

## The grim Chinese take-away

*With Africa's elephants being slaughtered at an alarming rate, what future do they face, asks Simon Birch.*



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Their butchered remains lying baking under the African sun are an increasingly depressing image on our TVs as the slaughter of elephants for their ivory is now spinning dangerously out of control.

Despite being outlawed since 1989 the illegal trade in elephant ivory is decimating Africa's elephants: from a population that could be counted in its millions 50 years ago, an estimated 500,000 of the animals remain.

Even the future of these remaining elephants is by no means assured as their survival is threatened by rampant poaching as well as a rising human population that's putting pressure on the elephants' dwindling habitat.

"Elephants in Africa are in a state of crisis," states Mary Rice who heads up the Environmental Investigation Agency.

"In Tanzania alone, one of the most important countries for elephants in Africa, there are undocumented reports that they are losing up to 70 elephants a day to the poachers," says Rice.

"If these levels carry on then the elephant is in trouble."

It's now widely accepted that the main driver behind these unprecedented levels of poaching is the booming Chinese economy which is in turn fuelling an insatiable and unsustainable demand for ivory.

But with the Chinese economy showing no sign of running out of steam, are we witnessing the start of the end-game for the African elephant and are the Chinese really as indifferent to the plight of these creatures as many here in the West believe?

Astonishingly many Chinese people

aren't even aware where ivory really comes from.

"The word for elephant ivory in Chinese translates as elephant teeth, so people think that ivory just falls out of an elephant's mouth like teeth and that as a result elephants don't have to be killed," explains Grace Ge Gabriel, the Asian Regional Director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

"We carried out a survey in 2007 and 70% of people didn't know that ivory comes from dead elephants," says Ge Gabriel speaking from Beijing.

"Over 80% of people said that if they'd known that ivory came from dead elephants then they wouldn't have bought it."

### Positive response

As a result of the survey IFAW began a public awareness campaign to educate the Chinese public.

"We got a tremendous response from the public to our campaign and received thousands of messages of support," says Ge Gabriel.

Despite this success IFAW acknowledges that awareness raising amongst the public is just a first step to secure the elephant's future.

"There's a lack of political will at the top level of government in China," believes Ge Gabriel.

"There's also a lot of conflict of interest within the mid-level officials who are regulating the ivory trade and I wouldn't count out corruption either."

And what about wider Chinese attitudes towards elephants and wildlife in general?

"Unfortunately there is a tradition of

eating wildlife or using wildlife parts in traditional Chinese medicine," accepts Ge Gabriel. "There's just not a great abundance of wildlife left any more in China for people to see and so they don't have that connection and affinity with the environment. Consequently people don't understand the importance of biodiversity conservation."

And what of the future, how does Ge Gabriel rate the elephant's chances in the long-term?

"I am worried," confesses Ge Gabriel.

"The current levels of demand combined with a lack of knowledge and awareness of connection between people and nature is increasingly putting pressure on all kinds of wildlife including tigers, rhinos and elephants."

Chillingly Ge Gabriel adds that in China people now call ivory white gold because of its soaring value. Shrinking returns on traditional investments such as stocks and real estate are now driving Chinese investors to buy elephant ivory, rhino horns and tiger-bone wine.

"People are banking on the extinction of species which would greatly increase their value, something which is extremely dangerous."

With loopholes in the current ban on the trade in ivory big enough for a troop of elephants to march through, many, including Mary Rice from the EIA, are now calling for a total global ban on the ivory trade.

"If we can persuade countries like China to outlaw the ivory trade then we stand a chance."