

Luanda—the largest illegal ivory market in southern Africa

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Abstract

Luanda, the capital of Angola, has the largest illegal retail ivory market in southern Africa today. In early 2014 we surveyed the retail outlets in and around Luanda and counted 10,888 recently carved ivory items without proper documentation, and thus illegal. These pieces had been crafted in central Africa and Angola, mostly from poached forest elephants. The tusks can be obtained wholesale in Luanda for USD 150–250/kg. We estimated 92% of the total worked ivory on display was in Mercado do Artesanato in Benfica in the southern outskirts of Luanda. The vendors there are from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo and Angola. The buyers today are nearly all Chinese. There has been a huge increase in demand for worked ivory since 2005 due to the rising number of Chinese working in Angola, from 25,000 in 2006 to 260,000 in 2012. Items for the Chinese, such as jewellery, name seals, Buddhas and chopsticks, dominate the market. Retail prices can be a tenth of those in China, and construction workers go daily to Benfica market for worked ivory to bring back home. Not only is Angola acting as a main conduit for shipments of tusks wholesale to East Asia, but the blatant sale of ivory items in Benfica market encourages poaching as well. Angola needs urgently to enforce its domestic ban on ivory sales and the CITES ban.

Résumé

Luanda, la capitale de l'Angola, a aujourd'hui le plus grand marché de l'ivoire illégal au détail en Afrique australe. Au début de 2014 nous avons étudié les points de vente à Luanda et ses alentours et nous avons compté 10.888 articles en ivoire récemment sculptés sans documentation adéquate, et donc illégaux. Ces pièces avaient été fabriquées en Afrique centrale et en Angola, pour la plupart à partir des éléphants de forêt braconnés. On peut se procurer des défenses en gros à Luanda pour USD 150–250/kg. Nous avons estimé que 92% de tout l'ivoire travaillé sur le marché était dans Mercado do Artesanato à Benfica dans la banlieue sud de Luanda. Les vendeurs là-bas viennent de la République démocratique du Congo, de la République du Congo et d'Angola. Les acheteurs sont aujourd'hui presque tous Chinois. Il y a eu une énorme augmentation de la demande pour l'ivoire travaillé depuis 2005 en raison de l'augmentation du nombre de Chinois qui travaillent en Angola, qui sont passés de 25.000 en 2006 à 260.000 en 2012. Les articles pour les Chinois, tels que les bijoux, les sceaux avec des noms, les bouddhas et les baguettes, dominent le marché. Les prix de détail peuvent être un dixième de ceux de la Chine, et les travailleurs de construction vont quotidiennement sur le marché de Benfica pour chercher l'ivoire travaillé à ramener à la maison. Non seulement l'Angola sert de conduit principal pour les cargaisons de défenses de gros vers l'Asie de l'Est, mais la vente flagrante des articles en ivoire sur le marché de Benfica encourage aussi le braconnage. De toute urgence, il faut que l'Angola fasse respecter son interdiction nationale sur les ventes d'ivoire et l'interdiction de la CITES.

Introduction

Angolans have been crafting ivory for centuries. From independence in 1975 to the end of the Angolan civil war in 2002, insecurity prevented any study of Luanda's ivory markets although large numbers of elephants were reported being killed during those years. TRAFFIC carried out the first main survey of

the domestic ivory trade in Luanda in June 2005. The investigators carried out a two-hour survey in Mercado do Artesanato in Benfica (Benfica market) and did a partial count of ivory items observed, mainly the larger items. They also counted 568 ivory items in other smaller retail outlets, including at the airport. They estimated 1,573 kg of worked ivory was displayed for sale in Luanda at this time. They also investigated

Angola's legislation on the ivory trade, with the help of government officials (Milliken et al. 2006). In September 2013 scientists in Angola, while surveying the country's wildlife, conducted another partial count of ivory items in Benfica market: 2,056 objects, excluding 30–40% of the smaller items (Svensson et al. 2013; Bersacola et al. 2014).

Methods

From 26 February to 5 March 2014 we studied the retail ivory trade in Luanda, Angola's capital. We concentrated our time in Benfica market, as it is the most important retail outlet for worked ivory. We spent a morning and afternoon counting all the ivory items on display for retail sale in this market on Thursday, 27 February, and we returned the next day and on Sunday to collect further information. We priced the items and counted the number of stalls that were open on different days, and noted the origin of the ivory and where the items were carved. We also asked vendors—when we could, as often they were suspicious—about the prices of the raw material and about the nationalities of the craftsmen, vendors and customers. We observed, when possible, ivory items and raw tusks stored in metal trunks under the tables, but as these were not on display the items we saw were not counted in order to be consistent with our past survey methods.

We visited all Luanda's main hotels, souvenir shops and stalls and checked the airport for any ivory for sale. We interviewed two Angolan ivory carvers about their business and we learned about the economic boom and development occurring in Luanda and in Angola overall. We interviewed tour operators and souvenir shop vendors to ascertain their views on the ivory trade.

Background

Luanda, a city of five million people, has since 2002 become one of the most expensive cities in the world for expatriates. Lack of adequate conservation funds since the end of the civil war had precluded detailed ivory surveys, but some findings showed that Angola's ivory market was a significant problem that needed further investigating. Another deterrent to visiting Angola is the long time it takes to obtain a visa, putting off conservationists, tourists and businessmen alike.

Short history of the Angolan ivory trade

The Kongo people in central Africa and Angola have had a long tradition carving ivory. They have been famous in the African art world from the 16th century for producing intricately carved *oliphants*—musical instruments played as side-blown horns (Bassani and Fagg 1988). They also carved Roman Catholic figures for the Portuguese colonialists. The Pinde people in Angola were well known in the 18th century for carving ivory human figures for their own culture (Manuel Murteira Martins, art historian and antique dealer, Lisbon, pers. comm. to Esmond Martin, 24 September 2008). From 1830 to 1975 the Kongo and other tribes in Angola produced carved ivory items in increasing amounts, including carved tusks, to meet the demand of the Portuguese and other Europeans living in the country (Ross 1992; St Aubyn 1987). Tourists visiting Angola in the 1950s and early 1960s were advised to buy worked ivory as souvenirs in the open-air markets in the main cities and towns of Angola (Kane 1961).

In the early 1960s rebellions broke out leading to independence from the Portuguese in 1975. The government, a Marxist regime, nationalized many of the businesses and took people's land and possessions; some Portuguese retaliated by destroying the infrastructure they had developed (Stead and Rorison 2010). Many fled Angola after buying up ivory items, especially carved tusks and figures, to take with them to sell in Portugal where ivory was in demand (Martin 2009; Martin and Martin 2009). The Angolan civil war from 1976 to 2002 resulted in massive destruction of the economy and thousands killed. Retail ivory sales in Luanda dwindled but the export of raw ivory was considerable during this time.

The economy of Angola

In the early 1970s the country's economy performed reasonably well, based on agriculture (especially coffee exports) and oil products. In 1975 the new independent government nationalized plantations, factories, transport, communications and other sectors of the economy. During the following 27 years of civil war, the agricultural economy almost collapsed. In 2002 when the war ended, the government eased its policy of state ownership and management, and became more lenient to foreign investment. The economy took off with GDP growing at 11% a year

from 2001 to 2010, one of the highest in the world (economist 2011). The main exports were oil (50% of GDP and 90% of exports), gas and diamonds. To achieve its economic plan the Angolan government required a skilled workforce to implement large projects, such as high-rise office buildings, housing complexes and new roads, quickly and efficiently, at reasonable prices. East Asian contractors, especially Chinese companies, were chosen. The Chinese are known for working hard and long hours, even in the hot months in Luanda, and are transforming the cityscape. The Chinese population in Angola rose from about 500 in 2002, to 25,000 in 2006 and reached 260,000 in 2012 (Sautman and Hairong 2007; Dongye 2013). Two-way trade between China and Angola reached 35 billion dollars in 2013, a 50-fold increase from 2000 (*China Daily* 2014).

Legal aspects of the ivory trade in Angola

The export of worked ivory in one's personal luggage without proper documentation is illegal in Angola (Milliken et al. 2006). This TRAFFIC report stated that the 41 retail outlets in 2005 that sold ivory did not have proper documentation and concluded, 'there is an urgent need to review and update the substance of Angola's legislation that relates to wildlife in general and wildlife trade and CITES in particular'. In 2013, according to Svensson et al. (2013), 'possession and trade of ivory requires special permission'. Svensson et al. (2013) found that no enforcement or regular monitoring is conducted by Angolan authorities. In our survey in 2014 we found no evidence that the vendors possessed official documents allowing their trade in ivory. A Chinese man recently visiting Angola had taken photos of mounds of worked ivory for sale and said that one could pay supposedly a dollar for a stamp to 'legalize' the export of one's worked ivory.

In December 2013, Angola finally became the 179th member of CITES, which presently forbids commercial imports and exports of elephant ivory. Before this the Angolan government had never reported a single ivory seizure from 1989 to January 2013 to the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), a CITES monitoring programme (UNEP et al. 2013; Tom Milliken, ETIS director, pers. comm. April 2014).

In 2014, however, there have been official seizures of ivory from Angola in other countries. For example, in January officers in Changi airport in Singapore detected two bags containing about 45 kg of ivory in transit via Dubai and Singapore destined for Lao PDR.



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A typical display of worked ivory for sale in Benfica market.

The owners of the two bags, Vietnamese nationals, were arrested immediately. One said he had been paid USD 1,000 by an unknown Vietnamese man at a market in Angola to take the ivory to Lao PDR (Channel News Asia 2014a). In February officers in Siem Reap airport in Cambodia arrested three Vietnamese for smuggling 79.5 kg of tusks. They admitted they bought the tusks in Angola to take to Hanoi, Vietnam (*Shanghai Daily* 2014). In June, Hong Kong customs seized 790 kg of tusks in 32 pieces of luggage on its way to Cambodia that had originated in Angola; 15 Vietnamese smugglers were arrested. The Hong Kong officials said it was unusual for such a large consignment of tusks to be carried by air (Channel News Asia 2014b). This last seizure shows how blatant the smuggling of ivory from Angola to Asia has become.

Present situation

Sources of ivory and prices of raw tusks in the Luanda area

Relatively little of the ivory for sale in Luanda nowadays originates from recently killed elephants in Angola as few elephants are left. The country once had many thousands of elephants but latest published AfESG figures for elephants in Angola are only 818 'definite', 800 'probable' and '851' possible; savanna elephants are still being poached in the extreme southeast and forest elephants in the northwest of the country (Blanc et al. 2007). Most of the ivory seen in Benfica market is from recently killed elephants from central Africa where forest elephants are being poached at accelerating rates. Between 2002 and 2011 their population declined by about 62% (Maisels et

al. 2013). Milliken et al. (2006) noted that most ivory seen in the TRAFFIC survey in 2005 was from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Svensson et al. (2013) remarked that the shape and size of the tusks on display in Benfica market indicated that the ivory originated from forest elephants. Our findings corroborated this. We also found that many of the vendors in the market are French speaking from the DRC and Republic of Congo who bring their ivory from central Africa to sell in this market. A few other retail outlets in the city displayed much smaller numbers of ivory items, some carved earlier by Angolans from elephants poached during the civil war in Angola.

Two vendors in Benfica market told us separately that the wholesale price for a 1–3-kg tusk was USD 150/kg and USD 200/kg if slightly larger. In a workshop in central Luanda, an ivory carver told us the wholesale price for a 1–3-kg tusk that he recently bought was USD 250/kg, which is understandably higher due to less competition for raw ivory than in Benfica market. The wholesale price of USD 150–250/kg is credible as the retail price for a polished tusk in Benfica market averaged USD 433/kg without bargaining.

Ivory craftsmen in the Luanda area

The carvers of the ivory items in Benfica market were from the DRC, Republic of Congo and Angola. Some ivory is carved in central Africa and some in Angola, especially in Zaire Province in the northwest. They produce items that are specifically in demand by the Chinese: Buddhas, chopsticks, dragons, jewellery and name seals. There are few ivory craftsmen in Luanda, according to the Benfica vendors. But they said their tusk tips on display could be carved, as requested by customers, into statues of their choice for USD 60–70.

In central Luanda we found two ivory craftsmen at their small workshop who produce a variety of items for their nearby shop. One was working on ivory earrings and pendants. They make objects for their main customers, notably the Portuguese who live in Luanda or visit on holiday. Items for sale here included African busts, Christian figures, European figures and a variety of different animals and fish.

Retail outlets and prices of ivory items in the Luanda area

Of all the ivory items surveyed in and around Luanda, 92% were seen in Benfica market. This single-storey

simple market had a corrugated iron roof and was on sandy ground, with low or no walls. It consisted of two oblong sections: one with paintings, basketry, cotton material and old masks, the second section with dark wood carvings and worked ivory. The ivory items offered for sale were displayed on the top of robust concrete-block tables, totally open with no glass protection. Under or beside the stalls were metal trunks that contained perhaps a third more ivory items wrapped in cotton sheeting with similar items grouped together in pillow cases. At the end of the day the vendors, all men, returned their ivory into these padlocked trunks.

We carried out our count on an average weekday when there were 20 tables displaying ivory for sale. Nearly all these tables sold ivory almost exclusively. We counted 10,026 ivory pieces in this market. Necklaces, bangles and pendants made up 61% of the total (Table 1). Almost all the items on display were of similar designs and newly carved. In general, items were of generous size. There were no antique ivory items, and vendors made no attempt to pretend any worked ivory was old or antique. On the first day we counted 20 stalls with ivory, the next day we counted 25 stalls, including two small displays among the wood carvings. On the Sunday, when most people have their day off, more vendors had opened their stalls with 30 displays of ivory: about 20 had nearly all ivory, sometimes with a few reptile skin wallets and handbags; 5 displays were half ivory and half jewellery items, often consisting of malachite or wooden-beaded necklaces; and 5 other stalls had smaller selections of fewer than 50 ivory items displayed among other souvenirs.

Table 1. Ivory items for retail sale in Benfica market in late February 2014

Item	Percentage of total
Necklace	23
Bangle	19
Pendant	19
Name seal	7
Cigarette holder	7
Ring	6
Figurine	5
Hairpin	4
Chopsticks (pair)	3
Miscellaneous	7

The ivory items in this market were fairly crudely carved, had a dull light beige tint and were not polished; they lacked variety in design. The bangles were wide, thick and usually plain; there were also medium- and large-beaded bracelets, as well as many medium- and large-beaded necklaces, and smaller bead necklaces with a large pendant many lying in mounds on the tables. Although they had fasteners, most necklaces were long enough to wear directly over one's head. Pendants were commonly round or oblong with a simple carving of Buddha or of animals from the Chinese zodiac on them, while others were shaped as hearts and tiger claws.

There were many squat Buddha figurines and also some thinner, taller Guanyin figures, but virtually no African figures or busts, and almost no European or Christian figures in this market. Stalls had a variety of simply carved animal figures, especially dragons, rhinos and elephants, and more could be produced on request from the trunks under the tables.

While jewellery, cigarette holders, name seals and figurines dominated the displays, sometimes there were other items, such as Chinese chess pieces, Chinese hand balls, cocktail sticks, combs (mostly with handles), drum sticks, fruit, hair fasteners, key rings, pen holders, pipes with dragon designs, tusk tips, and walking sticks with dragon handles.

In Benfica market, vendors gave prices in either US dollars or kwanza, as the customer preferred (Table 2). No items had a marked price. Customers new to the market with little experience were charged higher prices, but with bargaining, items could be bought for half the price, especially if bought in bulk. Vendors at different stalls varied their initial prices considerably; for example, an ivory walking stick was offered for USD 1,000 at one stall and USD 4,000 at another. The prices of a 15-cm figurine varied hugely, depending on the diameter and weight of the ivory. Customers prefer shorter, chunkier carvings; very few figures reached 30 cm. There were also very few bridges and carved tusks.

In central Luanda only six retail outlets displayed ivory, offering 862 items for sale. Two were outlets on Ilha do Cabo, a popular beach area with restaurants

Table 2. Retail prices for ivory items seen in Benfica market, February/March 2014

Item	Size (cm)	Average price (USD)
<i>Jewellery</i>		
Bangle, plain or carved	1	25
	2	100
	4	180
Bracelet, 1-cm beads		32
	2-cm beads	90
Hair fastener	8 x 3	23
Hairpin	20	22
Necklace, beaded	Various	30
Pendant	5	15
	8	25
Ring	0.5	3
<i>Figurines</i>		
Animal	5	60
	10	177
	15	400
	20	800
	30	1,250
Human / religious	10-15	325
	25	527
<i>Tusks</i>		
Bridge	25	375
Tusk tip	10	60
	15	225
	30	650
<i>Others</i>		
Cigarette holder	8	12
	13	18
Chopsticks, pair	20	87
Comb	15	47
Fruit, lifesize		180
Name seal, plain or partly carved	7 x 2	60
	12 x 5	225
Pipe, plain	16	100
Pipe, carved	16	150
Walking stick, all ivory	90	2,167

USD 1 = 100 kwanza, February–March 2014.
These prices were before extensive bargaining.

and bars; one had 445 items and the other 312 items. Two more large souvenir shops, both well established, displayed ivory objects, the bigger one displaying 68 objects; the other, with 16 items, was owned by a Portuguese woman for 60 years. A street vendor who

had for many years sold souvenirs beside a large hotel had 14 ivory pendants. The sixth outlet was in a luxury hotel with just 7 items, the only hotel we found with ivory for sale.

There were fewer Chinese-style items in the central Luanda retail outlets and more items attractive to the European market, such as religious figurines. The most common items were jewellery, which made up 74% of the total items (Table 3).

The prices for bangles and necklaces were higher in the central Luanda outlets compared with Benfica market where often they are sold in bulk. The figurines were less expensive in central Luanda, however, as they were generally thinner in diameter than in Benfica market, and the turnover is slow compared with accessories (Table 4). Vendors said small accessories were popular as souvenirs as they were easier to take out of the country. We saw no old or antique ivory items and no vendors tried to sell us ivory as antiques, but a number of items looked dusty and appeared to be old stock. Four outlets had price labels but generally some bargaining was possible.

Main customers for worked ivory in the Luanda area

In Benfica market all the buyers of worked ivory we saw were Chinese. Sometimes Vietnamese or other southeast Asians working in the country buy worked ivory. By far the most items cater to the Chinese; many vendors displayed the same objects, sometimes opening their storage trunks to reveal more, and allowing the Chinese to examine many items while indulging in their bargaining skills. Some Europeans were seen looking at wood carvings but were not generally interested in looking at ivory. There are very few foreign tourists in Angola and most visitors to the market are foreign residents. We were told Angolans do not buy worked ivory for themselves, and we saw no Angolan customers. The vendors all agreed that the Chinese had become their biggest customers, and apart from speaking Portuguese and French, some had learned and spoke fluent Chinese as opposed to English, to communicate with their main clients.

The Chinese in the market are mostly male contract workers who usually visit in groups of three or four, sometimes accompanied by Chinese women. Some were seen with a piece of paper listing the items they wished to buy. The Chinese are notorious for severe haggling and testing of the ivory. We saw Chinese

Table 3. Ivory items for retail sale in central Luanda in March 2014

Item	Percentage of total
Bangle	25
Necklace	25
Figurine	17
Ring	14
Pendant	10
Name seal	5
Miscellaneous	4

Table 4. Retail prices for ivory items seen in central Luanda in March 2014

Item	Size (cm)	Av. price (USD)
<i>Jewellery</i>		
Bangle, plain or carved	1	103
	2	149
Hair fastener	8 x 3	38
Necklace, beaded	various	68
Pendant	5	18
Ring	1	10
<i>Figurines</i>		
Animal	5	105
	10–15	138
	25	400
	30	700
Tusks		
Bridge	40	500
<i>Other</i>		
Cigarette holder	10	18
Comb	15	39
Name seal, plain or partly carved	7 x 2	90
	10 x 4	225

USD 1 = 100 kwanza, February–March 2014

customers smelling and biting ivory objects, and examining beads very closely in great detail, then walking away with nothing, until they finally would accept a price at a later stage. We sometimes saw groups of Chinese walking back to their vehicles with packages of ivory or wearing bracelets and bangles themselves. Nowhere else did we see anyone wearing ivory while we were in Luanda.

In central Luanda the smarter retail souvenir shops cater for Europeans and Americans, with Portuguese being the main customers; after the Chinese the Portuguese are the most numerous expatriates and



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Chinese are by far the main buyers of ivory items in Benfica market.

main holidaymakers in Angola. They prefer to shop in the comfort of central Luanda where items are clean and neatly laid out, unlike in the untidy market. Most of the Chinese in Luanda do not visit these more expensive souvenir outlets, which sell an array of other African crafts also, as they prefer to concentrate on the much larger displays of ivory and better bargaining possibilities in Benfica market.

Discussion

Benfica market is one of the largest retail markets for illegal ivory items in Africa, if not the world. It ranks with the Lekki market in Lagos and the Khartoum and Omdurman outlets that display for sale thousands of recently carved ivory items illegally.

Compared with 2005 (Milliken et al. 2006), in 2014 there were relatively more small items and fewer large figures or carved tusks in Luanda. This is because it is easier for the Chinese buyers to smuggle out small items back to China, so these are in greater demand. Most tusks are nowadays smuggled wholesale from Africa to East Asia in their raw form in large consignments to be carved there. The main buyers of worked ivory in the world today are Chinese and this is also the case in Angola. In 2005 the main buyers were southern Europeans, Americans and Asians (Milliken et al. 2006). From 2006 to 2012 there was a tenfold increase in Chinese coming to Angola, largely as contract workers, and they keep flooding in as Angola's development projects expand.

The Chinese we saw in Benfica market spent much time selecting large pieces of plain jewellery and plain utilitarian objects, such as combs and name seals, rather than carved accessories and figurines, which are roughly made compared with those made in China. There are now few Christian figurines or African busts for sale. Instead, Buddhas, dragons and animals are the main figurines, made especially for the Chinese.

In 2005 of all the ivory items estimated by weight in Luanda, Benfica market sold 92% (1,428 kg). In 2014 of all the ivory items estimated by number in Luanda, Benfica market sold 92% (10,026 items). In 2014, storage trunks under the tables had at least an additional one-third more items, some including whole polished tusks. Thus, including these, the number of ivory items available was considerably higher than our survey count of displayed ivory in 2014.

In 2005 small raw tusks sold wholesale in Luanda for USD 35–100/kg (Milliken et al. 2006) compared with USD 150–250/kg in 2014. The wholesale price for raw ivory in 2012 in the cities of Bauchi, Gombe and Jos in Nigeria was USD 110/kg in 2013 (Martin and Vigne 2013), while in Kenya in 2013 poachers received USD 175–190 (informants in Kenya, pers. comm. 2013). Thus, Luanda's raw ivory is relatively cheap, suggesting the ease of obtaining tusks in the city. In China small tusks sold wholesale for USD 2,100 in 2014, tenfold higher than in Angola (Martin and Vigne 2014). This demonstrates the large profits that can be made smuggling raw ivory. Similarly for worked ivory, the retail prices are at least 10 times more in China in 2014 than in Luanda for similar uncarved objects, such as chopsticks and personal name seals (Martin and Vigne 2014).

In 2005 vendors said it was easy to smuggle items out of the country; in 2014 they reiterated this. There has been little effort to reduce the illegal sale of worked ivory, and the vendors were generally fairly relaxed about photographs, compared with vendors in many other cities. The international airport, however, had no ivory for sale, unlike in 2005. Yet compared with countries such as Cameroon, Gabon, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania, where you hardly ever see worked ivory for retail sale, there seems little fear of inspections, confiscations or arrests in Luanda. In Benfica market other wildlife products were also on open display, including leopard skins, turtle shells and crocodile skins. We saw no signs or notices against ivory or other illegal wildlife in the markets, shops, hotels or airport.

Conclusion

All ivory for sale in Luanda without special official documentation is illegal, but none of the ivory items for sale that we saw had any such documentation, suggesting no improvement in law enforcement since the 2006 TRAFFIC report (Milliken et al. 2006). On the contrary, the number of newly made ivory items has increased with the rising demand for ivory by the soaring numbers of Chinese residents in Angola. The country has the second largest Chinese population in Africa today, with a tenfold increase since 2005, and no priority is given to or by the Chinese contractors to stop their workers from buying ivory. The open, illegal trade in worked ivory is fuelling demand and putting pressure on the survival of elephants in central Africa. Angola's laws against the domestic ivory trade have not been enforced, and similarly, tusks continue to be shipped out of Angola to East Asia, as seizures in 2014 in Asia indicate, even though the country finally became a member of CITES in December 2013. Some other African countries with growing numbers of Chinese residents, and also Chinese tourists, have successfully enforced their domestic bans on worked ivory. Angola must take action to follow suit.

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