

Major breakthrough: Nigerian authorities arrest two key ivory traffickers connected to recent seizure in Vietnam

In a landmark joint operation, the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), supported by the Wildlife Justice Commission has successfully arrested two major wildlife traffickers in Nigeria. These arrests are linked to the significant seizure of 1.58 tonnes of ivory at Lach Huyen International Port, Hai Phong, Vietnam on 27 March 2024.

Comprehensive intelligence-led investigations by the Wildlife Justice Commission in response to the Hai Phong seizure led to the identification and location of both the alleged shipper and supplier of the ivory. This culminated in their swift apprehension by NCS within six weeks of the Vietnamese authorities reporting the seizure.



The first suspect was apprehended by NCS on 16 May 2024 in Abia State, southeastern Nigeria. He is believed to be the consignor of the ivory shipment exported from Onne Port, Port Harcourt, Nigeria on 2 November 2023, which was seized in Vietnam. The ivory, painted black and concealed under a cover load of cow horns, was part of an elaborate smuggling operation.

The second suspect was arrested in Onitsha, Nigeria by NCS on 17 May 2024. He is suspected of supplying part or all of the 1.58 tonnes of ivory shipped by the first suspect to Hai Phong, Vietnam.

“The efficiency in which NCS was able to conduct intensive post-seizure investigations to identify and arrest those responsible for the shipment demonstrates Nigeria’s commitment to combating wildlife trafficking. To have achieved all this in a matter of weeks following a reported seizure

should be recognised and commended as best practice”, said Olivia Swaak-Goldman, Executive Director of the Wildlife Justice Commission.

African elephant populations face a critical threat, with poaching accounting for approximately 60% of their deaths. While ivory tusks are the primary target, their meat and skin are also traded. Decades of poaching and habitat loss have led to severe population declines. As a result, the African forest elephant is now listed as critically endangered, and the African savanna elephant is classified as endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Since July 2021, the collaboration between NCS and the Wildlife Justice Commission has led to the arrest of 29 suspects and the seizure of nearly 10 tonnes of pangolin scales and over one tonne of ivory. So far 11 convictions have been secured, including a high-ranking Vietnamese wildlife trafficker, his two key associates, and the principal shipping facilitators for Lagos-based organized crime networks.

This successful partnership has significantly disrupted Lagos-based criminal networks trafficking ivory and pangolin scales in Nigeria, with trafficking activities reaching their lowest level in five years. Remarkably, there have been no seizures of pangolin scales at Asian seaports originating from Nigeria for over two years.

The NCS-Wildlife Justice Commission collaboration has also led to the displacement of ivory trafficking from Lagos to other parts of Nigeria and to other countries, establishing wildlife trafficking as an increasingly high-risk criminal activity within Nigeria.

The Wildlife Justice Commission remains committed to supporting the NCS in further disrupting wildlife trafficking operations from Nigeria.

