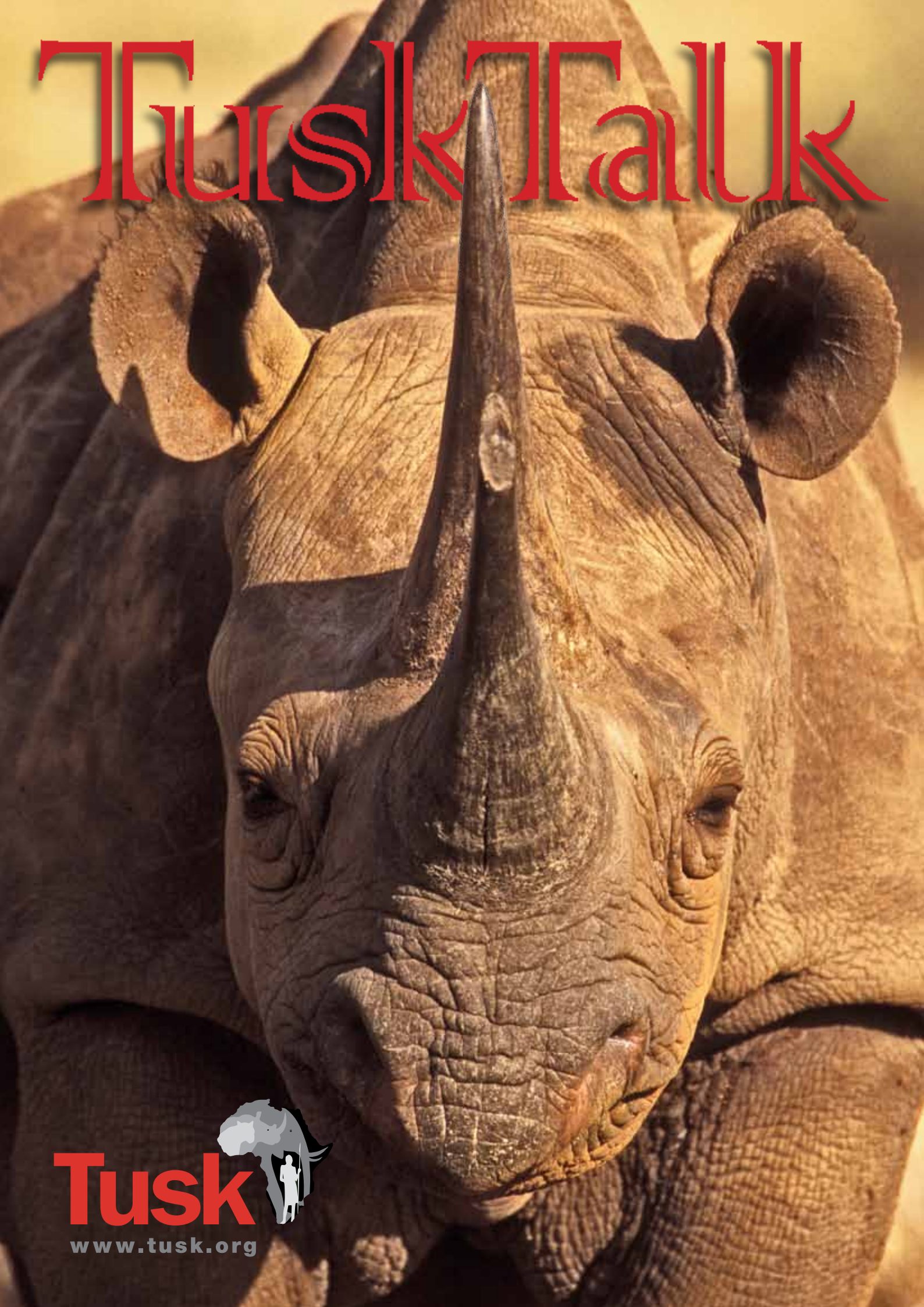


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China's rise 'puts elephants and rhinos in danger'

This article originally appeared in *The Times* on January 8th 2011.

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 UK-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 Ambassador 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. "The [Government of China] has not demonstrated any commitment to curb ivory poaching. 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 just 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 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 smuggled in from Mozambique and worth more than £190,000.

"The situation is not hopeless but this is a war and our efforts at the moment equate to a triage," said Meredith Ogilvie-Thompson, Tusk's recently appointed Executive Director in the USA.

Elephant ivory worth more than £64 per kg 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 herbivores being killed at a rate of nearly one a day by criminal gangs equipped with high-tech hunting equipment (see pages 42/43).

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 Charlie Mayhew. "The gains of the last ten years can be quickly eroded."

The rewards are such that you inevitably run into corruption

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 snuffled 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 Dr. Jonathan Moss, the former 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. Jonathan 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] bushmeat."

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.

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 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 also said that the wildlife service monitored its staff.