

## Tourists Smuggle African Ivory from Thailand

**You might think that ivory bracelet or elephant statue you bought in Thailand is legal, but you're wrong. Chances are it's made from the tusk of an African elephant, and in the next 15 minutes another elephant will be slaughtered to make more trinkets.**

*The travellers shed their parkas and winter boots, locking the cold and dark behind in their car. The airport shuttle arrives; they pass a woman on the way to her snow covered car, her straw hat soon to be replaced by a woolen one, her tanned wrist wrapped in a thick ivory bangle.*



It isn't just [Chinese delegates](#) who smuggle ivory into their own country. A [World Wildlife Fund \(WWF\) study](#) found that 28% of Swedish tourists returning from places such as Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, China, and Africa, may unwittingly bring illegal ivory and other prohibited animal products into Sweden.

*Inside the airport, the travellers strip belts and rings, gladly spread pale arms and legs for a body scan, as security officials x-ray bags and seize liquids and gels. Chattering excitedly, the travellers are granted access to pre-assigned airline seats, store their bags overhead, and plan the movies to watch on the long flight to Bangkok.*

Vagabond magazine lists Thailand as the 12<sup>th</sup> favourite travel spot for over 344,000 Swedes per year. If one in four Swedish tourists buy something made of ivory, that's 86,000 pieces of ivory stolen from endangered African elephants and as many people breaking the law.

“In Sweden we often have a self-image that we are environmentally conscious and a force for good in the world. Now it is high time that we live up to it,” says Håkan Wirtén, Secretary General of WWF in Sweden.

But, according to the WWF survey, 98% of the Swedes who answered say they'd never buy illegal ivory. Either they don't realise they're buying it or they think all the ivory for sale in Thailand is legal. It isn't.

*Our light-hungry travellers arrive in Bangkok. Tomorrow they'll transfer to the all-inclusive resort in Phuket, but today they wander the streets, soaking up colours and smells. They check the weather at home, laughing at the 45 °C difference. They snack on street food, dodge bicycles, down bottled water, and search for a place to eat in the market. Everywhere is exotic, from the unreadable writing, to the thousands of ivory statues and jewellery laid out and available for sale.*

***Don't Buy Ivory***

- jewellery
- toothpicks
- hairpins
- chopsticks
- cigarette lighter holders
- sculptures

The ivory they see is made from wild African elephant tusks, and even if there is any legal ivory, it cannot be removed from Thailand without the right paperwork. If you're caught smuggling you could serve a jail term of up to ten years or be arrested when you return home.



*Two of our travellers wander the market streets. The girl begs for one of the elephant carvings for her dresser. Her mother treats herself to a pair of ivory earrings, a pendant, and a bangle.*

“The ivory market in Thailand is still thriving and remains one of the largest and most active worldwide, with high turnover of stock and continued sales to foreign tourists,” Naomi Doak says in a TRAFFIC report, [Polishing Off the Ivory: Surveys of Thailand's Ivory Markets](#).

### **Proof It's African Ivory for Sale**

The elephant is a national, historical, and spiritual [symbol of Thailand](#). There are carvings and statues everywhere, including the elephant-headed deities from the Hindu and Buddhist religions. If

you're there on March 13, you can celebrate Thai Elephant Day, another sign of the Thai's long-standing relationship with elephants.

Yet, there on the market table are thousands of ivory pieces. It's difficult to believe the Thai people



would allow the sale of illegal ivory from an animal so revered.

There're no warning signs in the store, your travel agent said nothing, there's nothing at the airport. A natural conclusion might be that the ivory for sale is legal. And it could be but only if it comes from a domestic Asian elephant.

The evidence is in the number of items for sale and the size of the jewellery.

### ***The Numbers Don't Add Up***

Naomi Doak [surveyed the Bangkok markets](#) to find that the products for sale have trebled between January 2013 and May 2014 (from 5,865 to 14,512 items).

Doak analysed the captive elephant population in Thailand to determine how much domestic ivory could be harvested a year. Accounting for several factors, such as the number of registered male elephants, that only some male Asian elephants have tusks, the amount of ivory available over a lifetime, and how few elephants get their tusks trimmed, she estimated 135 pieces per year, or only 40 centimetres of ivory available for the domestic market.

### ***Thick Bangles Can Only Come from African Tusks***

More proof the source of the ivory is from African elephant tusks is the size of the bangles.

Doak compared the width and thickness of the bangles. If these are placed side by side, there is over two metres of ivory. Compare that to the estimated 40 centimetres of domestic product and it's clearly African ivory on sale.



How is any tourist visiting Thailand going to know they're breaking the law? What is Thailand doing to stop the flow of illegal ivory into and out of the country?

## **Thailand's National Ivory Action Plan**

In March 2013, the world put enough pressure on Thailand to start the process of change. In addition to many other campaigns, an [AVAAZ petition backed by Leonardo DiCaprio](#) resulted in Yingluck Shinawatra, the Prime Minister of Thailand at the time, [publicly pledging](#) to make domestic ivory illegal. The pledge, made at a Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) wildlife summit in Bangkok, came at a time when Thailand was being pressured to finalise their National Ivory Action Plans.

This July, the CITES Standing Committee [released a report](#) detailing Thailand's progress. Thailand could lose up to 40-50 billion baht (between £777 and £971 million) in revenue if the country doesn't pass the next review and if CITES imposes the trade bans as threatened.

### ***Tracking the Domestic Ivory***

The CITES Standing Committee evaluated ten aspects of Thailand's progress and ranked four as “substantially achieved” or “on track for achievement”. The remaining six categories were ranked as being “challenging” or “unclear”. One of the substantially achieved milestones is a regulation, passed in May, to implement a unique identification system to track whole tusks or piece of raw ivory harvested from domestic elephants. They completed an inventory of the ivory confiscated by the authorities, and are marking these with unique identifiers.

The CITES report found that monitoring and controlling the ivory traders remained unclear as did the progress made with law enforcement initiatives. Thailand is undergoing political upheaval, and for now Prime Minister, Prayut Chan-O-Cha, supports the country's commitment to stop the illegal ivory trade. The government is taking steps to increase border controls and to implement a licensing system for ivory shop owners.

### ***Monitoring the Borders***

On October 17 the [border police in Thailand](#) were ordered to tighten security at 50 check points. The deputy national police chief, Pol Gen Chalermkiat Srivorakhan, confirmed that “Thailand is a regional transit country for ivory from Africa, most of which is smuggled past customs and immigration, so new checkpoints will be set up along the 'ivory trail' to catch suppliers.”



## Tracking the Ivory Traders and Shop Owners

A new law is expected to take effect at the end of this year; shop owners will need licenses to sell ivory. Officials will monitor the stock and verify the ivory is from domestic sources. The plan is to force all ivory traders to follow the new rules. It's unclear what penalties shop owners will face. It's also difficult to distinguish between African and Asian ivory, it requires expert training or expensive DNA tests. This feeds into the debate. Wouldn't it be easier to ban all ivory instead of allowing domestic ivory to stay legal?

An October [Bangkok Post editorial](#) highlights the conflict. International groups, such as WWF and TRAFFIC, [want a total ban on ivory](#) but national groups want to increase monitoring and enforcement, allowing for a legal ivory trade. Even with similar goals, it's having a [negative impact](#) on the government's efforts to implement the CITES recommendations to the National Ivory Action Plan.

For now it continues to be legal to harvest and sell domestic ivory. It's still *illegal* to [take domestic ivory products out of Thailand](#) and if arrested and charged, you could go to jail for up to ten years.

The ivory smuggled into the country isn't only destined for the shops; it's laundered and shipped to other Asian countries, such as China, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Over 26.7 million people visited Thailand in 2013; that could translate to seven million people a year blindly supporting the illegal trade of African ivory.

## Taking the Message Home

*Our travellers settle in for the long flight home, their bags full of cheap clothing and Thai handicrafts.*

*In the last two weeks, they've ridden a live elephant, had their face tickled by a trunk, and run hands along wrinkled skin that feels like warm tree bark.*



*In the little girl's suitcase, wrapped in silk scarves, are two ivory elephant carvings bought in the market that first day, about to be smuggled into their home country.*

## **The Elephant in Crisis**

The world's elephant population is in crisis. Experts cannot accurately determine the numbers being poached, but estimates are that 36,000 elephants a year—99 African elephants a day, 4 elephants an hour, 1 elephant every 15 minutes—is being shot or poisoned, then has their tusks cut from their faces, before being left behind in the bush to suffer an agonizing death. If the ivory trade is not stopped, in 10 to 15 years the elephant population could be extinct.

The illegal trade in elephant ivory is accelerating and could be worth as much as a billion dollars (£640 million) a year. The dark figure of crime means that both the number of elephants being killed and the value of the ivory are drastically underestimated.

In [Out of Africa: Mapping the Global Trade in Illicit Elephant Ivory](#), they calculated that “[t]he price of ivory has skyrocketed from USD \$5/kg in 1989 to a wholesale price of USD \$2,100/kg in China in 2014, with retail prices much higher.”

During our travellers two week holiday, over 1000 elephants were slaughtered.

## **What is Sweden Doing to Educate the Tourists?**

Back in Sweden, Mats Forslund, an expert on trade in endangered species, spoke at this year's campaign to educate people about smuggling ivory and other animal products into Sweden.

Forslund says the Swedish customs system is “not in place” to search tourists when they return from holiday.

Forslund also said that Sweden's airports aren't educating tourists leaving the country. In other parts of the world there's information given to travellers at the airports but this isn't happening at Arlanda, Stockholm's busiest international airport with 60% of annual passenger traffic.

Just over the border in Norway, Oslo Airport is actively educating tourists and enforcing the laws: “We take a very serious view of these things, and confiscate everything we find,” said Tor Fredriksen, office manager for Norwegian Customs and Excise at Oslo Airport.

According to Forslund, the Swedish WWF has been trying for over 20 years to get information into the airports. Forslund says that they're working again this year with [Swedavia](#), the government group that operates the ten Swedish airports, to ask them to distribute the educational material produced by the WWF.

## What You Can Do

1. Don't buy ivory products or any animal products.
2. Ask tour companies and airlines to educate tourists before they travel.
3. Support a cause such as [Stop Wildlife Crime](#) or [adopt an African elephant](#).
4. Ask [Swedavia](#) to increase the customs enforcement and educate passengers.

*With thanks to Therese Gustafsson for translation assistance from the World Wildlife November 17, 2014 press conference.*



## Image Sources

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