

# STILL IN BUSINESS: The Ivory Trade in Asia, Seven Years After the CITES Ban

## A TRAFFIC Network Report

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### Executive Summary

The demand for ivory fuelled an unacceptable decline of the African Elephant *Loxodonta africana* in the 1970s and 1980s. This prompted the member countries of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1989 to assign the African Elephant the highest level of protection. The Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus* was already in Appendix I of CITES, so by placing the African Elephant in Appendix I, all commercial international trade in elephant ivory was banned.

At the time the ban went into effect in 1990, most ivory-consuming nations still had legal stockpiles of raw, semi-worked and worked ivory. Predictions over how long these stockpiles would support traditional ivory industries ranged from a matter of months to a few years.

This report provides a review of the current Asian ivory trade, examining recent information from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan. It shows that Asia's ivory industry is still in business, seven years after the international ban. However, the main volume of trade is no longer in intricate works of art, but in signature seals (known as hankos in Japanese) used to transact everyday business in some parts of Asia.

Has the Asian ivory trade really been running solely off dwindling, finite reserves of ivory that were stockpiled before January 1990? Unfortunately, existing information on stockpiles is inadequate to be able to judge how much "legal" ivory remains in Asia. Likewise, little data exists on actual consumption rates of ivory in Asia. Much of the trade is conducted informally or below the level at which trade records are maintained. Today, ivory passes less and less through formal traders and more through amateur and informal networks.

The study's examination of ivory trade controls in the region found that all of the countries and territories surveyed endeavour to comply with the international trade ban. Nonetheless, the legal domestic markets of these countries remain the destination for a significant volume of illicit ivory on the international market.

An analysis of data in TRAFFIC's Bad Ivory Database System provides some indication of the movement of illegal ivory around the world. Data from major seizures involving more than 52 tonnes of ivory from 26 countries between 1989 and 1996 show that 18.8 tonnes was directed towards Asian destinations.

The report documents the following with regard to illegal international trade into and through Asia:

- Several large seizures of illegal ivory have occurred in China or en route to China.
- Hong Kong continued to be a destination for commercial shipments of raw ivory tusks and pieces from African and Asian sources through 1992. Since 1992, virtually all seizures of raw and semi-worked ivory in Hong Kong have involved exports to other Asian countries.
- Japan continues to be a destination for illegal shipments of raw ivory, semi-worked ivory blocks, the semi-processed blanks used to produce hankos, and worked ivory products. From 1989 through 1992, Japanese law enforcement authorities seized 12 such shipments. In 1997, seizures in Japan included raw tusks and 13,800 semi-worked ivory blocks coming from Singapore.
- Macau authorities seized more than 300 ivory items between 1988 and 1995.
- Although South Korea was not identified as a significant destination for ivory prior to the ban, there is considerable evidence of South Korean involvement in illegal ivory trade in the post-ban period. Since 1989, large consignments of raw and semi-worked ivory destined for South Korea have been seized leaving Africa and Hong Kong, in transit through Belgium and France, and entering South Korea. Within Africa, South Koreans have been linked to illegal trade in ivory in Gabon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.
- Singapore continues to be both a destination for, and a source of, ivory in the region. Singapore-bound consignments have been seized leaving South Africa, in transit through Belgium, and entering Singapore from Congo. Singapore exports of raw and semi-worked ivory were seized in Hong Kong, Belgium, Taiwan, and Japan.
- Taiwan authorities have made a number of significant ivory seizures in the post-ban period. Illegal shipments involving Taiwan have been documented en route from South Africa, Malawi and Nigeria, in transit through the UK and entering Japan.

- Thailand continues to be a destination for illegal shipments of raw ivory, using routes involving Ethiopia, Djibouti, Belgium, Netherlands, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

**Asian destinations of major ivory seizures in the TRAFFIC Bad Ivory Database System (figures are in kilos)**

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	Total
Taiwan	*	*	158	854	465	4,738	881	243	7,339
Japan	*	2,207	1,069	372	*	*	*	*	3,648
China	*	*	*	688	*	166	*	1,032	1,886
Hong Kong	673	759	127	218	*	*	*	*	1,777
South Korea	127	897	149	79	457	*	*	*	1,709
Singapore	558	169	184	*	447	*	*	*	1,358
Thailand	*	*	*	468	400	226	*	*	1,094

\* data not available

Control of domestic trade, which is not governed by CITES, varies in the region, with the most comprehensive legislation found to be in Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan. However, one key finding of the study is that not one of the eight countries and territories surveyed has adequate regulations to deal with the possible infiltration of illicit ivory into its legal domestic market, particularly ivory for making signature seals.

Japan has one of the most advanced domestic ivory trade control systems in the region. Yet TRAFFIC's examination found the existing system to be neither mandatory nor comprehensive at all levels. A survey of 100 shops indicated that the system is particularly weak at the retail level for finished products.

China may be an emerging ivory market, though little is known about the domestic market at this time. Recent smuggling cases involving Koreans in Africa are also cause for concern. Taiwan now has the strictest domestic ivory trade controls of the markets examined, but it may still function as a platform for illicit trade.

In Hong Kong, a legislative loophole allowing a five-kilogram exemption for export of personal effects for departing residents has been habitually used for smuggling ivory out of the Territory. One such shipment can carry ivory equal to 200 finished signature seals.

Production of signature seal blanks is on the rise in Africa, as is illegal trade in these items in Asia. The ivory seizure information gathered by TRAFFIC indicates that Asian-run ivory-processing businesses are now operating in at least 12 African countries, and signature seals appear to be their main output. These countries are Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Zaire, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and South Africa. In addition, smugglers are using new techniques, such as shipping small parcels of worked ivory through the regular post.