



## OPINION

# CHINA, IVORY AND WISHFUL THINKING...

In early December 2015, a Save the Elephants' press release documenting the decline in price of illegal raw ivory in China was picked up by a wide range of media outlets. A range of other NGOs (non-governmental organizations) then claimed credit for a demand reduction which they believed had taken place.

At the time I informed Save the Elephants and researchers Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin that the sampling of legal and semi-legal outlets in northern China might not have been representative of that which was going on in a regional context.

They confirmed that their survey and press release had been based solely on their findings in parts of China from ivory carvers and traders.

They agreed that their findings were not representative of what has been happening in the wider region of South East Asia.

During various film shoots, over the past six years, we documented more and more ivory and ivory products becoming available in a wide range of neighbouring countries and gambling enclaves (specifically created to get around the national laws of China, including those relating to gambling, prostitution, the illegal trade in wildlife and drugs).

We made it a point to also film activities at various border crossing where we documented a total lack of control measures which would help restrict the cross-border trade of contraband such as wildlife products. While countries in parts of

**A carver in Vietnam shows us a marked tusk which looks very much like one having come out of government storage.**



**TOP: The younger generation appears to be equally interested in ivory jewelry items.**

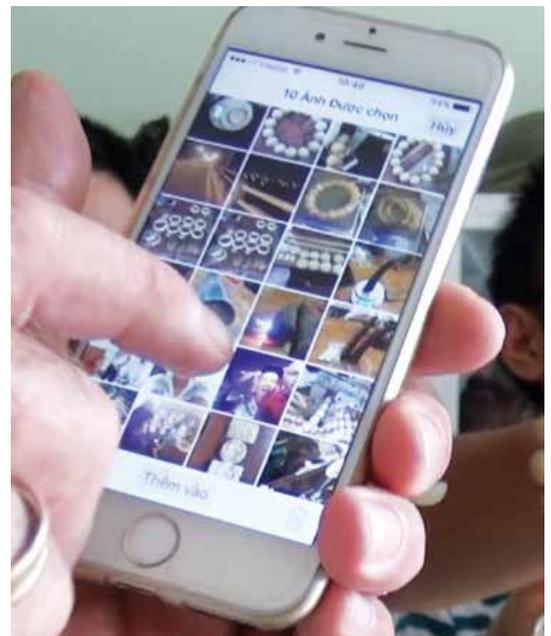
**BELOW: A lot of the marketing of high profile products is now done showing potential clients the product as part of a mobile phone display.**

Africa have graduated to introducing sniffer dogs, there was no sign of any such control measures at the borders we checked out. The trend of more and more Chinese travelling to neighbouring countries for pleasure as well as for shopping is evident everywhere as is the increasing number of Chinese-owned shops in a range of retail markets and more and more hotels under construction in some of the border enclaves.

It has never been easy to watch and film Chinese customers abroad checking out and buying ivory, rhino horn products, tiger bone jewellery and wine, bear bile and the like. We managed to film dozens, if not hundreds, of these sales transactions, in stark contrast to the contention in the press release that the authors had not seen a single person in a shop in China actively buying ivory products.

Chinese customers would often take photographs on their mobile phones, send the images with the prices back to friends in China, receive feedback in minutes and then expand

**IN ONE LOCATION WE FOUND A RANGE OF SHOPS WITH POSTERS ADVERTISING ELEPHANT IVORY, BUT THEY HAD TAPED OVER THE ENGLISH VERSION OF 'IVORY FOR SALE' WHILE STILL DISPLAYING THE CORRESPONDING CHINESE CHARACTERS.**



PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN

their purchases accordingly. Although the price for raw rhino horn has dropped per kilo (but not for the corresponding jewellery which tends to be sold on a per gram basis), the rates quoted for ivory have been pretty consistent in the neighbouring countries at \$800 to \$1,200 per kilo with every dealer mentioning quality as a final determining factor.

As to the thousands of worked items we filmed, negotiations were generally not just in terms of



**TOP: The more elaborate landscape carvings are becoming rare in some markets the more downmarket jewelry items are the main line of production in most workshops.**

**BELOW: Mammoth ivory shop outlets appear to be on the increase and offering a perfect setting to launder elephant ivory products.**

weight but based on the type and quality of the product on offer.

We recently concluded another three-week film shoot documenting the demand for tiger products, but since this trade is closely interlinked with ivory, pangolin scales, hornbill ivory, rhino horn and so on, we also asked our local investigators to check on changing prices and demand patterns.

There was no talk of the bottom dropping out of any market in some of China's neighbouring countries, in fact the opposite, with more and more ivory on display in a range of trading centres in Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

One could not avoid the impression that there might be a specific policy in place encouraging key Chinese ivory traders to set up shop in neighbouring countries - the

first step in counteracting compensation claims that have been discussed in the context of China finally outlawing the domestic ivory trade.

One shopkeeper in Laos told us that most of the ivory now on display in that country was carved in Laos by Chinese carvers. When leaving China we flew out through Guangzhou International Airport.

We again filmed a large supply of 'mammoth ivory' items in a souvenir shop located in the departure hall after customs and immigration. As with a range of other mammoth ivory outlets we looked into, the quantities and variety of items appeared to be on the increase.

Clearly, the average consumer would be unable to determine, on the spot, if they are buying elephant or mammoth ivory. This new trend offers a perfect scenario for laundering African elephant ivory.

In one location we found a range of shops with posters advertising elephant ivory, but they had taped over the English version of 'ivory for sale' while still displaying the corresponding Chinese characters.

There is a very wide range of fake and falsified wildlife products on offer imitating rhino horn, ivory (some plastic and some bone), tiger wine, tiger teeth, tiger claws, tiger penis or bear bile (mostly from pigs) and all at a fraction of the price of the real thing.

The Chinese traders and markets once again demonstrating how very good they are at beating the system and generally being miles ahead of any kind of enforcement bodies trying to protect the



PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN

**ONCE AGAIN THE CONCLUSION AT THE END OF THE TRIP WAS: THE DEMAND IS THERE, THE MARKET AND THE KEY DEALERS ARE VERY DYNAMIC AND ARE READY TO ADAPT AND TAKE LOSSES IF NECESSARY.**

**A typical display in a Laos souvenir shops many of which have been acquired by Chinese traders.**

end consumer - or for that for matter the wildlife.

We have been left with the overall impression of a culture of window-dressing, corruption and lip service - from the street dealers, to the manufacturers, to the wholesalers, to the policy makers with the corresponding infrastructure having been allowed to develop to serve this dark underbelly of China.

It is an ever changing scenario with one constant - overall demand seems on the increase and not in decline.

In another case, a news item by Al Jazeera TV, based on an investigative story by an NGO, resulted in some cosmetic measures.

We have a mobile telephone photograph of a display handed to us by a dealer offering 33 different rhino horns of various weights and size. This type of marketing is used by wholesale

importers sending the latest offers of new arrivals to a wide range of retailers. It would appear that a host of such networks exist.

On our last trip, we travelled with a former Russian government official who stated that Russia had helped establish the communist systems in many of these countries, and under any communist system the authorities would have the enforcement capacity to counteract these trends if there was any kind of real political will.

Once again the conclusion at the end of the trip was: The demand is there, the market and the key dealers are very dynamic and are ready to adapt and take losses if necessary. Governance quality in the countries concerned is generally poor and encourages corrupt practices.

Based on these experiences, those NGOs peddling feel-good demand reduction tales might well turn out to be part of the problem. ●



**KARL AMMANN** is a wildlife photographer and film-maker. He has received world-wide recognition, notably as one of Time Magazine's Heroes of the Environment in 2007.