



Published: October 2012

## Ivory Worship

**Thousands of elephants die each year so that their tusks can be carved into religious objects. Can the slaughter be stopped?**

By Bryan Christy

Photographs by Brent Stirton, Reportage by Getty Images

**IN JANUARY 2012 A HUNDRED RAIDERS ON HORSEBACK CHARGED OUT OF CHAD INTO CAMEROON'S BOUBA NDJIDAH NATIONAL PARK, SLAUGHTERING HUNDREDS OF ELEPHANTS**—entire families—in one of the worst concentrated killings since a global ivory trade ban was adopted in 1989. Carrying AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, they dispatched the elephants with a military precision reminiscent of a 2006 butchering outside Chad's Zakouma National Park. And then some stopped to pray to Allah. Seen from the ground, each of the bloated elephant carcasses is a monument to human greed. Elephant poaching levels are currently at their worst in a decade, and seizures of illegal ivory are at their highest level in years. From the air too the scattered bodies present a senseless crime scene—you can see which animals fled, which mothers tried to protect their young, how one terrified herd of 50 went down together, the latest of the tens of thousands of elephants killed across Africa each year. Seen from higher still, from the vantage of history, this killing field is not new at all. It is timeless, and it is now.

### THE PHILIPPINES CONNECTION

In an overfilled church Monsignor Cristobal Garcia, one of the best known ivory collectors in the Philippines, leads an unusual rite honoring the nation's most important religious icon, the Santo Niño de Cebu (Holy Child of Cebu). The ceremony, which he conducts annually on Cebu, is called the Hubo, from a Cebuano word meaning "to undress." Several altar boys work together to disrobe a small wooden statue of Christ dressed as a king, a replica of an icon devotees believe Ferdinand Magellan brought to the island in 1521. They remove its small crown, red cape, and tiny boots, and strip off its surprisingly layered underwear. Then the monsignor takes the icon, while altar boys conceal it with a little white towel, and dunks it in several barrels of water, creating his church's holy water for the year, to be sold outside.

Garcia is a fleshy man with a lazy left eye and bad knees. In the mid-1980s, according to a 2005 report in the *Dallas Morning News* and a related lawsuit, Garcia, while serving as a priest at St. Dominic's of Los Angeles, California, sexually abused an altar boy in his early teens and was dismissed. Back in the Philippines, he was promoted to monsignor and made chairman of Cebu's Archdiocesan Commission on Worship. That made him head of protocol for the country's largest Roman Catholic archdiocese, a flock of nearly four million people in a country of 75 million Roman Catholics, the world's third largest Catholic population. Garcia is known beyond Cebu. Pope John Paul II blessed his Santo Niño during Garcia's visit to the pope's summer residence, Castel Gandolfo, in 1990. Recently Garcia helped direct the installation of Cebu's newest archbishop in a cathedral filled with Catholic leaders, including 400 priests and 70 bishops, among them the Vatican's ambassador. Garcia is so well known that to find his church, the Society of the Angels of Peace, I need only roll down my window and ask, "Monsignor Cris?" to be pointed toward his walled compound.

Some Filipinos believe the Santo Niño de Cebu is Christ himself. Sixteenth-century Spaniards declared the icon to be miraculous and used it to convert the nation, making this single wooden statue, housed today behind bulletproof glass in Cebu's Basilica Minore del Santo Niño, the root from which all Filipino Catholicism has grown. Earlier this year a local priest was asked to resign after allegedly advising his parishioners that the Santo Niño and images of the Virgin Mary and other saints were merely statues made of wood and cement.

"If you are not devoted to the Santo Niño, you are not a true Filipino," says Father Vicente Lina, Jr. (Father Jay), director of the Diocesan Museum of Malolos. "Every Filipino has a Santo Niño, even those living under the bridge."

Each January some two million faithful converge on Cebu to walk for hours in procession with the Santo Niño de Cebu. Most carry miniature Santo Niño

icons made of fiberglass or wood. Many believe that what you invest in devotion to your own icon determines what blessings you will receive in return. For some, then, a fiberglass or wooden icon is not enough. For them, the material of choice is elephant ivory.

I press through the crowd during Garcia's Mass, but instead of standing before him to receive Communion, I kneel.

"The body of Christ," Garcia says.

"Amen," I reply, and open my mouth.

After the service I tell Garcia I'm from *National Geographic*, and we set a date to talk about the Santo Niño. His anteroom is a mini-museum dominated by large, glass-encased religious figures whose heads and hands are made of ivory: There is an ivory Our Lady of the Rosary holding an ivory Jesus in one, a near-life-size ivory Mother of the Good Shepherd seated beside an ivory Jesus in another. Next to Garcia's desk a solid ivory Christ hangs on a cross.

Filipinos generally display two types of ivory *santos*: either solid carvings or images whose heads and hands, sometimes life-size, are ivory, while the body is wood, providing a base for lavish capes and vestments. Garcia is the leader of a group of prominent Santo Niño collectors who display their icons during the Feast of the Santo Niño in some of Cebu's best shopping malls and hotels. When they met to discuss formally incorporating their club, an attorney member cried out to the group, "You can pay me in ivory!"

I tell Garcia I want to buy an ivory Santo Niño in a sleeping position. "Like this," I say, touching a finger to my lower lip. Garcia puts a finger to his lip too. "*Dormido* style," he says approvingly.

My goal in meeting Garcia is to understand his country's ivory trade and possibly get a lead on who was behind 5.4 tons of illegal ivory seized by customs agents in Manila in 2009, 7.7 tons seized there in 2005, and 6.1 tons bound for the Philippines seized by Taiwan in 2006. Assuming an average of 22 pounds of ivory per elephant, these seizures represent about 1,745 elephants. According to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the treaty organization that sets international wildlife trade policy, the Philippines is merely a transit country for ivory headed to China. But CITES has limited resources. Until last year it employed just one enforcement officer to police more than 30,000 animal and plant species. Its assessment of the Philippines doesn't square with what Jose Yuchongco, chief of the Philippine customs police, told a Manila newspaper not long after making a major seizure in 2009: "The Philippines is a favorite destination of these smuggled elephant tusks, maybe because Filipino Catholics are fond of images of saints that are made of ivory." On Cebu the link between ivory and the church is so strong that the word for ivory, *garing*, has a second meaning: "religious statue."

### THE CATHOLIC-MUSLIM UNDERGROUND

"Ivory, ivory, ivory," says the saleswoman at the Savelli Gallery on St. Peter's Square in Vatican City. "You didn't expect so much. I can see it in your face." The Vatican has recently demonstrated a commitment to confronting transnational criminal problems, signing agreements on drug trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime. But it has not signed the CITES treaty and so is not subject to the ivory ban. If I buy an ivory crucifix, the saleswoman says, the shop will have it blessed by a Vatican priest and shipped to me.

Although the world has found substitutes for every one of ivory's practical uses—billiard balls, piano keys, brush handles—its religious use is frozen in amber, and its role as a political symbol persists. Last year Lebanon's President Michel Sleiman gave Pope Benedict XVI an ivory-and-gold thurible. In 2007 Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo gave an ivory Santo Niño to Pope Benedict XVI. For Christmas in 1987 President Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan bought an ivory Madonna originally presented to them as a state gift by Pope John Paul II. All these gifts made international headlines. Even Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi, father of the global ivory ban, once gave Pope John Paul II an elephant tusk. Moi would later make a bigger symbolic gesture, setting fire to 13 tons of Kenyan ivory, perhaps the most iconic act in conservation history.

Father Jay is curator of his archdiocese's annual Santo Niño exhibition, which celebrates the best of his parishioners' collections and fills a two-story building outside Manila. The more than 200 displays are drenched in so many fresh flowers and enveloped in such soft "Ave Maria" music that I'm reminded of a funeral as I look at the pale bodies dressed up like tiny kings. Ivory Santo Niños wear gold-plated crowns, jewels, and Swarovski crystal necklaces. Their eyes are hand-painted on glass imported from Germany. Their eyelashes are individual goat hairs. The gold thread in their capes is real, imported from India.

The elaborate displays are often owned by families of surprisingly modest means. Devotees have opened bankbooks in the names of their ivory icons. They

name them in their wills. “I don’t call it extravagant,” Father Jay says. “I call it an offering to God.” He surveys the child images, some of which are decorated in *lagang*, silvery mother of pearl flowers carved from nautilus shells. “When it comes to Santo Niño devotion,” he says, “too much is not enough. As a priest, I’ve been praying, ‘If all of this stuff is plain stupid, then God, put a stop to this.’”

Father Jay points to a Santo Niño holding a dove. “Most of the old ivories are heirlooms,” he says. “The new ones are from Africa. They come in through the back door.” In other words, they’re smuggled. “It’s like straightening up a crooked line: You buy the ivory, which came from a hazy origin, and you turn it into a spiritual item. See?” he says, with a giggle. His voice lowers to a whisper. “Because it’s like buying a stolen item.”

People should buy new ivory icons, he says, to avoid swindlers who use tea or even Coca-Cola to stain ivory to look antique. “I just tell them to buy the new ones, so the history of an image would start in you.”

When I ask how new ivory gets to the Philippines, he tells me that Muslims from the southern island of Mindanao smuggle it in. Then, to signal a bribe, he puts two fingers into my shirt pocket. “To the coast guards, for example,” he says. “Imagine from Africa to Europe and to the Philippines. How long is that kind of trip by boat?” He puts his fingers in my pocket again. “And you just keep on paying so many people so that it will enter your country.”

It’s part of one’s sacrifice to the Santo Niño—smuggling elephant ivory as an act of devotion.

### HOW TO SMUGGLE IVORY

I had no illusions of linking Monsignor Garcia to any illegal activity, but when I told him I wanted an ivory Santo Niño, the man surprised me. “You will have to smuggle it to get it into the U.S.”

“How?”

“Wrap it in old, stinky underwear and pour ketchup on it,” he said. “So it looks shitty with blood. This is how it is done.”

Garcia gave me the names of his favorite ivory carvers, all in Manila, along with advice on whom to go to for high volume, whose wife overcharges, who doesn’t meet deadlines. He gave me phone numbers and locations. If I wanted to smuggle an icon that was too large to hide in my suitcase, I might get a certificate from the National Museum of the Philippines declaring my image to be antique, or I could get a carver to issue a paper declaring it to be imitation or alter the carving date to before the ivory ban. Whatever I decided to commission, Garcia promised to bless it for me. “Unlike those animal-nut priests who will not bless ivory,” he said.

A few families control most of the ivory carving in Manila, moving like termites through massive quantities of tusks. Two of the main dealers are based in the city’s religious-supplies district, Tayuman. During my five trips to the Philippines I visited every one of the ivory shops Garcia recommended to me and more, inquiring about buying ivory. More than once I was asked if I was a priest. In almost every shop someone proposed a way I could smuggle ivory to the U.S. One offered to paint my ivory with removable brown watercolor to resemble wood; another to make identical hand-painted statuettes out of resin to camouflage my ivory baby Jesus. If I was caught, I was told to lie and say “resin” to U.S. Customs. During one visit a dealer said Monsignor Garcia had just called and suggested that since I’d mentioned that my family had a funeral business, I might take her new, 20-pound Santo Niño home by hiding it in the bottom of a casket. I said he must have been joking, but she didn’t think so.

Priests, *balikbayans* (Filipinos living overseas), and gay Filipino men are major customers, according to Manila’s most prominent ivory dealer. An antique dealer from New York City makes regular buying missions, as does a dealer from Mexico City, gathering up new ivory crucifixes, Madonnas, and baby Jesuses in bulk and smuggling them home in their luggage. Wherever there is a Filipino, I was often reminded, there is an altar to God.

And it seems Father Jay was right about a Muslim supply route. Several Manila dealers told me the primary suppliers are Filipino Muslims with connections to Africa. Malaysian Muslims figured into their network too. “Sometimes they bring it in bloody, and it smells bad,” one dealer told me, pinching her nose.

Today’s ivory trafficking follows ancient trade routes—accelerated by air travel, cell phones, and the Internet. Current photos I’d seen of ivory Coptic crosses on sale beside ivory Islamic prayer beads in Cairo’s market now made more sense. Suddenly, recent ivory seizures on Zanzibar, an Islamic island off the coast of Tanzania—for centuries a global hub for trafficking slaves and ivory—seemed especially ominous, a sign that large-scale ivory crime might never go away. At least one shipment had been headed for Malaysia, where several multi-ton seizures were made last year.

The Philippines' ivory market is small compared with, say, China's, but it is centuries old and staggeringly obvious. Collectors and dealers share photographs of their ivories on Flickr and Facebook. CITES, as administrator of the 1989 global ivory ban, is the world's official organization standing between the slaughter of the 1980s—in which Africa is said to have lost half its elephants, more than 600,000 in just those ten years—and the extermination of the elephant. If CITES has overlooked the Philippines' ivory trade, what else has it missed?

### THE ELEPHANT MONK

The ivory carvers in Phayuha Khiri and Surin are the most famous in Thailand and the targets of most investigations there into the illegal ivory trade. Phayuha Khiri is so dedicated to ivory that in the town center, where one might expect to see a fountain, there's a circle of four great white tusks. It takes me only minutes on the main street to realize I've seen this place before: Tayuman, Manila's religious-supplies district; only here, instead of crucifixes and images of the holy family, are life-size images of famous monks, small images of the Buddha wrapped in plastic, and bracelets and other religious items bagged by the dozens. Vendor after vendor on both sides of this long street is a Buddhist wholesale outlet. The only people I see shopping during my visits to Phayuha Khiri are small knots of orange-robed monks.

I track down the village's head ivory dealer—Mr. Thi, who's wearing an amulet on an ivory necklace and an ivory belt buckle—tour his shops and carving operation, and also visit his McMansion-size home. Mr. Thi tells me that Phayuha Khiri's carving industry was founded by a monk who liked to carve ivory amulets. Standing in his shop, I look over his shoulder and see a painting of Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu god, and beside him a Happy Buddha. Monks, I discover, give out amulets in return for donations. The better the donation, the better the amulet. Amulets blessed by certain monks are even more valuable.

The Elephant Monk, Kruba Dharmamuni, who used to be the Scorpion Monk and still displays a life-size statue of himself as a scorpion in his temple, wants to take me ivory shopping in Surin. Once upon a time Surin was home to the king of Siam's royal elephant catchers, but today government-subsidized elephant keepers, mahouts, live a shadow of their old lives, dependent on their animals' ability to kick a soccer ball or hold a paintbrush and create a "self-portrait" on an easel for tourists. Vendors selling ivory rings, bangles, and amulets line the entrance to Surin's tourist park.

"Ivory removes bad spirits," the Elephant Monk tells me. He wears the brown robes of a forest monk and chews steadily on betel-infused *maak*, which he spits out in great blood-like wads. He also wears ivory. Around his neck is an ivory elephant-head pendant suspended from ivory prayer beads representing the 108 human passions.

The elephant is a symbol of Thailand and is revered in Buddhism. According to legend, a six-tusked white elephant entered the right side of Queen Maya the night she became pregnant with Siddhartha Gautama. The Elephant Monk believes he was an elephant in a past life and is well-known among mahouts. He tells me he has 100,000 followers around the world, though during my visit to his temple only a few show up. They kneel before him with offerings and receive an amulet he has blessed.

Many Thais wear amulets, sometimes dozens, to bring them luck and protect them from harm and black magic. Bangkok's amulet market is huge, with countless vendors selling tens of thousands of small talismans made of materials such as metal, compressed dust, bone—and ivory. High-end amulets can fetch \$100,000 or more. There are magazines, trade shows, books, and websites devoted to amulet collecting. Amulets hang from the rearview mirror of almost every Thai cab. Ousted Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra credits his Buddhist amulet with saving him in assassination attempts, and the Thai Army has distributed amulets to its border soldiers to ward off Cambodia's black magic.

The Elephant Monk's main income is from amulets, and he offers a strange variety, including images of himself and of the Buddha as well as amulets made with plastic-encased bits of bone from the skulls of dead pregnant women, pure corpse oil, soil from seven cemeteries, tiger fur, elephant skin, and carved ivory. Business is good enough that he's building a new temple, Wat Suanpah, modeled in part after Thailand's popular tiger parks—often front organizations, critics say, for the illegal tiger trade. The Elephant Monk suffered similar controversy when a recent television exposé reported that he'd starved an elephant to death for its skin and ivory, but he says it died of natural causes and he was only holding an elephant funeral. Besides, by shopping in Surin, he tells me, he can find all the elephant ivory and skin he needs. Before the exposé, he took in about one million baht (\$32,000) a month from his gift shop, the Internet, and foreign travels. Now he's down to about 300,000 baht a month. But, he says, in just three days in Malaysia or Singapore he could sell his followers one million bahts' worth or more.

Thailand has a small, natural population of Asian elephants, an endangered species long off-limits to international trade. Inside Thailand, however, the rules

are less rigid. Mahouts and others may sell the tusk tips of live domesticated elephants and the tusks of ones that died of natural causes. For years international ivory traffickers have capitalized on this, smuggling in African ivory to mix with Asian ivory.

Conservationists refer to this as the “Thai loophole.” But there’s a far bigger loophole enjoyed by every country in the world. African ivory brought into a country before 1989 may be traded domestically. And so anyone caught with ivory invokes a common refrain: “My ivory is pre-ban.” Since no inventory was ever made of global ivory stocks before the ban, and since ivory lasts more or less forever, this “pre-ban” loophole is a timeless defense.

Thailand’s ivory market has been evolving. “Ivory traders are stockpiling,” says Steve Galster, director of the Freeland Foundation, a Bangkok-based nongovernmental organization (NGO). “Since CITES has a history of relaxing trade bans, they feel it’s a safe gamble.”

Thailand, like the Philippines, has another commodity traffickers value: corruption. A ton of seized African ivory disappeared recently from a Thai customs warehouse. When I ask to see the rest, customs officers refuse and suggest that journalists stole it. Only when I say I heard otherwise am I told the truth: Customs officers are believed to have been the culprits. Corruption is so bad in the Philippines that in 2006 the wildlife department sued senior customs officers for “losing” several tons of seized ivory. Chastened, the customs office turned its next big ivory seizure over to the wildlife department, which soon discovered that its own storeroom had been raided. Piles of tusks had been replaced with exact duplicates made of plastic.

The Elephant Monk’s favorite carver, Jom, lives on a dirt road in a place so remote that I blink when I realize that the vegetable stands in front of Jom’s house are actually glass jewelry cases filled with ivory Buddhist figurines. On the outside of one case is a bumper sticker bearing the Elephant Monk’s face. Most of the ivory is Thai. “That is African,” the Elephant Monk says, pointing to a piece that’s especially white.

“If I could get you African ivory,” I ask Jom, “could you carve it?”

“*Dai*,” he replies.

“No problem at all,” his wife agrees.

And that was all it took to get the Elephant Monk to talk smuggling. He tells me to cut the ivory to fit into my suitcase, holding out his hands to show me how long to make the pieces. That’s what his followers do, he says. When I arrive at the Bangkok airport, his assistant will pick me up and drive me to him. He has followers in immigration, but if anything goes wrong, I should say I’m bringing the ivory to his temple. Religion, apparently, will cover me.

Because this is about faith, and because faith requires suspension of disbelief, ivory traded for religious purposes doesn’t garner the aggressive scrutiny it might if it were carved into, say, chess pieces. God’s ivory has its own loophole.

## CHINA’S IVORY FACTORIES

Inside the Beijing Ivory Carving Factory it smells and sounds like what it essentially is: a vast dentist’s office. The whirl of electric drills on tusks fills the air. Ivory dust lies heavy on windowpanes and doorframes and even coats my teeth as I make my way among men and women bent over images that repeat the religious and mythological motifs I find throughout China, such as Fu, Lu, and Shou, the gods of luck, money, and long life; the Happy Buddha; and Guanyin, Buddhist goddess of mercy, a Madonna-like figure who doubles as a fertility goddess and who sometimes holds in her arms a male child, the “giving sons” Guanyin, popular under China’s one-child policy. No matter where I find ivory, religion is close at hand. “Chinese people believe in the concepts these figures represent,” the head of the Daxin Ivory Carving Factory in Guangzhou tells me.

At the time of the ivory ban, Americans, Europeans, and Japanese consumed 80 percent of the world’s carved ivory. Today in the heart of Beijing, dealerships offering Maseratis, Bentleys, and Ferraris rub shoulders with Gucci and Prada. Nearby is the Beijing Arts and Crafts Emporium, whose first-floor ATM dispenses 24-karat gold bars. Up the escalator, past galleries of jade and silk, the main ivory boutique sparkles like a snow-covered Tiffany’s. One of the first items I notice is a carved ivory Guanyin behind glass with so many zeros on its price tag I have to ask for help—1360000.00 (about \$215,000).

By all accounts, China is the world’s greatest villain when it comes to smuggled ivory. In recent years China has been implicated in more large-scale ivory seizures than any other non-African country. For the first time in generations many Chinese can afford to reach forward into a wealthy future, and they can also afford to look back into their own vibrant past. One of the first places many look is religion.

“We don’t all only think of money,” Xue Ping corrects me as we sip tea in his Buddhist art gallery inside the Grand Hotel Beijing. During a 2007 pilgrimage retracing the Buddha’s life from Nepal to India, the advertising executive had a vision: The Buddha challenged him to do good with his life. He returned home and in 2009 founded a company he called Da Cheng Bai Yi (transmitting great heritage), dedicated to supporting China’s great masters in five art forms: lacquer, lacquer carving, porcelain, thangka scrolls, and ivory carving. Xue tracked down 62-year-old Li Chunke, one of only about 12 national master ivory carvers in China. Xue built Li an ivory-carving studio in Beijing’s arts district, rented him an apartment, and opened this stunning new gallery. Nothing in it is for sale. Xue is Li’s only customer.

“The elephant is a good friend of man,” Li says. “When elephants die, they want to leave man something behind as a good deed to have a good next life.” Li carves ivory to honor the elephant’s gift. As Buddhists, Li and Xue abhor killing. Their ivory comes from the government, they explain, and so is supposed to be from elephants that died of natural causes.

Just as some Filipino priests baptize ivory images, Buddhist monks perform a ceremony called *kai guang*, the opening of light, to consecrate religious icons. “Ivory is very precious,” Xue tells me, “so to be respectful of the Buddha one should use precious material. If not ivory then gold. But ivory is more precious.” It is a version of the same message I heard from Filipino Catholics: Ivory honors God.

In every shop and factory I visit in China, a substantial portion of the inventory consists of religious carvings, including many of the most valuable pieces. Among the high-end buyers are military officers—surprisingly well paid in China—who give ivory to superior officers and companies that give carvings to other businesses and government regulators to influence them. “We call it the back door,” a representative of the government’s China Arts and Crafts Association (CACA) explained. And so ivory is used the way a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue might once have been, except that if the gift works, then ivory blesses its giver as well as its recipient.

At a gallery in Guangzhou, Gary Zeng shows me a photo of a 26-layer “devil’s work” ball on his iPhone. The 42-year-old Zeng has just bought two of these ivory balls from the Daxin Ivory Carving Factory, one for himself and one on behalf of an entrepreneur friend. He’s come to this retail store to see whether he got his money’s worth. I climb into his new Mercedes, drive to his double-gated community, and watch as he hands the less expensive ball to his three-year-old for *National Geographic*’s Brent Stirton to photograph. It will become a centerpiece in a new home Zeng is building, to “hold the house against devils,” but for a moment the \$50,000 ball is simply a very precious toy. I ask Zeng why young entrepreneurs like him are buying ivory.

“Value,” he replies. “And art.”

“Do you think about the elephant?” I ask.

“Not at all,” he says.

On the corner of one of the most popular ivory-selling streets in China, outside the Hualin International Buddhist jewelry arcade, a four-story electronic billboard runs a video announcing to passersby a hot new investment opportunity: Sales of Buddhist jewelry and related religious products have reached \$15.8 billion a year and are growing by 50 percent a year. “There are nearly 200 million Buddhism believers in China,” the sign declares. Inside the building two stores deal exclusively in ivory carvings. Down the street other galleries offer Buddhist ivory carvings—some legal, some not.

Everything about China’s ivory industry is poised for growth. The government has licensed at least 35 carving factories and 130 ivory retail outlets and sponsors ivory carving at schools like the Beijing University of Technology. Most telling of all, as in the Philippines, Chinese carvers such as Master Li are training their relatives—they’re investing in their own blood.

## THE JAPAN EXPERIMENT

In 1989, after ten years during which at least one elephant died every ten minutes, President George H. W. Bush unilaterally banned ivory imports, Kenya burned its 13 tons of ivory stocks, and CITES announced the global ivory ban, which began in 1990. Not all countries agreed to the ban. Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Malawi entered “reservations,” exempting them from it on the grounds that their elephant populations were healthy enough to support trade. In 1997 CITES held its main meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, where President Robert Mugabe declared that elephants took up a lot of space and drank a lot of water. They’d have to pay for their room and board with their ivory. Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia made CITES an offer: They would honor the ivory ban if they were allowed to sell ivory from elephants that had been culled or had died of natural causes.

CITES agreed to a compromise, authorizing a one-time-only “experimental sale” by the three countries to a single purchaser, Japan. In 1999 Japan bought 55 tons of ivory for five million dollars. Almost immediately Japan said it wanted more, and soon China would want legal ivory too. If Kenya’s Daniel arap Moi is the father of the ivory ban, then Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe is the father of its first rupture.

Before it would allow another ivory sale, CITES demanded the results of the Japan experiment: Had the sale increased crime? Specifically, had elephant poaching or ivory smuggling gone up? To find out, it launched one program to count illegally killed elephants and another to measure ivory smuggling. For a science-based organization, it was an odd way to conduct an experiment. CITES had approved the sale and had then set about constructing a way to gauge its impact, which is a bit like pushing the button to test the first atomic bomb and then building a device to measure the explosion.

It’s easy to kill an elephant (lately poachers in Kenya and Tanzania have been using poisoned watermelons), but it’s hard to locate dead bodies, and it’s taken CITES years to get the counting program running. CITES officials refuse to issue a formal estimate of the elephants killed annually for fear that any number, which would derive from 2007 population estimates and limited 2012 poaching data, will “become embedded as hard truth in the public psyche.” Still, according to Kenneth Burnham, official statistician for the CITES program to monitor illegally killed elephants, it is “highly likely” that poachers killed at least 25,000 African elephants in 2011. The true figure may even be double that. Meanwhile, last year saw an estimated 34.7 tons of illegal ivory seized globally. Using an Interpol rule of thumb that says seized contraband equals 10 percent of actual smuggling, and assuming that each elephant carries 22 pounds of ivory, that weight equates to 31,500 dead elephants. “The point is this,” says Iain Douglas-Hamilton of Save the Elephants, “tens of thousands of elephants were killed last year. And the figures are going up drastically.”

Quantifying the illegal ivory trade is difficult too. Smugglers don’t file sales reports. To estimate smuggling activity, CITES uses ivory seizures as a proxy. Even as a proxy, seizures are tricky. They accurately tell you only the bare minimum of illegal activity going on in a country, and there’s a lot they can’t tell you. More ivory seizures in one year can mean that smuggling has increased, or that law enforcement is working harder, or both. Fewer seizures can mean what you might hope, but they can also mean that law enforcement is on the take. Big-time smugglers have connections in local wildlife departments, customs offices, and freight-forwarding and transportation companies that enable them to move multi-ton shipments from one country to another. (In the Philippines, for example, ivory traders I met accused customs officers of seizing illegal ivory only when someone hadn’t made a payoff.) Worst of all, a seizures-based system rewards countries for confiscating ivory, when what they really need to do is follow smuggled ivory up the demand chain to the kingpins, a reason good investigators consider seizures to be bad law enforcement.

To audit ivory seizures, CITES engaged Traffic, an NGO that monitors global wildlife trade. Traffic is not an independent auditor, however. It is a subsidiary of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which, like many NGOs, have research projects and offices in ivory-trafficking countries, complicating Traffic’s ability to render independent judgments. Traffic based its new ivory-seizures monitoring program, the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), in Africa’s leading pro-ivory-trade country, Zimbabwe.

From the beginning, Traffic boasted that its ETIS database extended back to the 1989 ivory ban, but countries were not asked to report ivory seizures to ETIS until 1998. For a decade its data came from random Traffic surveys, and it had scant data on seizures by key countries, such as Japan (20 cases in a decade), Thailand (21 cases), the Philippines (5 cases), and China (2 cases). Even after ETIS was up and running, many governments rarely bothered to report their seizures, so when it was time to judge the Japan experiment, Traffic’s database was heavy on cases from the U.S. and European Union (more than 60 percent) and light on cases from where it mattered: Asia (less than 10 percent). ETIS had no good baseline to judge the effects of the Japan sale.

CITES might have taken a holistic approach to the Japan experiment, combining reports of international NGOs, whose undercover investigators found an increase in illegal ivory trade after the Japan sale, with data from Traffic, whose ETIS statistics did not show a definite correlation between the Japan sale and seizures. It might have recognized the limitations of ETIS—whose core metric, seizures, is, after all, controlled by the countries being evaluated. Since CITES also had problems calculating how much elephant poaching was going on, it might have declared the Japan experiment inconclusive, or even a failure.

A failure is what China considered it. In a 2002 report China warned CITES that a main reason for China’s growing ivory-smuggling problem was the Japan experiment: “Many Chinese people misunderstand the decision and believe that the international trade in ivory has been resumed.” Chinese consumers thought it was OK to buy ivory again.

CITES ignored China’s warning and placed its faith entirely in the ETIS statistics. “The data we have from ETIS is that there is no correlation between decisions made at CITES and the illegal trade,” Willem Wijnstekers, CITES secretary-general, would later assert in anticipation of more CITES-approved ivory sales. Tom

Milliken, director of ETIS, would likewise suggest that the Japan sale had worked: “It is encouraging to note that the illicit trade in ivory progressively declined over the next five years.” But Milliken didn’t know what the illicit trade had done; what he knew was his seizure statistics. Nevertheless a judgment was made, and the future of the African elephant may forever be clouded by the moment when CITES, lacking the data to evaluate the impact of its first ivory sale, endorsed a second.

By 2004 China had forgotten its concerns and petitioned CITES to buy ivory. In March 2005 CITES sent a team of three people, including Milliken, to China for five days to evaluate its ivory-control system. The team returned “more than satisfied” and predicted that China’s system could “eradicate, or at least significantly reduce, illicit trade.” They also noted, however, that two successive ETIS reports had found that China was the single most important reason the illegal ivory trade was increasing. The CITES secretariat therefore refused China’s request to buy ivory.

But ETIS could be manipulated. It scored countries not only on ivory seizures weight but also on law enforcement. It was possible to game the ETIS system by reporting lots of small seizure cases, such as a tourist wearing ivory earrings. “Tom Milliken told me to make raids on Chatuchak [a Bangkok market] to get my cases up,” a frustrated Thai official told me. In 1999, the year of the Japan sale, China had reported seven ivory seizures to ETIS. Soon after it petitioned CITES, China was reporting dozens of cases a year to ETIS, most the personal effects of tourists. Recently it has been reporting hundreds of cases a year. This past February China made public one of its big ivory-enforcement efforts of 2011, involving 4,497 personnel and 1,094 vehicles and leading to 19 cases. It had resulted in the confiscation of 63.5 pounds of ivory, the weight of an overfed poodle.

In July 2008 the CITES secretariat endorsed China’s request to buy ivory, a decision supported by Traffic and WWF. Member countries agreed, and that fall Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe held auctions at which they collectively sold more than 115 tons of ivory to Chinese and Japanese traders.

As a test for whether ivory sales increase crime, the Japan experiment was flawed. As a prognosticator for China, it had deeper problems. Japan is an island nation with a narrow primary use for its ivory: signature stamps called *hanko*. China shares borders with 14 countries; it has a vast coastline, a booming economy, ten times the population, a separate system for ivory-loving Hong Kong, extensive investment in Africa, and uses for ivory ranging from sculptures to cell phone covers. After Japan bought ivory, China said its smuggling problem went up. Now China itself was entering the ivory business. CITES urged the world not to worry.

#### **DEVILS LURK IN DETAILS**

Meng Xianlin is executive director general of China’s CITES management authority, making him China’s top wildlife-trade official. He attended the 2008 ivory auctions in southern Africa. Over sheep tripe and noodles near his Beijing office, he shares a startling secret with me: The African auctions had not been competitive. Before they left for Africa, the Japanese team of buyers flew to Beijing, where they made a strategic suggestion. Since Japanese use primarily medium-size, high-quality tusks for *hanko* and Chinese prefer either large, whole tusks for big sculptures or small pieces for decorative touches, the Japanese proposed that each country bid on separate types of ivory and keep all the prices low. The prices they paid were so low, Meng tells me, that an official from Namibia, which had held the first auction, followed the Asian delegations from country to country hoping for evidence her country had been cheated.

Still, to the CITES secretariat, the auctions had been a success. They’d raised \$15.5 million, most of which was supposed to go to African conservation projects. And while an average price of only about \$67 a pound for the ivory meant that the Africans had less to spend on conservation, it also meant, according to CITES, that China could now do its part for law enforcement by flooding its domestic market with the low-priced, legal ivory. This would drive out illegal traders, who CITES had heard were paying up to \$386 for a pound of ivory. Lower prices, CITES’s Willem Wijnstekers told Reuters, could help curb poaching.

Instead the Chinese government did the unexpected. It raised ivory prices. Through its craft association, CACA, the government charged entrepreneur Xue Ping \$500 a pound, a markup of 650 percent, and imposed fees on the Beijing Ivory Carving Factory that brought the company’s costs to \$530 a pound for Grade A ivory. China also devised a ten-year plan to limit supply and is releasing about five tons into its market annually. The Chinese government, which controls who may sell ivory in China, wasn’t undercutting the black market—it was using its monopoly power to outperform the black market.

Applying the secretariat’s logic that low prices and high volumes chase out smugglers, China’s high prices and restricted volumes would now draw them in. The decision to allow China to buy ivory has indeed sparked more ivory trafficking, according to international watchdog groups and traders I met in China and Hong Kong.

And prices continue to rise. According to Feng You Min, sales director at the Daxin Ivory Carving Factory, the price of raw ivory has risen to 20 times the price paid in Africa. The genie cannot be returned to her bottle: The 2008 legal ivory will forever shelter smuggled ivory.

There is one final flaw in the CITES decision to let China buy ivory. To win approval, China instituted a variety of safeguards, most notably that any ivory carving larger than a trinket must have a photo ID card. But criminals have turned the ID-card system into a smuggling tool. In the ID cards' tiny photographs, carvings with similar religious and traditional motifs all look alike. A recent report by the International Fund for Animal Welfare found that ivory dealers in China are selling ivory carvings but retaining their ID cards to legitimize carvings made from smuggled ivory. The cards themselves now have value and are tradable in a secondary market. China's ID-card system, which gives a whiff of legitimacy to an illegal icon, is worse than no system at all.

Just before elephants were discussed at an August 2011 CITES meeting, China orchestrated the expulsion of all attending NGOs. It was an extraordinary act. Among those expelled were representatives of the Born Free Foundation, the Humane Society International, the Japan Federation of Ivory Arts and Crafts Associations, the Pew Charitable Trust, Safari Club International, and me (for the National Geographic Society). Traffic's Tom Milliken was allowed to remain to deliver his latest ETIS results. The reason for the expulsion, Meng tells me, was a report by a small but influential London-based NGO, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), which had sent undercover Chinese operatives into China. EIA alleged that China's ivory-control system was a failure, that up to 90 percent of the ivory on the Chinese market was illegal, and that the 2008 auctions had resurrected the illegal ivory trade. Meng was outraged. Yes, he said, 80 percent of EIA's report was true, "but they should have come to us first."

Last year CITES made a startling admission: "The Secretariat continues to struggle to understand many aspects of the illegal trade in ivory." This past April, Tom Milliken confessed something to the BBC that was eerily reminiscent of China's warning after the Japan experiment: "Did allowance of legal ivory to go into China exacerbate a situation? One could probably argue now, with hindsight, that indeed it did. It created perhaps an image in the minds of many potential Chinese consumers that it was OK to buy ivory."

Meng chuckles as I pour him another bottle of beer. He tells me that after the African ivory arrived in China, a strange sound could be heard coming from one shipment. It took some time to discover the source. During the bidding South Africa's ivory had looked the best and the whitest. Now some tusks were splitting open. "You could hear it cracking," Meng says. To get a good price, he speculates, the South Africans had bleached their ivory white, and now dehydration was causing the tusks to crack.

Even more precious than the savanna elephant's white ivory is the yellow ivory of the smaller, forest elephant. "This is the best," the Daxin Ivory Carving Factory's Feng tells me, holding up a chunk of forest elephant tusk. Carvings made from forest elephant ivory sell out so quickly that customers have been commissioning them. The only carved image he has left to show me is an old one of Chairman Mao with a crack in it. Trouble is, forest elephants don't live in any of the countries where China legally bought ivory. They live in central and western Africa, including in Cameroon, the country raided by Muslim poachers earlier this year.

In March CITES will meet again to discuss the future of the African elephant.

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Investigative reporter Bryan Christy's January 2010 story, "[The Kingpin](#)," exposed wildlife trafficker Anson Wong. Documentary photographer Brent Stirton's March 2012 "[Rhino Wars](#)" won a World Press award.

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Ivory Worship. Thousands of elephants die each year so that their tusks can be carved into religious objects. Can the slaughter be stopped? IN JANUARY 2012 A HUNDRED RAIDERS ON HORSEBACK CHARGED OUT OF CHAD INTO CAMEROON'S BOUBA NDJIDAH NATIONAL PARK, SLAUGHTERING HUNDREDS OF ELEPHANTS "entire families" in one of the worst concentrated killings since a global ivory trade ban was adopted in 1989. Princess Ivory Sexy Feet. 05:26. The Babysitter needs you to worship her feet! 07:49. Princess Ivory With White Ankle Dirty Socks - Sole and Feet JOI Pov. 10:09. #Best Ivory cute Soles Feet joi. 04:39. teen queen feet fetish joi #9. Ivory Worship Steve Sensenig. 16:08. We Worship Ivory McDonald. 3:53. Worship Moment 1 Steve Sensenig. 0:59. Worship Moment 2 Steve Sensenig. 0:32. Worship Moment 3 Steve Sensenig. 0:32. Worship Moment 4 Steve Sensenig. 0:36. Worship Moment 5 Steve Sensenig. 0:53. Worship Moment 6 Steve Sensenig. 0:44. Worship Moment 7 Steve Sensenig. 2:27. Breathe Steve Sensenig. 5:13. To Worship You Steve Sensenig. 4:56. The Voice The Ivory Hawks. 4:44. Call 666 the Fixer The Ivory Hawks. Who is Involved? What is the Ivory used for? The Philippines China Thailand An elephant getting its tusks hacked off. Why the Philippines? Filipino Catholicism Worship Santo Niño de Cebu (The Holy Child of Cebu) "Every Filipino has a Santo Nino, even those lining under a bridge."