

New Zealand's role in elephant ivory trading

By Fiona Gordon

5:00 AM Tuesday May 13, 2014

A photo exhibition, petition and report highlight the plight of the elephant and New Zealand's hidden role in international ivory trading. The report's author, Fiona Gordon, explains how it fits together.



A new petition seeks to expose New Zealand's role in elephant ivory trading. Photo / Getty Images

Six powerful images depicting the elephant poaching crisis and rampant ivory trade in China and the Philippines form part of a world-renowned exhibition in Auckland, taking place as a petition is lodged to ban ivory trading in New Zealand.

The London Natural History Museum's exhibition *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* is showing at the Auckland Museum until August 3.

It includes six photos from award-winning wildlife photographer Brent Stirton. The caption for one image, titled *The End of the Elephants*, reads: "The patronage and obsession of such wealthy collectors sustains the trade in illegal ivory, creating an inevitable threat to elephant populations worldwide."

While this might be a disturbing revelation to some viewers, it's nothing new to Auckland teacher and passionate animal advocate Virginia Woolf.

And while Epsom MP John Banks has been vocal with his objection to inhumane testing on beagle puppies, rats and rabbits, he is also quietly championing the cause for a much bigger animal - the African elephant.

Ms Woolf met with Mr Banks at Parliament last month to register her petition requesting the government ban all ivory trade in New Zealand and support a global ban. The petition also requests harsher penalties for illegal trading in New Zealand.

"The ivory trade in New Zealand plays a part in driving elephants to extinction - by keeping the demand for ivory buoyant," Ms Woolf said.

A comprehensive report supporting Ms Woolf's petition notes that, according to Webbs Auction House, competition for ivory on the domestic market continued to push prices well above estimates in 2012. In line with the global market and the current popularity and increasing value of ivory, items available via Trade Me, auction houses and antique shops throughout the country command high prices.

Earrings can fetch around \$50, a necklace, bracelet or small carving (netsuke) can fetch hundreds of dollars, and larger carvings can sell for thousands.

Investors are advised to be wary. Only African elephant ivory items imported before the 1989 ivory trade ban, or imported since then with a Department of Conservation permit for commercial trade, can be legally traded in New Zealand. The trade ban started even earlier, in 1975, for Asian elephant ivory.

However, with no domestic regulations requiring evidence of an item's age or source, few include proof of their legal eligibility for trade at point of sale.

The first New Zealand conviction for illegal trade in ivory took place last year. The defendant was reported to have traded in ivory as art but also with a view to gain from those purchases as an investment.

According to the report supporting Ms Woolf's petition, New Zealand authorities have confiscated 791 pieces of illegal ivory over the years, including 80 tusks, 564 carvings, numerous ivory pieces and teeth.

Forty-nine items were confiscated just from 2010 to 2012. Whether these imported items included freshly-poached ivory or 'older' pre-ban ivory without the necessary permits is unclear. Either way, all were illegal.

While perhaps not a big player in the ivory trade, the report notes that on a per capita basis for ivory carving imports from 2009 to 2012, New Zealand easily tops the United States - a globally-significant ivory consumer nation.

There's also been a dramatic increase in re-exports, with over 1200 items of ivory leaving New Zealand's shores during 2012. Traditionally destined for Australia, the UK and the US, China has emerged as a new top destination.

Some serious ivory enthusiasts appear to be leaving the country, with individual re-export records of between 50 and 278 items, all declared for "personal use". The report notes that these items were not re-exported for commercial purposes however, without a tracking system, there is potential for the ivory to end up on the market once in the destination country.

"There is no valid defense for any country to trade in ivory items, particularly given the devastating impacts on elephant populations," Ms Woolf said.

As part of a global effort to reduce ivory demand, international agencies including the African Wildlife Foundation, Born Free Foundation, David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, Environmental Investigation Agency, Humane Society International, Tanzania Association of Tour Operators, and Wildlife Conservation Society are calling on nations, including New Zealand, to crush its confiscated ivory stockpile.

Ms Woolf is hopeful Brent Stirton's images will raise awareness and encourage action to save the world's largest land mammal - "soon to be just an image on the internet if we don't stop ivory trading, now".

Ivory trade in a nutshell

Fiona Gordon is an environmental policy analyst and mediator. A copy of her report "A Report on the New Zealand Trade in Ivory 1980 - 2012" is available from Gordon Consulting.