

CRIME



A customs officer guards the 1,209 elephant tusks shipped to Hong Kong in two containers from Kenya and Tanzania. Photo: Sam Tsang

CUSTOMS SEIZE HK\$27m SMUGGLED IVORY HAUL

Massive illegal consignment of 1,209 elephant tusks from East Africa is uncovered by agents at Kwai Chung after two-month investigation

POINTED TRUTHS

1 Yesterday's single seizure is larger in weight than the total in 2004, and the total in 2007, according to TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network.

2 In 2011 4,759 elephant tusks were seized in major anti-smuggling operations globally, a 200 per cent rise on the previous year.

3 That year also saw a record number of large seizures, weighing a total of 23 tonnes.

4 About 2,500 elephants were killed for ivory in 2011.

5 In 2011, 1,267 elephant tusks - worth HK\$22.3 million on the black market - were seized in Hong Kong.

6 In 2010 and 2011 combined, Hong Kong customs impounded nearly 6 tonnes of illegal ivory.

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One of the world's biggest ever seizures of illicit ivory - a haul of tusks which cost the lives of 600 African elephants - has been made in Hong Kong.

The raid was the outcome of a two-month-long, cross-border investigation by Hong Kong and Guangdong customs agents.

The unprecedented haul weighed 3.8 tonnes - 1.6 tonnes more than was seized worldwide in the whole of 2007.

It could have fetched upwards of HK\$26.7 million on Asia's booming black market.

The ivory arrived in two shipping containers from Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa, countries widely acknowledged to be hubs for elephant tusk smugglers.

The cargo was seized at the Kwai Chung container port on Tuesday, a day after agents arrested seven people in Dongguan (東莞), Guangdong.

Among them was a 56-year-old Hong Kong man investigators said was a key member of the smuggling syndicate. The other six are from the mainland.

Customs officers said they were trying to track down other members of the syndicate they believe are in Hong Kong.

The haul comprised 1,209 elephant tusks, either whole or in

pieces, which had been falsely labelled as plastic scrap and borlotti beans, a legume and a few ivory ornaments.

Lam Tak-fai, Hong Kong customs' head of ports and maritime command, said they received information from mainland investigators which led them to the two suspicious containers.

One held 972 lengths of ivory and the other 237 whole tusks, the heaviest of which weighed 40.6kg.

"We believe a small portion [of the tusks] would have gone to the mainland and the rest elsewhere in the region, such as Japan and Taiwan," Lam said.

The desire for ivory has decimated the elephant population, which has fallen from about five million in the 1940s to just half a million today.

Lam said that in an elaborate attempt to avoid detection, the container from Kenya took a circuitous route via the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East, Malaysia and Nansha in Guangdong, before arriving in Hong Kong. The second came from Tanzania via Malaysia.

He insisted Hong Kong was not a major transit point for shipments of illegal ivory from Africa to the mainland, describing the seizure as "an isolated incident".

Before the international trade in ivory was banned under the CITES convention in 1990, Hong Kong was a major importer of, trader in and manufacturer of ivory carvings, crafts and products.

Since the ban, seizures of

ivory have continued, the most recent of which was last October, when 11 tusks off a ship from Cape Town in South Africa were seized, also at Kwai Chung.

Asian tourists have increasingly been carrying ivory products back from Africa or mailing them from the continent for resale, according to Jesse Wong Tai-chiu, head of the customs department's intelligence bureau.



Forbidden City