



Officials get 'teeth' to identify trafficked ivory

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HELP: A new guide will assist law enforcement agencies in identifying trafficked ivory. PHOTO: FILE

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A comprehensive new guide has been published to assist law enforcement agencies to identify trafficked ivory.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) secretariat, TRAFFIC and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have published the Identification Guide for Ivory and Ivory Substitutes.

It is a comprehensive and accessible resource for identifying the most commonly found ivories and artificial substitutes used for trade.

“The much-awaited fourth edition of the guide will be a key tool in the regulation of the international trade of several Cites-listed species. Through it, we reaffirm our commitment to support Cites parties to achieve the objectives of the convention and combat wildlife crime,” said Cites secretary-general Ivonne Higuero.

Advancements incorporated

Last reviewed in 1999, more than two decades of advancements have been incorporated into the new guide to help distinguish between types of ivories and their substitutes.

It also includes detailed graphics and forensic applications for ivory identification.

Accurate identification is critical to prevent illegal ivory products from being smuggled or illegally traded, and to curb the poaching crisis decimating African elephant populations, the wildlife organisations said in a joint statement.

In the past dozen years, there has been a surge in the poaching of elephants for their tusks.

Statistics provided by the environment ministry in July indicated that elephant poaching in Namibia has been decreasing, with two elephants poached this year, compared to 13 last year and 27 in 2018.

Poaching arrests

Meanwhile, 30 people were arrested for elephant poaching cases in Namibia this year, compared to 90 last year and 66 in 2018.

A total of 38 elephant tusks and 16 tusk pieces have been seized this year, compared to 116 last year and 99 in 2018. The guide provides law enforcement officers, forensic scientists, online enforcement staff and wildlife trade management authorities with detailed procedures, visual aids and instructions for recognising ivory products, particularly those that have undergone heavy alterations, such as carving and painting.

The guide also addresses the sale of ivory products online, where an increasing share of the illegal elephant ivory trade is now taking place, and where the identification of static digital images can be challenging.

Challenging

“Even today, it is still challenging to identify ivory,” said Ginette Hemley, the senior vice-president for Wildlife Conservation at WWF-US.

“We are in a time of increased illicit trade in elephant ivory and a proliferation of trade in other ivories, like mammoth and artificial substitutes that make it difficult to distinguish the origin of the ivory.”

The guide will be used in training programmes for law enforcement and to support a wide range of enforcement and conservation applications, including helping online companies with blocking listings of prohibited elephant ivory on their platforms.