

The Price of Ivory

To meet the demand for ivory products in Asia, thousands of African elephants are being hunted for their tusks.

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By TFK Staff

DOZENS OF AFRICAN ELEPHANTS KILLED. That headline has become all too common. Last month, poachers killed at least 86 elephants in Chad and 28 in Cameroon. Both countries are in a part of Africa that has lost more than 60% of its elephants to illegal hunters in the past 10 years.

Why are poachers going after elephants? The answer lies thousands of miles away from Africa, in a handful of Asian countries. In China, business is booming in fancy shops that sell expensive goods made of ivory.

The material comes from elephant tusks. But for many people who buy ivory, the gentle giants are out of sight and out of mind. "Seven out of 10 Chinese citizens don't realize that an elephant has to die in order [for them] to get ivory," says Will Travers, of the Born Free Foundation.

The Trouble with Tusks

The hunt for ivory is not a new problem. In the 1980s, as many as 1 million elephants were killed for their tusks. Poaching continued until 1989, when an agreement called CITES banned the sale of ivory from one country to another. The number of elephants in the wild began to grow. But the progress did not last.

In 1999 and 2008, CITES officials let a few African countries sell ivory they had in storage. Today, that ivory is sold legally in China. Unfortunately, this has made it possible for illegal ivory to be sold as well.

Now conservationists are putting pressure on China to stop the sale of illegal ivory. Experts say help is needed in Africa too. "A lot of our focus has been on providing training and equipment for the rangers," says Kelvin Alle, of the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Last year, Gabon, in central Africa, made a statement against the sale of ivory by burning a collection of tusks. "We don't want our children to inherit an empty forest," said President Ali Bongo. With friends like him, elephants just might stand a chance.

To watch a Wildlife Conservation Society video about elephants, go to timeforkids.com/elephants.