



Internet trade of elephant ivory in Latin America Report 2009





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Acknowledges

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Introduction

Is there elephant ivory in Latin America? Most of the people honestly believe that there is not a market for ivory in the third world and much less such a thing as an internet trade developed there. Well, there is an ivory trade in this side of the world, but so far we didn't know the extension of this.

While doing the CATCA research on Internet trade of CITES species of animals in Ecuador, we found by chance several internet services selling ivory in many countries of the America's, so we decided to conduct a research on this issue.

Due to the limited financial resources and the magnitude of the task, we decided to survey the e-trade in ivory in only four selected countries: Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico and Uruguay. We based the decision to choose these countries on the different geographical location, their levels of economy development, their population and backgrounds of its inhabitants. Each country is unique.

We decided to embark on this investigation to find out if there was really a problem in Latin America and to find out the degree of the internet trade of elephant ivory.

During the CITES CoP15 our results of this project will be delivered to the proper authorities, not only from Latin America, but from other continents as well, to the internet service providers and to non-governmental organizations.



Religious carvings

Method

This investigation was conducted by CATCA and consisted of three phases:

Phase I - In this phase we conducted a research, to identify and locate the website services offering ivory all over Latin America, basing our research on Google and Yahoo searchers.

Phase 2 - With the results from the Phase I, we proceeded to preliminary assess the scale of ivory trade in all the different countries. Based on this, we could choose countries with very different amount of offers. These were: one country of North America with a large number of offers, one from South America with a minimum number of offers and two other South American countries with a medium size of trade in ivory. Some other factors involved in our selection of countries to research were the different economic environment, their development, geographic area and location, culture and origins of its inhabitants. These are the factors that we decided to take into consideration and this is how we chose to conduct our research in the countries of Mexico, Ecuador, Uruguay and Argentina.

Phase 3 - In each one of the chosen countries, we conducted a full research of ivory offers on the internet. To do this, we did a general Google and Yahoo search engine survey of all ivory offers in each country. Many offers repeat themselves several times on the same website service and also in other services We tried to identify these duplications of offers to avoid repetition of records in the results.

While working on Phase 3, we could not work in each country in the same time frame (e.g. for Ecuador it took only 4 days to complete our research and for Mexico 3 weeks). This was because of the variation of the amounts of offers we found in each country differed, so the ivory e-commerce could be quite vast in one country and in another country there would be very few offers.

Results

Figure 1 shows the very interesting results of our investigation. Mexico has a staggering number of ivory offers compared to the other countries where we conducted our research. **The offers of ivory products are in Mexico almost ten times more numerous than those in Ecuador, over five times more than Uruguay and it has four times the quantity of ivory sales offered in Argentina.** The price range of the items that we found is also extreme, from just a couple of US Dollars to \$50,000 per item!



Lot of ivory for sale in internet



Fig. 1. The average number of ivory offers in the chosen four Latin American countries in 2009



Ivory carving from Africa

We estimate that Argentina has a total value of offers present any time in Internet in 2009 worth \$64,500, Ecuador \$42,000, Uruguay \$370,000 and Mexico \$760,000. These calculation of the approximate total value of the specimens for sale makes a staggering amount of ivory products worth over \$1,200,000 offered everyday day on internet services in four countries.

We found more ivory here in these four countries in 2009, than our European colleagues in all of the Central and Eastern European countries in 2005-06 and in 2008-2009 (CEEweb reports on trade in CITES species in Central and Eastern Europe - Kala et al. 2007, Kala & Kepel 2010).

Chart 2 and 3 shows that the majority of the ivory offers come from the **Mercado Libre** website service, followed by **DeRemate.com** and **Olx**. These internet services are quite popular in Latin America.

A 57% of offers is comprised of all the other services, mostly small classified services and private websites, that range from piano stores to private sales and stores selling jewellery, arts and antiquities.

The website services with the highest estimated total value of detected offers (USD prices) is also the **Mercado Libre** with almost \$295,000, followed by the Mexican service **MundoAnuncio.com.mx** (\$290,000) and **Olx** (almost \$270,000). Figure 3 shows the share of 7 leading services in internet ivory market in surveyed countries.

The results of this research show an interesting number of offers of religious catholic items, such as crucifixes, baby Christ's, the Holy Family, the Virgin Mary, and saints. We found an ivory retablo (*reredo*), which is interesting due that mostly they are made of wood, stone or metals. These figures come in the form of statues, miniatures figures and miniature ivory plaques painted. Various of these catholic items come from the Philippines. Some others come from Spain and Portugal.

The majority of the items we found, are from China, Japan or other Asiatic countries. The most common oriental items we found were sculptures, Japanese netsukes, miniature figurines, animals, jewellery and whole carved elephant tasks. There are also some African contemporary carvings and figures.

It is not easy to estimate the age of ivory products according to the internet offer. However the color of items on the pictures and information given by the sellers suggest , that an important percentage of items offered for sale were done recently (e.g. when seller offered several specimens of the same kind).

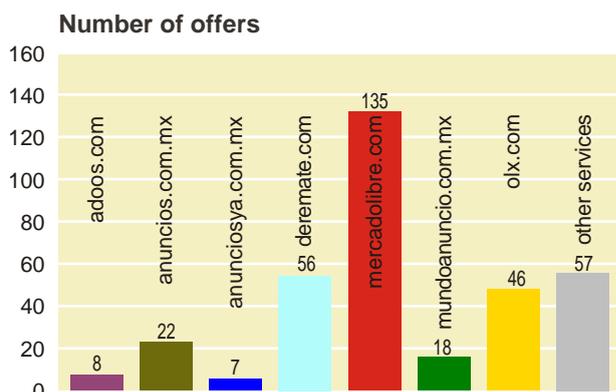


Fig. 2. Numbers of ivory offers found on the seven leading services in the four surveyed countries

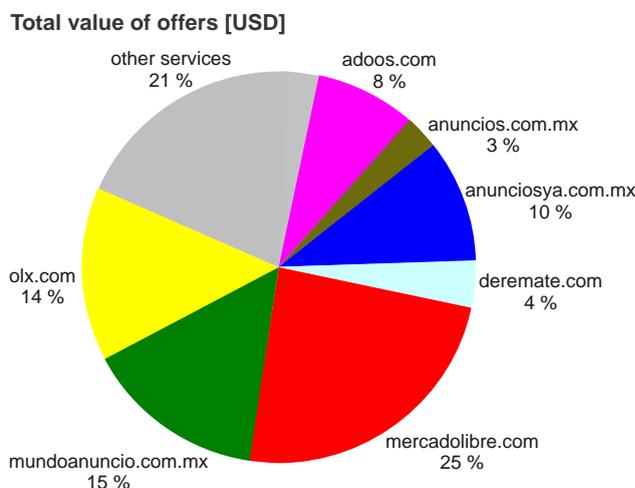


Fig. 3. Estimated share of the total value of offers of the nine leading services in the four surveyed countries

Note: In September 2001 Mercado Libre, a large Latin American internet advertisement service, signed an exclusive alliance with eBay (which is the largest enterprise for buying and selling on the global internet). This alliance turned eBay into one of its principal investors and is now for service all over Latin America. In this research we found lots of ivory in this website. It was as surprise, as eBay declared during the CITES CoP14 in 2007 that they were going to ban all elephant products from their services. Obviously the ivory is still there all over in Mercado Libre.

Conclusions

Not to our surprise, Mexico has proven to be the number one country with the highest amount of offers and specimens in this research. There is so much ivory for sale on the Internet in Mexico, that the job with monitoring was overwhelming sometimes. Ecuador turned out to have more ivory offers online than we expected, but the ivory offers there are minimum compared to Mexico, while Uruguay and Argentina are in the medium size of offers category.

There is obviously a problem with the ivory trade in Latin America. The trade on ivory products is quite developed there and the total of specimens found on the internet trade is much more than we ever expected to find.

Most of the ivory products offered for sale in Internet originate from Asia. There are also specimens from Africa or Europe.

People in the America's lack awareness about the ivory trade. Most of the people aren't aware about the poaching of elephants all over Africa to satisfy the ivory demand. They see ivory as a mere beautiful sculpture, a decorative item or jewellery, which in turn is also viewed as a symbol of class and status. We urge the proper authorities of these countries and the internet advertisement services, to educate at least with a basic knowledge about this problem to the general public.

The internet ivory trade, which is very difficult to control, drives the poaching on elephants. Therefore to reduce the scale of this kind of crime and save this magnificent animal species, the total world wild ban for offering ivory for sale in internet should be introduced. National bans could be first steps to achieve this goal.

Note: Ivory it is not seen as something that concern Latin Americans, because there are not elephants in the American continent, but about 100 elephants have been killed every day just for their ivory tusks to be made into ornaments, and unwarily of this problem, they buy elephant ivory when they see it and in doing so, they keep supporting this cycle of death of the African elephants. It is important that Latin American people realize that this is a global issue that concerns us all, if we don't want the African elephants to get extinct in the next years to come.



Japanese netsuke



Virgin of Guadalupe painted on an ivory plaque

African elephant's future in peril

How the decisions taken during the CITES CoP can either save or condemn the elephant population in Africa?



© Kenya Wildlife Service



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Forest elephants in Mount Elgon National Park

African bush elephants in Meru National Park

The African elephants have been hunted for centuries because of their ivory tusks. The 20th Century proved to be one of the most devastating for the two species of African elephants: the African bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) and the African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*).

Between 1979 and 1989 the global demand for ivory caused elephant populations to decline enormously. The poaching of elephants stretched all over Africa to satisfy the increasing demand on ivory. The result was that half of the elephant populations on this continent were killed.

In 1979 there were about 1.3 million African elephants and today only 470,000 remain, but some authorities and scientists say, there could be as low as 250,000 left.⁽⁵⁾ The main target has always been the bush elephants, but in Kenya, when the populations declined dramatically and this species started to be scarce, the poachers started to hunt the forest elephant.⁽¹⁾ These elephants are smaller in body and tusk size in comparison to the bush elephants, but that didn't stop the poachers.

In October 1989, during the CITES CoP, the governments banned the global trade of ivory starting on January 1990. From then on the demand for ivory decreased dramatically, but the poaching of the elephants remained posing a threat to the African elephants, especially to the populations from Central and West Africa where there were local markets for ivory.⁽⁴⁾ The demand for ivory from Asia (especially from China and Japan), has kept the poachers busy killing elephants and smuggling out the ivory.

It is estimated that currently about 38,000 elephants are killed annually to supply the demand on ivory trade, according to Dr. Samuel Wasser's genetic studies of confiscated ivory.^(6,10)

Dr. Wasser and his team have created a DNA map of African elephants based on recent seizures of thousands of tusks in Asia and these tusks can be traced to the Selous and Niassa reserves on the Tanzania and Mozambique borders, which suggest that few illicit groups are responsible for the killing of tens of thousands of elephants every year.⁽⁷⁾

China has the world's largest illegal ivory market, and is the single major destination for illegal ivory, mostly from elephants slaughtered in Africa. The escalating demand for ivory has increased the black market prices from \$200 per kilo to \$850 per kilo in the past four years, providing a big financial incentive for the poachers⁽²⁾ and it is estimated that a 75% of all the ivory sold in Africa has been bought by Chinese.⁽⁸⁾

Kenya's national parks are heavily target by poachers, especially in the parks of Tsavo and Amboselli. Just in the Amboselli National Park 15 elephants were killed last year.⁽¹⁾

After the 2007 decision taken during the CITES CoP14 to allow Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa to sell their ivory, Kenya as a direct consequence lost to poachers:

in **2007** - 47 elephants,

in **2008** - 145 elephants,

in **2009** - 214 elephants.

3,562 raw ivory kilos were smuggled out of Kenya alone just in 2009⁽¹⁾. A lot more has been smuggled from other African countries. The poaching has been devastating for some countries: Sierra Leone with only a small population of 16 elephants has just been erased from the map by the poachers.^(4,9)

A kilogram of ivory sells for as much as \$1,500 in the Far East. In Kenya it sells for \$40. Even a small pair of 10 kg tusks would bring a poacher the equivalent of \$400, more than casual workers earn in a year. A big bull carrying 100 kg of ivory would bring a fortune. The incentive is considerable.⁽⁶⁾

To allow Tanzania and Zambia to get a onetime sell of their ivory, it would go against the position of most of the African countries, which want to continue with the current ivory trade ban and to expand it to 2028. Another country allowance to sell ivory not only would endanger all of the elephant populations in Africa, but also would increase the current problems of poaching and the international traffic of ivory.

To sell confiscated ivory doesn't support the conservation of these elephants, nor does it benefit people fighting to protect these elephants. It is the equivalent to sell drugs for an anti drug crusade. It is morally wrong.

The future of the African elephants depends on this CITES CoP decisions. The extension of the ivory trade moratorium (or even better, a permanent moratorium), is the only thing that can be done to save these magnificent animal species, from vanishing of the African map forever.



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Chess sets, pianos with ivory keys and raw elephant tusks were the most expensive specimens in our research



Ivory, is it really worth it the cost?



CATCA is going to follow up the monitoring of the internet trade in ivory and continue to do a wider and in depth research all over Latin America, to present the results in the form of a report during the CITES CoP16.

If your group, NGO or state is interested in sponsoring this project totally or partially, please contact us at: ericka@catcahelpanimals.org.



Campaigns Against the Cruelty to Animals was founded in The Netherlands in 1989. We are an animal welfare and an animal conservation organization, created to fight against the animal cruelty worldwide.