

Online ivory trade threatens Africa's elephants

TODD PITMAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Conservationists say there's a new threat to the survival of Africa's endangered elephants that may be just as deadly as poachers' bullets: the black-market trade of ivory in cyberspace.

Illegal tusks are being bought and sold on countless Internet forums and shopping websites worldwide with increasing frequency, including Internet giant Google, according to activists. And wildlife groups attending the 178-nation Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in Bangkok this week are calling on global law enforcement agencies to do something about it.

The elephant slaughter, which has reached crisis proportions unheard of in two decades, is largely being driven by skyrocketing demand in Asia, where tusks are often carved into tourist trinkets and ornaments.

"The Internet is anonymous, it's open 24 hours a day for business, and selling illegal ivory online is a low-risk, high-profit activity for criminals," Tania McCrea-Steele of the International Fund for Animal Welfare told The Associated Press on Tuesday from London.

In one investigation last year, IFAW found 17,847 ivory products listed on 13 websites in China. The country, which conservationists call the world's leading destination for "blood ivory" exported out of Africa by smuggling gangs and heavily armed rebel militias, is not alone.

IFAW says illegal ivory trading online is an issue within the U.S., including on eBay, and it is rife on some websites in Europe, particularly nations with colonial links to Africa.

It is often advertised with code words like "ox-bone," "white gold," "unburnable bone," or "cold to the touch," and shipped through the mail.

Another conservation advocacy group, the Environmental Investigation Agency, said Tuesday that Google Japan's shopping site now has 10,000 ads promoting the sale of ivory.

About 80 percent of the ads are for "hanko," small wooden stamps inlaid with ivory lettering that are widely used in Japan to affix signature seals to official documents; the rest are carvings and other small objects.

The EIA said hanko sales are a "major demand driver for elephant ivory."

"While elephants are being mass slaughtered across Africa to produce ivory trinkets, it is shocking to discover that Google, with the massive resources it has at

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its disposal, is failing to enforce its own policies designed to help protect endangered elephants," said Allan Thorton, EIA's U.S.-based president.

Google said in an emailed response to The Associated Press that "ads for products obtained from endangered or threatened species are not allowed on Google. As soon as we detect ads that violate our advertising policies, we remove them."

The EIA said it had written a letter to Google CEO Larry Page on Feb. 22 urging the company to remove the ads because they violate Google's own policies. It said Google had not responded to the letter or taken down the advertisements.

About 70 years ago, up to 5 million elephants were believed to have roamed the African continent. Today, just several hundred thousand are left.

As Asian economies have grown, so has their demand for ivory. Over the last 12 months, an estimated 32,000 elephants were killed in Africa, according to the Born Free Foundation, which says black-market ivory sells for as much as \$1,300 per pound, a huge multi-billion dollar business.

CITES banned the international ivory trade in 1989, but the move did not address domestic markets. Since then, Japan and China have imported legal ivory stocks from Africa in at least three controlled sales.

McCrea-Steele said IFAW has advised Google on illicit trading, as well as China's Alibaba Group, which runs the popular e-commerce platform Taobao. She said both were "very responsive" and had taken action to stamp out illicit activities.

IFAW has also worked with eBay, which it once called "one of the main channels through which trafficking in wildlife and wildlife products are conducted online." The company imposed its own voluntary ban in 2007 after IFAW helped persuade them that ivory was indeed being trafficked with the help of their site.

"They've cleaned up, that's sure," said Adrian Hiel, an IFAW official attending the CITES conference in the Thai capital. "But there are so many ads that come out every day, you have to be vigilant, you have to keep checking."

Even now, concerned Internet shoppers still allege ivory is being sold on eBay. One called attention to a carving of a rural Asian village scene selling for \$1,000 that is labeled as "Fine Chinese Ox Bone." The item is advertised by a seller in Los Angeles with the note, "Ships to: Worldwide."

Hiel said it was always possible to make an educated guess based on where the object is being sold and how much it goes for. But "unless you buy it and examine it, it's hard to tell for sure what's legal and what's not."

"Our argument is that the onus should be on the seller to prove the legality of what they're selling," Hiel said. "Because law enforcement can't go around ordering stuff of eBay just to test the legality of it."

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Dan Ashe, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that when elephant poaching last reached crisis levels several decades ago, web-based trafficking was not something anybody had to consider.

Now, "Internet-based crime is an important aspect of control," he said. "It makes it much more difficult, but we have to deal with it."

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