

Myanmar's ivory trade threatens wild elephants

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Demand for elephant ivory for making tourist items is higher than ever before in Myanmar. The socialist military government shows little interest in reducing the ivory trade, while the elephants in the country have become the silent victims. Myanmar is not a country that springs to mind as an ivory carving nation. There have never been more than a hundred full-time ivory craftsmen in the country at any one time. Ivory carving is slow, as only hand tools are used. Furthermore, the quality of workmanship is not good. Yet, after the world-wide ivory ban, prices of raw ivory in the country skyrocketed from \$76 a kilo for large tusks in 1989/90 to over \$200 a kilo by the mid-1990s.

It is foreign tourists who are responsible for the massive rise in price of ivory tusks which fuels the illegal killing of elephants. Tourism to Myanmar increased hugely in the early 1990s, and especially since 1994. While the Japanese buy mainly signature seals and chopsticks, others, especially South Koreans, Taiwanese and Italians, choose animal carvings, elephant bridges and jewellery. The domestic ivory carving industry is tolerated by the authorities in Myanmar, but the export of both raw and worked ivory is illegal without government permits. Many tourists take the chance of hiding ivory pieces in their luggage, and they are rarely caught smuggling them into their

home countries. Millions of tourists visit Thailand each year and some buy ivory objects which have been smuggled across the Myanmar border, and there also is a sizeable trade in ivory chopsticks and carvings, smuggled by traders from Myanmar into China.

About a tonne of elephant tusks is sold annually in Myanmar. Half of this comes from government-owned domesticated elephants which have died naturally. There are about 5,250 captive elephants, 3,000 of which are owned by the government timber industry. The other half a tonne is mainly from poached wild elephants. There are at least 4,150 wild elephants left, scattered in the remaining forests throughout the country. Although Myanmar has the second largest Asian elephant population after India, the number of wild elephants has been shrinking.

There can be little hope of improvement, so long as the present government continues to put a low priority on wildlife conservation, especially the illicit commerce in wildlife products. Too many officials turn a blind eye to such trade. In a country rife with economic and political problems, protecting wild elephant habitat and reducing the trade in illegal ivory provoke little interest, and the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future.

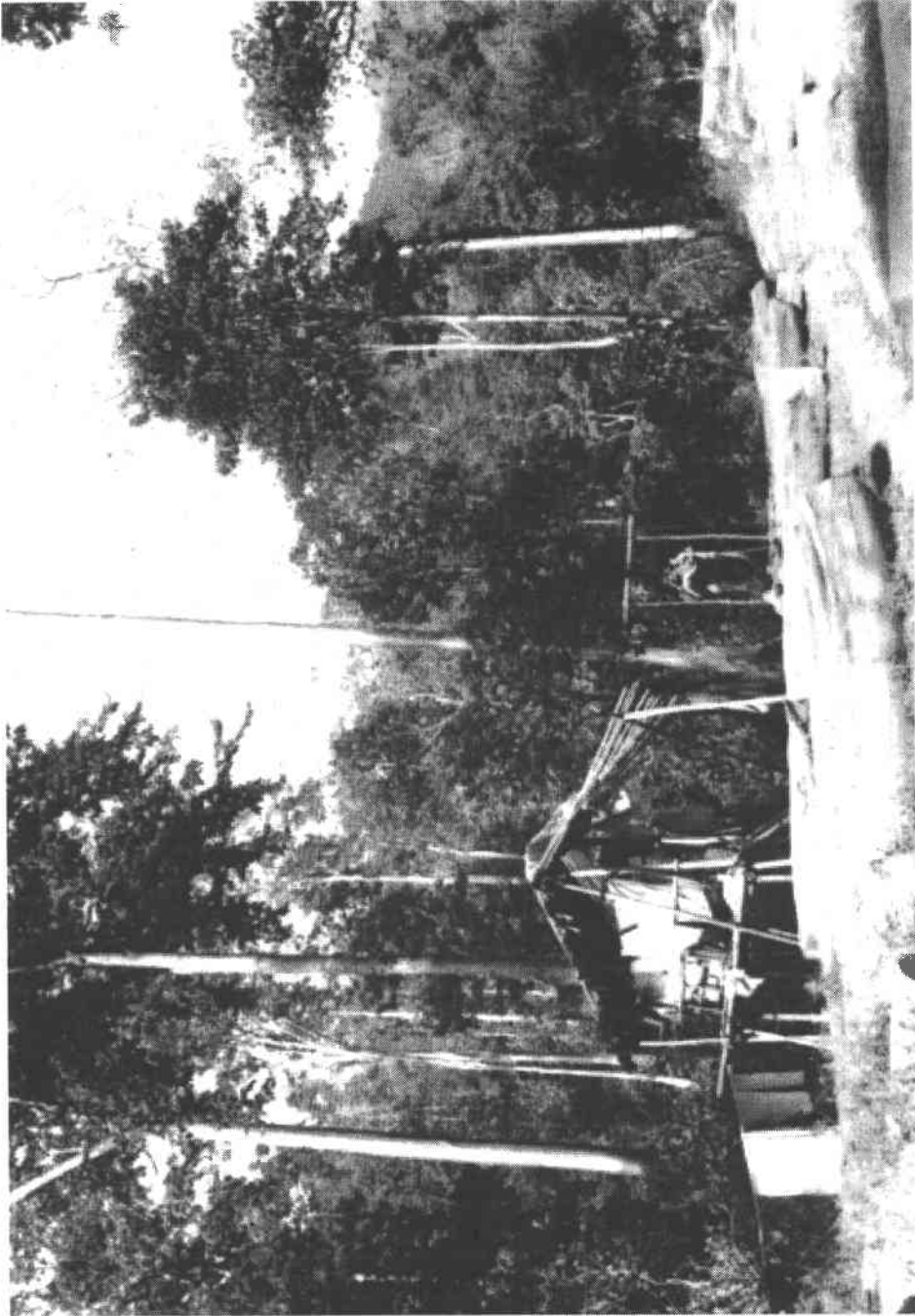


Fig. 1 The illegal ivory trade and the destruction of the forests are reducing elephant numbers in Myanmar.