

Twenty years since a massive ivory seizure, what lessons were learned? (commentary)

by Julian Newman on 27 June 2022

- *In late June 2002, a container ship docked in Singapore with a massive shipment of ivory, which was seized.*
- *It was the largest seizure of its kind since an international ban on the ivory trade had come into force in 1989, and the lessons learned from it would change the way the illegal wildlife trade was investigated and tackled.*
- *But it's unfortunate that some of the biggest lessons from that event still have not been put into practice, a new op-ed argues.*
- *This article is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily of Mongabay.*

In late June 2002, the container ship MOL Independence docked at a Singapore port after a voyage of almost a month from Durban in South Africa. On board was a consignment which had been on a far longer journey.

Beginning in an industrial area on the outskirts of Lilongwe, the capital of land-locked Malawi in southern Africa, the container was taken by road to the port of Beira in neighboring Mozambique and loaded onto a feeder vessel to Durban.

According to the Bill of Lading, its contents were stone sculptures. Acting on a tip-off from my organization, London-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), Singapore customs officers inspected the container and discovered more than 6.2 tons of elephant ivory.

At the time, it was the largest seizure of its kind since the international ban on the [ivory trade](#) had come into force in 1989 and the lessons learned from it would change the way the [illegal wildlife trade](#) was investigated and tackled, evolving from simple seizures and the arrests of any low-ranking criminals to much wider-reaching investigations led by gathered intelligence.



Some of the ivory discovered in the 'Singapore seizure' of 2002. Photo courtesy of Singapore Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA).

Unfortunately, the abject failure by authorities at both the source and destination countries to properly investigate and prosecute the case allowed the transnational wildlife trafficking syndicate behind the shipment to emerge largely unscathed. It was able to regroup and, through various incarnations, continued to use Malawi as its base of operations for another two decades.

There are, however, grounds for optimism. A 14-year jail sentence handed down by a court in Malawi in September 2021 to Chinese national Lin Yunhua, the latest kingpin of the syndicate, for dealing in rhino horns and money laundering, marks the end of a major wildlife crime group which has profited from the slaughter of African wildlife for three decades.

Putting the pieces together

Back in June 2002, when our tip-off led to the seizure, we were convinced that the brazen attempt to smuggle such a large amount of ivory in a single shipping container bore the hallmarks of an organized criminal enterprise.

Our belief wasn't widely shared at the time and so, faced with indifference from government enforcement agencies, EIA set out to piece together an accurate picture of the main players in the syndicate at both the Africa and Asia ends.

The trail began in Singapore, with EIA investigators arriving in the city state a few days after the seizure. During a perfunctory meeting with the relevant Singaporean authorities, it emerged that one of the directors of Delight Harvest, the company named on the shipping bill as the consignee for the container of “stone sculptures” had been interviewed. He denied any knowledge of the shipment, claiming that the name of the company had been used without his knowledge and that he had been out of town when the shipment arrived.

His protestation of innocence appears to have been taken at face value and the lead was dismissed as a dead end. Yet a day spent in the offices of the Singapore business registry revealed connections with Singapore-based companies called Kyomi Handicraft & Trading and Fung Ivory. When the companies had been formed in the late 1980s, two of the directors stated their nationality as Hong Kongese and their profession as “Ivory Craftsmen.”

On sifting through old EIA intelligence reports from the late 1980s, some of the company directors were found to have had connections to the notorious Poon syndicate, which had orchestrated an ivory smuggling scam involving transporting poached ivory tusks from Tanzania via small boats to the Jebel Ali free trade zone in the United Arab Emirates, where the tusks were cut into sections and sent on to Hong Kong.

When the international ivory ban was agreed in 1989, loopholes allowing the trade in part-processed ivory were closed. As a result, some of those involved had created a new base of operations in Singapore. Delight Harvest did not seem so innocent after all.



Manica Freight Company, Lilongwe, Malawi was involved in transporting shipments for Allena. Image courtesy of EIA.

Following the trail to Africa

The next step was to travel to Lilongwe, in Malawi, to investigate those who had collated, packed and shipped the container of ivory subsequently seized in Singapore. Government agencies were more welcoming there, especially the Anti-Corruption Bureau which had launched an investigation of the case. It had pinpointed a crafts workshop called “Allena Curios,” run by the Gwedeza family, as the source for the shipment. Although the shipping bill had named the fictitious company “Seng Luck” as the consignor, buried in the paperwork was the company name “Allena Transport and Trading,” the real company behind the shipment.

The Anti-Corruption Bureau had gathered a stack of shipping documents dating back to the mid-1990s relating to consignments bound for East Asia where the same shipping agent had been used and there were links to Allena Curios or related companies as the sender. Detailed analysis of the shipments by EIA revealed that, since 1994, the syndicate had made at least 19 previous ivory shipments, 15 of them bound for Singapore.

At the heart of this massive ivory trafficking enterprise was Allena Curios, which had conducted legal ivory trade prior to the ban in 1989 and had built a business producing handicrafts under the guidance of the family patriarch MacDonald John Zulu Gwedeza. He had formed a close relationship with a Taiwanese man name called Fong Ken Hsieh, who had first arrived in Malawi in the late 1980s to work on

an irrigation project. He subsequently stayed on, moving into the timber business and marrying a local woman. He began visiting Allena Curios, bringing other Asian businesspeople and tourists as customers, and formed a close relationship with Zulu Gwedeza. This was the genesis of the ivory smuggling syndicate, with Hsieh acting as the point person in Malawi.

By the mid-1990s, another key actor had arrived on the scene – Peter Wang, a Malaysian national who began working with Zulu Gwedeza and Hsieh. He did not reside in Malawi but visited often to arrange ivory shipments for Asian buyers. Analysis of the shipping documents shows that Wang used a series of aliases, but EIA eventually confirmed his real name as Wang Yong Sai, based on land registry documents for an apartment in Hong Kong. Following the seizure in Singapore, “Peter Wang” was identified as the “mastermind” behind the shipment but was never caught.

Despite the efforts of the Anti-Corruption Bureau, nobody in Malawi was ever charged in connection with the Singapore seizure, although two people connected to the case, including Zulu Gwedeza’s son Gift, were temporarily jailed but not charged. Despite the predictable failure to convert major ivory seizures into meaningful prosecutions, it appeared that the operations of the syndicate had nonetheless been severely disrupted by the main players going to ground.

ALA = 40000 @ 10000 = 50000

Date	under 3	3-10K	10K up	Total	Remarks
96-28	243.1	1249.3	955.4	2447.8	PANG HAND.
2-9	131	523	108.7	762.7	PANG.
96-22	191.5	717	317	1225.5	peter
6-23		65.2	485 (485)	550.2	"
96-9-14	336.2	832.8	439.7	1608.7	peter
9-7-9	281	667.6	455.1	1403.7	"
	81	675.7	130.4	887.1	"
9-26	55.7	194.1	603	852.8	"
"	214	691.8	226.1	1131.9	"
Total =	1533.5	5816.5	3720.4	10870.4	
-	378.1	2353.3	1482	4213.4	ALA
	1155.4	3263.2	2238.4	= 6657	→ 24.60

Page from Allena notebook detailing the sale of over 10 tons of ivory between February and September 1996. Image courtesy of EIA.

A resilient smuggling syndicate

However, in May 2013 a random inspection of a truck by a mobile customs unit in northern Malawi was to reveal the resilience and tenacity of the Wang-Hsieh group.

The truck in question was on its day-long journey from Dar es Salaam, the commercial capital of neighbouring Tanzania, and was allegedly delivering a consignment of cement bags to an address in Lilongwe. The truck, driven by Malawian national Charles “Chancy” Kaunda and his brother Patrick, had breezed through the official border crossing at Songwe. The vehicle, registered to a company called City Car Hire owned by Chancy Kaunda, had made the same journey carrying the same goods several times before. On this occasion, the Kaundas’ luck ran out when the random inspection uncovered 781 ivory tusks weighing 2.6 tons.

When the case went to court in July 2015, the Kaunda brothers were given a derisory sentence of 2.5 million Malawi kwacha each – a little under £2,000 at today’s exchange rates – and far below the state prosecutor’s requested penalty of 18 years in jail and a fine of MK4.5 billion. The fine was paid in cash by an unidentified benefactor and the brothers were free to go.

The case was subsequently referred to the Malawi Supreme Court and in July 2019 the Kaundas were sentenced to eight years in jail. Unfortunately, the authorities had failed to detain the brothers in advance of the verdict and they promptly fled and remain at large to this day.

Information gathered by EIA reveals that Chancy Kaunda was not just a lowly ivory transporter. He had been recruited as a driver and factotum by Hsieh in the late 1990s and, in the aftermath of the Singapore seizure, he rose through the ranks and began working directly with Peter Wang, effectively side-lining Hsieh.

Shipping records analyzed by EIA also showed that Charles Kaunda had shipped 14 containers along the Lilongwe-Beira route to East Asia between 2010-15, using the same freight agent, a relative, each time. The containers were either declared as sawn wood or semi-precious stones and the destinations were Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, all of which have featured as transit countries for ivory shipments.

One of the company addresses in Malaysia to which a shipment was sent turned out to be registered to the brother of Peter Wang. Known as “Steve,” his role in the syndicate was to source ivory from Zambia and he was implicated in the seizure of a half-ton of ivory in Lilongwe in December 2016, for which Winston Humba, a mid-ranking member of the syndicate who is also married to a member of the Zulu family, was subsequently convicted and jailed

In addition, money transfer records for Charles Kaunda show payments made to him by both Wang brothers from addresses in Hong Kong and Malaysia, often coinciding with the container movements.

See related: [Cash-strapped Zimbabwe pushes to be allowed to sell its ivory stockpile](#)



Yunhua Lin,

left, at the court in Malawi, 28 Sept 2021. Image courtesy of EIA.

A final incarnation?

The latest, and hopefully final, version of the Asian-led wildlife crime group exploiting Malawi as its base of operations is the Lin-Zhang syndicate, a husband and wife team hailing from Fujian Province in China. Lin Yunhua first arrived on the scene around 2014 at the behest of Hsieh, who was seeking new financing and partnerships. He and his accomplices were soon identified as people of interest by the Malawian police and this time an intelligence-led operation led to the arrest and sentencing of the main syndicate members. Lin's wife Zhang Quinhua and eight accomplices were sentenced to a total of 56 years in prison in July 2020 for possession of illegal wildlife products. Lin absconded but was apprehended after three months on the run and subsequently sentenced to 14 years in prison for trading rhino horn and money laundering in September 2021.

Twenty years on from the Singapore seizure, the case provides a cautionary lesson. It highlights how repeated failures to apprehend the main players – but more importantly, the failure to prosecute them – left the door open for the syndicate to regroup.

It adapted and continued to exploit Malawi as a hub, plundering wildlife from neighboring countries such as Zambia and Tanzania for huge profits. The bosses all

evaded justice – Hsieh passed away in 2014 and Peter Wang is also believed to be deceased. Steve remains at large and Chancy Kaunda is still on the run.

Hopefully, the jailing of Lin and Zhang marks the end of the story.



herd of elephants gets a drink in Botswana. Image by Roger Borgelid for Mongabay. A

Not seizing the opportunity

The massive ivory seizure which occurred in Singapore in June 2002 presented a golden opportunity to dismantle a major ivory trafficking syndicate spanning East Africa to East Asia, which had been operating for at least a decade. Unfortunately, this opportunity was squandered by government enforcement agencies in the key countries of Malawi and Singapore, which were either unwilling or unable to properly investigate and prosecute the main culprits.

Unsurprisingly, the syndicate reorganized and rebounded and continued to profit from the slaughter of thousands of elephants until Kaunda, a key syndicate member, was apprehended in possession of ivory. Even then, the initial court judgment was ridiculously lenient and when a higher court increased the sentence he was tipped off and went on the run.

Overall, during the past decade some of the lessons from the Singapore case have been learned, with improved international cooperation between countries to

investigate similar cases, such as China Customs cooperating with a range of countries and agencies, including NGOs such as EIA, to bust a series of ivory smuggling gangs and extraditing the ringleaders to face justice.

But it is still an unwelcome fact that the majority of large-scale ivory seizures in key transit and destination countries such as Vietnam and Singapore and Hong Kong port still do not lead to prosecutions, despite a treasure trove of clues yielded by such incidents, as EIA's investigation into the Singapore seizure showed.

Julian Newman is EIA's Campaigns Director.

Related audio from Mongabay's podcast: 'Stubborn optimism' for elephants fuels Indigenous conservation effort, listen here: