

FINDINGS ON THE FLOURISHING IVORY TRADE IN ANGOLA'S CAPITAL, LUANDA



LUCY VIGNE

SCENES FROM LUANDA: an array of items for sale at the market in Benfica, including walking sticks with handles carved into dragon-shapes.



LUCY VIGNE

A rhinoceros figure carved from ivory by an Angolan, for retail sale in a Luandan shop.



ESMOND MARTIN

A selection of name seals for the Chinese market at the Benfica market.



LUCY VIGNE

An Angolan carver working on an ivory pendant and earrings, central Luanda.

INTRODUCTION

Angola's capital, Luanda, has the largest illegal ivory market in southern Africa. A recent investigation in the city follows a number of surveys into the ivory trade in Luanda undertaken by TRAFFIC and others over the past decade which have indicated an increasing availability of ivory for sale: in 2005, an estimated 1573 kg of ivory items were displayed openly for sale at 41 retail outlets, with over 90% in the Mercado do Artesanato (Artists' Market) at Benfica in south Luanda (Milliken *et al.*, 2006). A partial ivory survey in this market in 2013 recorded 2064 items; the shape and size of the tusks indicated that the ivory mostly came from forest elephants *Loxodonta africana cyclotis* rather than savannah elephants *L.a. africana* (Svensson *et al.*, 2014). In early March 2014, the authors spent a week in and around the city to review the retail ivory trade, during which time they counted 10 888 pieces of ivory for sale illegally, nearly all of them new items. Most of this ivory is purchased by Chinese and other East Asian citizens based in the country.

BACKGROUND

By 2006, Angola's once large populations of forest and savannah elephants had declined, with estimates, according to the most recent IUCN/SSC African Elephant Status Report, of 818 elephants in the "Definite" category and 801 in the "Probable" category (Blanc *et al.*, 2007). Most of the ivory available for sale in Angola at that time reportedly originated from Central Africa (Milliken *et al.*, 2006), and this remains the case. Between 2002 and 2011, about 62% of Central Africa's forest elephants were estimated to have disappeared due to habitat destruction and as a result of the soaring demand for ivory (Maisels *et al.*, 2013).

On 31 December 2013, Angola acceded to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) records seizures of ivory by country, and while ivory from Angola seized in other countries has been recorded by ETIS, Angola had never reported an ivory seizure until this year (2014). Sale of all ivory is illegal in Angola without a permit (Milliken *et al.*, 2006; Svensson *et al.*, 2014). However, domestic legislation prohibiting such sales is not being enforced.

Chinese demand

The soaring demand in Angola for ivory and other wildlife products (such as Leopard *Panthera pardus* skins, turtle shells and reptile skins that Chinese visitors to the Benfica market were observed by the authors to be examining) is largely due to the exponential growth in Chinese workers. Angola is booming economically, with increased production of oil and gas. The Chinese construction companies, who employ hard-working, fast builders from China, providing inexpensive labour, have gained most contracts in large construction projects all over the country, especially in and around Luanda. The number of Chinese workers has risen from 500 in 2002 to 260 000 in 2012 (Sautman and Hairong, 2007; Dongye, 2013). Chinese and other East Asian construction

workers fly back and forth to their home countries for leave or at the end of their contracts. Yet at Luanda's international airport, the authors saw no signs in the form of literature or posters to indicate that exports of ivory or any other wildlife products from endangered species were prohibited, nor did they see any signs elsewhere in Luanda. When questioned, vendors indicated that it was fine to take ivory out of Angola.

During the survey the authors learned that raw ivory can be obtained wholesale in Luanda for as little as USD150 per kg for tusks weighing between one and three kilogrammes, and USD200 per kg for slightly larger ones. In 2005, a kilogramme of ivory fetched USD35–100 (Milliken *et al.*, 2006). The authors learned that many ivory items come from Central Africa; they are sold by French-speaking vendors, mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Republic of Congo. Angolans were also illegally selling worked ivory carved mostly in the north of the country, such as Zaire Province. The authors interviewed two Angolan ivory carvers at their workshop in Luanda; one was making ivory earrings and pendants. At their retail outlet in the city, a variety of artistically designed ivory items were displayed in glass cabinets and were of a higher quality than the piles of ivory items laid out on tables at the Benfica market.

SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 10 888 ivory pieces on open display in Luanda, 10 026 items were in the Benfica market at 20 large stalls selling predominantly ivory. They were arranged in 12 rows of about four stalls each (half of which were unoccupied on the first day of the survey, an average week day) and a few ivory carvings were included among wooden carvings available elsewhere in the market. Each vendor had ivory items laid out on a flat table top. There appeared to be no security guards in the market. The market in Benfica was visited four times, on three days and on each visit the number of stalls selling ivory ranged from between 20 and 30; the market was particularly active on Sunday when most Chinese, and some other East Asian buyers, come to shop for ivory. The extra 10 stalls set up on the Sunday displayed equal quantities of ivory and other souvenirs and cheap jewellery.

The main ivory objects for sale at the Benfica market were beaded necklaces (23%), bangles (19%), pendants (19%), name seals (7%), cigarette holders (7%), rings (6%), figurines (5%), long hair pins (4%) and chopsticks (3%). Most figurines were Buddhas, which the Chinese prefer to Christian and African figurines that are much less common nowadays. At less than 30 cm, the figurines were mainly smaller than in 2005—clearly easier to smuggle abroad—and fewer plain tusks were on display than in 2005. Jewellery items and name seals, including tusk tips, were larger than those for retail sale in China, making them attractive to Chinese buyers in Angola. The pieces were more crudely carved than ivory items carved in China, however. If a customer showed interest in a particular item, the vendor would produce more such items from a metal trunk under his stall, wrapped in cotton sheeting and pillow cases. Items produced from these trunks ranged from combs and animal figurines to full polished tusks. At the end of the day, the vendors would return all the ivory to their trunks, which they locked with a padlock.



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Chinese customers at the market in Benfica, Luanda, choosing ivory bangles from beneath the display table (above); carved ivory bangles, Benfica, Luanda (below).

Prices were very low, sometimes a tenth of the price similar items fetch in China (Martin and Vigne, 2011), and likely an important factor for their popularity with the Chinese in Angola. The cheapest items at the Benfica market were rings for USD1 and the most expensive—at USD4000—were solid ivory walking sticks with handles carved into the shape of a dragon's head. Large bangles were offered for USD100–200, but most items could be bought for half the original asking price. Ivory vendors at the market, who were all men, spoke French, Portuguese and Chinese. Most of the Chinese buyers are involved in construction projects, and selected jewellery and utilitarian objects, examining them in great detail. Groups of Chinese men, and sometimes Chinese couples, were seen buying ivory, usually several items at a time. No other nationalities were knowingly observed buying ivory, nor wearing ivory, during the week's visit.

Apart from the market in Benfica, only six ivory outlets were seen in the city. At these, some 862 ivory items were counted: seven bangles and figurines in one hotel souvenir shop; 841 items in four other souvenir shops; and 14 large pendants being sold by a street vendor. Antique ivory or noticeably older ivory was not seen for sale in Luanda. Prior to the country's independence from Portugal in 1975, there had been an active ivory carving industry in Angola, largely for the ethnic Portuguese Angolans, many of whom fled the country when their property was confiscated during the years of civil war following independence, taking with them many ivory carvings. Vendors at these six souvenir outlets said business today was slow as there are fewer European (most still are Portuguese) and American buyers, and the Chinese prefer to go to the Benfica market where there is a larger choice of worked ivory, lower prices, and items can be bought in bulk.

CONCLUSIONS

A large illegal retail ivory trade continues unabated in Luanda, fuelled mainly by Chinese nationals. The recently-carved ivory items for sale in the Benfica market in the capital derive mostly from forest elephants of Central Africa, where numbers are in sharp decline. No vendors displayed any apparent concern that they were offering ivory for sale illegally, perhaps owing to the fact that official inspections and confiscations are extremely rare. Growing numbers of Chinese workers, and other East Asians coming to Angola, buy ivory in this market daily. It is vital that the Chinese Embassy and other East Asian embassies warn citizens from their countries working in Angola not to buy ivory. It is also imperative that the Angolan Government closes down the huge illegal retail ivory market in Benfica.

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