

## World Africa

# China's rise 'puts elephants and rhinos in danger'

Chinese investment in Africa has been linked to a surge in poaching and the soaring illegal trade in ivory and horn, **Tristan McConnell** reports

Hundreds of elephants and rhinos are being slaughtered for their tusks and horns in an illegal trade fuelled by growing demand from Chinese workers and businessmen in Africa, conservationists and wildlife officials claim.

Authorities in Kenya, where at least 178 elephants and 21 rhinos were killed last year, attribute the rise in poaching to unprecedented interest in ivory from the Far East and the increasing presence of Chinese employees on the continent. According to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) experts, the vast majority of those arrested for trafficking horns and tusks are Chinese.

Dr Julius Kipng'etich, the director of KWS, said: "It is not a myth or a theory, it is a reality. Ninety per cent of all the people who pass through our airports and are apprehended with illegal wildlife trophies are Chinese." Most of these "trophies" consist of ivory parts.

Richard Leakey, the renowned Kenyan conservationist and former head of

the national wildlife authority, said: "All the pointers are that poaching has grown very rapidly, very recently."

Poaching for ivory has also risen over the past three years in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

China is investing billions in Africa every year in deals that swap roads and railways for the minerals and natural resources that fuel its growing economy. Charlie Mayhew, the chief executive of the London-based conservation group Tusk Trust, said: "There has been a massive investment in Africa by China and that has resulted in a significant Chinese presence of workers and businessmen across the continent."

Tom Milliken, regional director for east and southern Africa at Traffic, which monitors wildlife trade, said: "China is the major driver for trade in ivory and that is linked to China's phenomenal economic growth, the level of disposable income there, a re-embracing of traditional culture and status symbols in which ivory plays a role and the phenomenal increase of Chinese nationals on the African continent."

A leaked embassy cable written by Michael Ranneberger, the US Amba-



A ranger guards elephant tusks in Nairobi National Park. The Kenya Wildlife

sador to Kenya in February and published recently by the website WikiLeaks said: "KWS noticed a marked increase in poaching wherever Chinese labour camps were located and in fact set up specific interdiction efforts aimed to reduce poaching."

Mr Ranneberger said: "The [Government of China] has not demonstrated any commitment to curb ivory poach-

ing. The slaughter of the animals has left conservationists dismayed and worried for the survival of the species."

Kenya recorded its worst year for killing in decades in 2009, with 249 elephants killed, up from 140 in 2008 and only 47 in 2007. Last year the killing continued across the continent, the ivory smuggled out of the country as raw tusks or carved ornaments to be sold on

## A cruel toll

### Rhinos killed between 2006-09

235

Zimbabwe

210

South Africa

17

Kenya

### Ivory seizures in 2009

57

Sudan

30

Kenya

17

Namibia

Sources: Traffic, Elephant Trade Information System



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Service says that most of those arrested for trafficking tusks are Chinese

the Far East black market. In one week alone, authorities in Thailand, a favoured transit point for the illegal trafficking, said they had seized 69 elephant tusks and four smaller pieces of ivory, worth more than £190,000 and smuggled in from Mozambique.

"The situation is not hopeless but this is a war and our efforts at the moment are tantamount to triage," said Meredith Ogilvie-Thompson, a director of Big Life Foundation, a conservation group working in the Amboseli ecosystem spanning the border between Kenya and Tanzania.

Elephant ivory worth more than £64 per kilogram to poachers in Africa goes for ten times that price in China. KWS estimates that about 21 rhinos were also poached for their horns in 2010, but many believe that the number is much higher. There are only 6,000 elephants and 900 rhinos left in Kenya, according to the wildlife authority.

In South Africa the slaughter of rhinos is worse, with the massive herb-

ivores being killed at a rate of nearly one a day by criminal gangs equipped with high-tech hunting equipment.

A rhino's horn is a spike of keratin — much like human hair or fingernails — that can weigh up to 15kg. It is used in traditional medicines in China and Vietnam and to a lesser degree for dagger handles in Yemen. It now sells for up to £38,000/kg in Asia.

Experts trace the recent upsurge in poaching of rhinos in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe to a pronouncement by a Vietnamese politician who reportedly claimed that his cancer went into remission thanks to a daily draft of powdered rhino horn.

Trade in ivory was banned in 1989 and since then elephant populations have begun to recover.

"The last big poaching epidemic was in the 1980s but what we are seeing now is more worrying because the bans are in place yet poaching is escalating," said Mr Mayhew. "The gains of the last ten years can be quickly eroded."

# 'The rewards are such that you inevitably run into corruption'

Tristan McConnell

The three men dressed in mismatched fatigues and clutching AK47 assault rifles crouched on a rocky outcrop as the sun drifted towards the horizon. Their vigil was, they thought, about to pay off as a rhino lumbered towards them oblivious to the threat, its large horn bobbing above the grass as it sniffed at the ground.

The poachers would have preferred darkness but this target was too

tempting: they fired, hitting the animal four times.

"As soon as the shots were heard we sent in armed anti-poaching teams," said Jonathan Moss, the chief executive of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, a 62,000-acre private wildlife sanctuary in Kenya. "There was a fire fight but it quickly became dark and they were able to escape." The rhino died.

Until last year the Lewa sanctuary had not lost a single rhino to poachers in 23 years but in the past 12 months

four endangered black rhinos have been killed. Mr Moss said that Chinese workers on infrastructure projects across Kenya were fuelling demand. In 2009 the Amboseli Trust for Elephants also blamed Chinese workers for attacks on elephants.

"There are two Chinese road camps in the general area," the trust reported. "We are told by our informants that they are buying ivory [and] bush meat."

Ian Craig, the chief executive of the Northern Rangelands Trust, a conservation group working to the north of Mount Kenya, has found 23 elephant carcasses in the last few weeks, all with their tusks hacked off.

"I'd say that we've reached perhaps a ten-year high in our area. Demand is up, prices are up; there are a lot of guns and a lot of criminals," he said.

## Culture needs to change before species are extinct

Commentary  
Simon Barnes

When I hear the word culture I release the safety catch on my AK47. It is part of Chinese culture to use rhino horn in medicine to treat all sorts of maladies. I despise that part of Chinese culture. It is also part of Chinese culture to take a delight in objects made of ivory. I despise that part of Chinese culture as well.

It used to be part of our culture to empty chamber pots in the street with a merry shout of "gardyloo". We would be appalled if anyone did that in Streatham High Road today. We have grown beyond that aspect of our culture: we now despise it.

We have grown out of other aspects of our traditional culture.

We no longer take the children out for a good hanging, drawing and quartering. The baiting of bulls and bears is no longer legal: we would despise anybody who tried to reinstate what was once our national sport.

Cultures change. That is the point

of them. There are aspects of our modern culture that are profoundly despicable: make your own list.

The fact that something is part of your own or someone else's culture does not make it automatically acceptable. It is time for the world to express its disgust at those aspects of Chinese culture that will, if unchecked, destroy five species of rhino and two of elephant. Not because it is part of our culture to admire such creatures but because they have a right to exist.

Clearly the prestige conveyed by ivory and rhino horn comes because a large and powerful beast has died for the sake of little you. We should despise this loudly: those in positions of influence most loudly of all. There are some aspects of people's cultures that do not deserve any respect at all.

But if we sometimes have too much respect for other people's cultures, we have even more respect for other people's money.

These days Chinese prosperity tends to win respect for anything that the Chinese happen to want.



In the decade before the 1989 ban on the ivory trade Africa's elephant population fell from 1.3 million to 600,000. In the 15 years before the ban Kenya lost 85 per cent of its elephants. Prices for ivory and horn are so high that fears are growing of a return to the devastation of the 1970s and 1980s.

"The rewards are such that you inevitably run into corruption issues," said Peter Younger, the wildlife crime programme manager at Interpol, who has helped in stings on ivory trafficking gangs.

Charlie Mayhew, of Tusk Trust, said: "Prices are so high there are rewards for everyone ... from rangers all the way to politicians." Dr Richard Leakey, a naturalist, added: "We're right back where we were in the 1980s. I suspect that a lot of the killing in Kenya is carried out by wildlife department personnel or with their full connivance."

Julius Kipng'etich, the director of Kenya Wildlife Service, denied collusion by his department's officials, saying: "If you look at the seizures it is clear they are not coming from government stocks because those are marked with indelible ink." He said that the wildlife service monitored its staff.

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