets displayed a total of 1843 pieces.

### Prices, origins and destinations

Prices were advertised or quoted in US dollars or Chinese Yuan Renminbi, and not in Lao Kip. Prices of carved ivory items in Lao PDR, or at least those observed in the luxury hotels, are high particularly when compared to price data from Viet Nam (Stiles, 2008), Thailand (Stiles, 2009) or China (Martin and Vigne, 2011). Prices for three bangles, from two different shops, differing only slightly in thickness, as indicated on price stickers were USD1200, USD1400 and USD1340. Similar-sized bangles in Viet Nam were reportedly on sale for USD350–400 (Ho Chi Minh City) and USD203–525 (Ha Noi), and in Thailand for USD214–257, and in China from USD430–1150.

When queried, the traders indicated that most of the ivory originated from Lao PDR, with some traders referring to the large number of elephants that occur in the south of the country. The authors' suggestions that at least some of the ivory surely must have originated from Thailand or even Africa were by and large denied. In one shop in Vientiane it was pointed out that one intricately carved bangle represented Laotian ivory but that the carving had been done in Viet Nam. Another shopkeeper indicated that the ivory she had on display had been carved in her own factory in Luang Prabang.

The large numbers of ivory Buddha amulets (in addition to ones made of bone or resin) were probably for both domestic and international markets. A fair number of the figurines and carved tusks had *Kwan Yin* (the Buddhist goddess of compassion) and *Maitreya* (Happy or Laughing Buddha) as subjects, suggesting that vendors were targeting Chinese customers. The authors observed 10 name seals (hanko) for sale which are exclusively produced for East Asian markets, including China.

### Seizures

No reports of ivory seizures or confiscations in Lao PDR were found. In fact, Lao PDR has never reported a single ivory seizure to ETIS (cf. CITES, 2010; T. Milliken, *in litt.*, 11 August 2011). The WCMC CITES

Trade Database lists three cases of illegal importation of ivory from Lao PDR into the USA. In 2001 one ivory piece was confiscated, and in 2006 there were two confiscations, of two ivory carvings and one ivory carving, respectively.

International media have reported on two recent ivory seizures that were apparently destined for Lao PDR. The first occurred in July 2009 when 16 elephant tusks, weighing almost 300 kg, were confiscated at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Kenya, allegedly originating from Mozambique and being shipped to Lao PDR. The second case involved the seizure of 239 tusks weighing over 2000 kg in February 2010 at Bangkok international airport, in transit, from Dubai to Lao PDR. ETIS data detail a third case involving 435 kg of African Elephant ivory seized in December 2010 at Bangkok international airport, in transit to Vientiane, Lao PDR; this shipment had originated from Nampula, Mozambique, and had transited Johannesburg, South Africa, and Hong Kong as air freight before being seized by Thai Customs in Bangkok (T. Milliken, *in litt.*, 24 January 2012).

## DISCUSSION

### Trade in Vientiane—an upmarket shift

Martin and Stiles (2002) reported a decrease in trade in ivory in Vientiane between 1990 and 2001, with fewer active carvers and items for sale. Most of the trade was centred in Vientiane's Morning Market where, in 2001, they found some 1300 items for sale in 46 outlets. In sharp contrast, Nooren and Claridge (2001), who surveyed 23 stalls or shops in central Vientiane and 56 in the Morning Market in May 1999, report not a single piece of ivory among the more than 1000 wildlife products for sale (although they did record other elephant products such as teeth, skin, bone). In 2002, Shepherd (unpublished data) surveyed 159 shops in Vientiane and found 106 items for sale in a total of nine shops. During the present survey, the amount of ivory for sale at the Morning Market was not remarkable (142 items in nine shops) but unlike previous surveys, large quantities of

LAO PDR IS PLAYING A MORE PROMINENT ROLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL IVORY TRADE THAN WAS PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT, ESPECIALLY AS A CONDUIT FOR LARGE SHIPMENTS TO CHINA



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ivory pieces were found for sale in several luxury hotels. No ivory was seen for sale at Vientiane's international airport. Martin and Stiles (2002) noted that most of the international tourists visiting Vientiane were low budget backpackers who were not prime ivory buyers. This situation has clearly changed with Vientiane increasingly catering to a high-end tourist market. See Table 2 for an overview.

During this survey there were indications that international buyers were the target of the ivory market in Lao PDR, and this was especially true in Vientiane. The type of ivory carvings for sale, such as name seals and chopsticks, suggest an East Asian clientele, most notably Chinese and Japanese buyers. Prices here were higher than in neighbouring countries and were displayed or quoted in foreign rather than Lao PDR currency, again suggesting an international clientele.

Finally, the seizure of ivory from Africa en route to Lao PDR, which was confiscated in Kenya and Thailand, points to an emerging role for Lao PDR in the international ivory market. Assuming dealers were truthful when stating that ivory for sale in Lao PDR originated from local elephants, this suggests that Lao PDR may be acting as a gateway for African ivory to enter East Asian markets, particularly China, rather than serve as a point of sale for African ivory.

Analysis of the ETIS data has repeatedly identified the Chinese ivory market as the leading driver of illicit trade in ivory and has hypothesized that a series of exceptionally large ivory seizures, representing more than 9.3 t of ivory made at the port of Haiphong, Viet Nam, in 2009 and 2010, were actually destined for the more lucrative Chinese market (Blanc *et al.*, 2011). In fact, the subsequent April 2011 seizure by Chinese authorities of 707 ivory tusks, weighing 2234 kg, coming from Viet Nam into neighbouring Guangxi province, provided confirmation of a terrestrial 'back door' trade route into China. Guangxi province borders Guangdong province, of which Guangzhou is the capital and where the largest number of China's ivory carvers are located. With both Chinese and Vietnamese authorities increasingly interdicting such ivory through targeted law enforcement actions, it is very possible that Lao PDR is now being used as an alternative terrestrial route into China's Yunnan province (T. Milliken, *in litt.*, 11 August 2011). Further support for this comes from a recent seizure in the Chinese city of Jinghong, north of Muang Sing, and just 10 km from the Sino-Lao border, where in December 2011 93 ivory products were seized (Anon., 2012).

### **Regional comparison**

Table 3 shows the magnitude of the trade in major ivory markets in Lao PDR and neighbouring countries. With over 10 000 ivory products recorded in each survey (Stiles, 2008), Bangkok clearly stands out as the largest ivory market in the region. The second largest ivory market is Guangzhou in China. Levels of trade in Vientiane are less than in Phayuha Kiri, Thailand, and

Tachilek, Myanmar (just across the border with Mae Sai, Thailand), but are similar to ivory trade levels found in Chang Mai, Thailand, the country's second largest city. In comparison, the open ivory trade in Viet Nam and Cambodia appears to be relatively small, but the most recent survey data for Cambodia date back more than a decade and may not reflect the current situation.

As indicated in the ETIS analysis (Milliken *et al.*, 2009), there is little evidence of law enforcement action against illicit ivory trade in Lao PDR. Very little, if any, ivory has been confiscated in Lao PDR and none has been reported to ETIS. Instances of ivory seized en route to Lao PDR are only beginning to emerge, but trade volumes are substantial: four seizures made elsewhere in the world between 2009 and 2011 which implicate Lao PDR as the country of destination amounted to a total of 4123 kg of ivory (T. Milliken, *in litt.*, 24 January 2012). This survey strongly suggests that Lao PDR is now playing a more prominent role in the international ivory trade than was previously thought, especially as a conduit for large shipments to China.

### **Recommendations to curb the trade**

The CITES authorities in Lao PDR are urged to take the necessary steps to stop the sale of ivory in Vientiane and elsewhere in the country, and to liaise with their Thai and Chinese counterparts to curb the international trade in ivory. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Regular monitoring of the markets in Vientiane (Morning Market, jewellery/gem shops, luxury hotels) should be carried out by Lao PDR's law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend illegal traders. It is anticipated that focusing on some of the largest traders that openly sell ivory (especially those selling products in major hotels) would lead to a substantial decrease in trade activity in the capital city.
- Offenders should be apprehended and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law in order to serve as a deterrent to others. All ivory seen for sale in retail outlets should be confiscated by the government and destroyed to avoid subsequent 'recycling' or leakage of confiscated contraband into trade channels.
- Recognizing that international co-operation is essential to curb illegal cross-border trade, and to mitigate Lao PDR's role as an increasingly important transit country in the illicit Africa-to-Asia ivory trade chain, CITES officials, Customs and police authorities should be encouraged to work closely with enforcement officers in neighbouring Thailand, Viet Nam and China.
- In order to understand the source of ivory in Lao PDR's domestic ivory market more fully, it may be worthwhile to test various ivory samples to establish

their origin. With the recent work by Ahlering *et al.* (2011), who genotyped populations of Laotian elephants and that of Vidya *et al.* (2005, 2007) who genotyped other populations of Asian Elephants, the option to construct a relevant Asian Elephant microsatellite map now exists, allowing the origin of Laotian elephant ivory to be traced. Such a map could be constructed and results co-ordinated by the newly established ASEAN Wildlife Forensics Network, under the support of the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network.

- Monitoring of the ivory trade in Lao PDR should continue in order to measure trends in the trade as well as to gauge the success and impact of any future law enforcement efforts.

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