



## CITES Asian elephants SC78 briefing

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written and edited by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA UK).

This report has been produced with the financial assistance of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Asian Elephant Conservation Fund.

EIA also wishes to thank its numerous supporters whose long-term commitment to the organisation's mission and values helped make this work possible.

### ABOUT EIA

We investigate and campaign against environmental crime and abuse.

Our undercover investigations expose transnational wildlife crime, with a focus on elephants, pangolins and tigers, and forest crimes such as illegal logging and deforestation for cash crops such as palm oil. We work to safeguard global marine ecosystems by addressing the threats posed by plastic pollution, bycatch and commercial exploitation of whales, dolphins and porpoises. Finally, we work to avert climate catastrophe by strengthening and enforcing regional and international agreements that tackle short-lived climate super-pollutants, including ozone-depleting substances, hydrofluorocarbons and methane, and advocating corporate and policy measures to promote transition to a sustainable cooling sector and away from fossil fuels.

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## Recommendations to SC78

**REJECT** the Secretariat's recommendation to delete Decisions 18.226 (Rev. CoP19), 19.107 and 19.108 as these have not been fully implemented

**RENEW DECISIONS** 18.226 (Rev. CoP19), 19.107 and 19.108 with amendments (see EIA cross campaigns recommendations for SC78)

**REJECT** the recommendation that the Secretariat will monitor the trade in Asian elephant specimens as this falls outside their mandate and would place the Secretariat under further capacity and resource constraints

**DIRECT** the Secretariat to continue dialogue with Asian elephant range States regarding the need for a regional database noting that response rates were disproportionately low for South Asia and as such not fully representative

**STRENGTHEN** provisions relating to the disposal of carcasses in the draft registration system criteria in Annex I, and mandate provision of information relating to the disposal and location of carcasses, to prevent laundering of parts and products into the illegal market

**ENCOURAGE** Parties affected by illegal trade in Asian elephant specimens to scale up activities to address illegal online trade and including by drawing upon the support available through INTERPOL, the Wildlife Crime Linked to the Internet: Practical Guidelines for Law Enforcement Practitioners, and as appropriate, reviewing their implementation of the provisions under "Regarding wildlife crime linked to the Internet" in Resolution Conf. 11.3 (Rev. CoP19)



**SPECIES: ASIAN ELEPHANT**  
(*ELEPHAS MAXIMUS*)

**IUCN RED LIST ASSESSMENT**

**ENDANGERED**<sup>1</sup>

SINCE 1986 indicating that the species faces a very high risk of extinction in the wild

**CURRENT POPULATION**

**<50,000**

APPROX. 60% LIVE IN INDIA

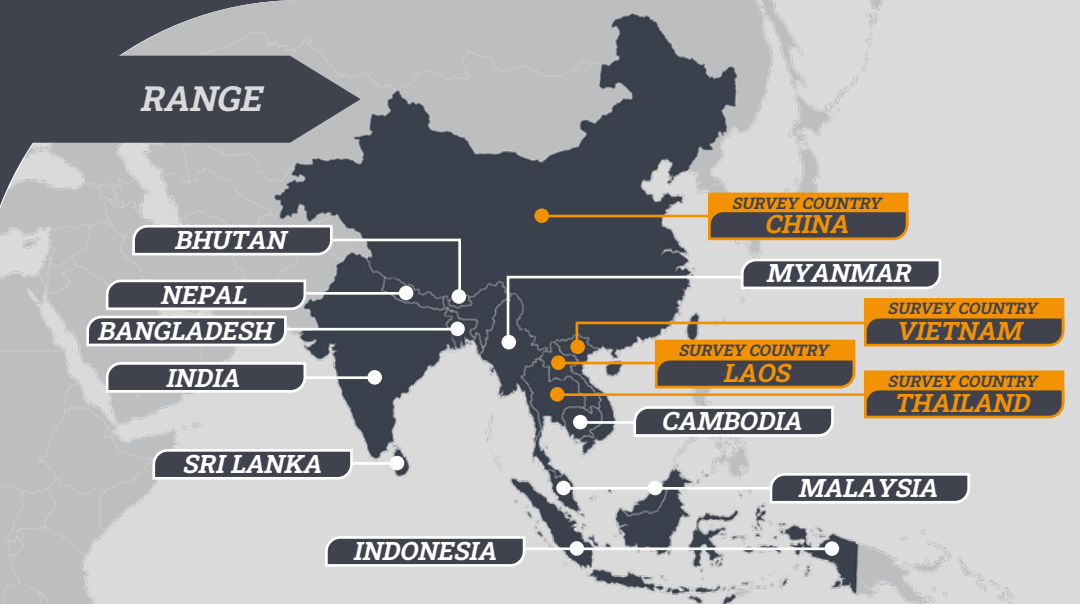
**POPULATION TREND**

**50% DECREASE** IN THE PAST CENTURY

The downward trend is projected to continue, particularly in South-East Asia.<sup>2</sup>

**THREATS**

Primary threats to Asian elephants' survival include **habitat loss and fragmentation, human-elephant conflict and the poaching and illegal trade of live elephants and their parts and derivatives.**<sup>3</sup> Poaching for parts and derivatives may target calves, females and males alike, highlighting the disproportionate risk to the species.



## Summary of EIA online market survey findings

- advertisements from June 2019 to September 2024 were logged
- significant increase in advertisement counts from 2022-24 and a consistent year-on-year increase since 2020
- a total of 1,179 advertisements in four languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and Laotian) found selling non-ivory products across 11 social media and e-commerce platforms
- 75 per cent (892) of advertisements were selling elephant skin, either raw or processed
- other parts include elephant bone, hair, tail, tooth, semen, toe, placenta, penis and trunk
- 388 sellers
- most mentioned locations: Shandong, China (96 ads); Nghe An, Vietnam (64 ads); Maymyo, Myanmar (41 ads); and Jiangsu, China (37 ads).



## Vietnamese online survey

- 140 advertisements found across four social media and e-commerce platforms;
- Facebook is the most popular platform for illegal wildlife advertising. However, with regard to non-ivory elephant parts and derivatives, WeChat is the main platform used
- 48 sellers
- top three advertised products: raw/dried elephant skin, bone and tooth
- associated locations: Nghe An; Buon Ma Thuot

## Thai online survey

- 85 advertisements found across three social media platforms
- Facebook was the most popular platform observed
- 37 sellers
- top three advertised products: raw/dried elephant skin, toe and tooth
- associated locations: Surin; Prakhon Chai, Buriram; Si Songkhram, Nakhon Phanom; Ayutthaya, Nakhonsawan; Nakhon Sawan; and Uthaitani
- Thailand is the only Asian elephant range state (and one of a total of three Parties) to have submitted a report to SC78 under Decision 18.266. However, no mention of investigations or online trade were made in the report.

## Laotian online survey

- 109 advertisements found across two social media and e-commerce platforms
- Facebook was the most popular platform observed
- 47 sellers
- top three advertised products: raw/dried elephant skin, bone and tooth
- associated locations: Vientiane, Phongsaly and Sainyabuli
- Laos did not submit a report to SC78 under Decision 18.226, although it provided information under Article XIII relating to the seizure of 20kg of elephant skin in April 2024 and the conviction of three individuals in June 2024 for illegal transport and trade in elephant bone and ivory.<sup>4</sup>

"...undertake, as necessary, investigations into the illegal trade in Asian elephants and their parts and derivatives, and endeavour to enforce, and where necessary improve, national laws concerning international trade in specimens of Asian elephants with the explicit intention of preventing illegal trade."

However, Asian elephants have received little attention. Only three Parties were reported to SC78 and historically no reports submitted by Parties under 18.226 have provided information relating to investigations. Weak reporting and low prioritisation have resulted in an incomplete understanding of the current nature, scope and scale of illegal trade threats facing Asian elephants.

With funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Asian Elephant Conservation Fund, EIA UK recently launched a project to address data gaps in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, which has historically played a significant role in the illegal trade in Asian elephants and their parts and derivatives.

This briefing provides preliminary observations from EIA's first phase – effectively a snapshot – of online market research into the availability of non-ivory elephant specimens across social media and e-commerce platforms in the Greater Mekong Sub-region between June 2019 and August 2024.

Our research has established that the illegal trade of dried elephant skin and skin beads continues to be prevalent.



# ASIAN ELEPHANTS AT CITES

**1975**

Commercial international trade in live individuals, parts and derivatives of Asian elephants is banned

**1986**

Asian elephants are listed by IUCN as endangered

**2006**

The first Asian Elephant Range States' Meeting (AsERM) is held to discuss threats limiting population abundance of Asian elephants

**2012**

Illegal live trade in Asian elephants is first raised at CITES SC62

**2016**

Decision 17.217 is adopted at CITES CoP17 directed at Parties to investigate illegal trade in live Asian elephants

IUCN publishes a review on illegal trade in Asian live elephants in all 13 Asian range countries

**2017**

The Jakarta Declaration is introduced at the second AsERM highlighting regional commitment to safeguarding the future of the Asian elephants

**2019**

Decision 18.226 is adopted at CoP18 mandating Parties to investigate not only the illegal live trade, but also the illegal trade in Asian elephant parts and derivatives

The last known study of illegal trade relating to Asian elephants was conducted by Elephant Family

**2022**

The Kathmandu declaration was introduced at the third AsERM agreeing to enhance conservation measures to protect Asian elephants

Decision 18.226 was renewed at the CITES CoP19 continuing to encourage Parties to undertake investigations into the illegal trade in Asian elephants and their parts and derivatives

## LEGAL TRADE IN ELEPHANT SKINS

An analysis of the UNEP/WCMC Trade Database<sup>6</sup> reveals that legally sanctioned trade in elephant skin is significant. Given the existence of both illegal and legal sources of skin and the difficulty in identifying skin taxonomically, this presents further challenges in addressing the trade in consumer countries.

### Asian elephant skin and skin pieces

Between 2015-23 there were 14 legal transactions, all of which involved seized specimens imported by the US, mostly from Thailand and some from Laos. The purpose of 10 was personal and of the remaining four commercial.

### African elephant skin

Between 2015-23, importers declared 35,246 and exporters 37,341 skins and skin pieces in total. As for the purpose, the vast majority of the trade declared by importers (33,925 skins and skin pieces) were commercial in nature. In addition to these amounts, China imported 8,116kg from Zimbabwe in 2022 (commercial purpose), as well as 563 skins and skin pieces (mixed purposes but mainly personal, commercial and hunting trophy) over the total period.

## RELEVANT CITES PROVISIONS

### Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP19)

Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP19) on *Trade in Elephant Specimens* sets out the responsibilities of Parties in reporting on and addressing elephant poaching and illegal trade in elephant specimens. This includes an amendment agreed at CoP16 (2013) which addresses the threat of illegal trade in live wild-caught Asian elephants.

### Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19)

Decision 18.226 was adopted at CoP17 (2016) directing Parties implicated in the trade in live Asian elephants to investigate illegal trade and improve management of captive populations, ensure that cross-border trade is compliant with CITES and to collaborate in the development of a regional registration system for captive elephants.

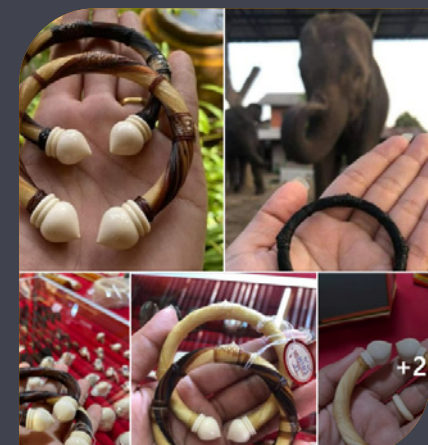
This Decision was amended at CoP18 (2019) to also include parts and derivatives, so that the above provisions applied to all Asian elephant specimens, provisions which remain in effect as Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19).

### Decision 19.107

Decision 19.107 directs the Secretariat to request that Parties report on the above Decision to develop requirements for a registering, marking and tracing system for live Asian elephants in collaboration with stakeholders; and then report back on all the above to the Standing Committee, with their recommendations.

### Decision 19.108

Decision 19.108 directs SC78 to consider this information and make recommendations to the Secretariat and to Parties, and to report to CoP20.



In its report to SC78, the Secretariat recommended that CoP20 delete Decisions 18.226 (Rev. CoP19), 19.107 and 19.108 decisions, suggesting they had been implemented.<sup>5</sup> However, these decisions have consistently received low reporting rates, particularly from most Asian elephant range states and Parties in the Article XIII process. Therefore, EIA urges Parties to reject the proposed deletion and instead advocate for increased and regular reporting.

Table: Historic reporting rates re Decision 18.226 (Rev. CoP19)

Meeting	No. of reporting Parties	Notes
SC69 2017	0	
SC70 2018	N/A	The Secretariat presented information it had proactively gathered through a literature review and a survey among range States and other stakeholders, but this did not concern all the provisions in Decision 18.226, nor did it provide clarity on the status of implementation among range and consumer States
SC71/72 2019	N/A	Not on the agenda
SC73 2021	N/A	No elephant agenda item
SC74 2022	5	Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, New Zealand, the UK (N.B. required further Notification)
SC75/76 2022	N/A	Not on the agenda
SC77 2023	Unknown	No mention of reporting against the Decision was made in the Secretariat's document on elephant trade to SC77
SC78 2024	3	Japan, Thailand, the US

## CASE STUDY: Thailand's leadership in Asian elephant conservation

Thailand is home to approximately 7,000 Asian elephants, of which half are captive. While challenges remain in addressing the trade in ivory obtained from captive populations, Thailand has made commendable efforts in conserving Asian elephants and tackling illegal wildlife trade.



### Introduction of DNA registration system

In 2017, Thailand was the first Asian elephant range State to introduce a DNA registration system for its captive elephants aimed at improving the traceability of captive animals and to prevent wild elephants from being laundered into captive facilities. To date, the majority of captive elephants in Thailand have been registered, contributing to the protection of wild elephants from illegal trade threats.

### Regular reporting to CITES

At SC74 in 2022, Thailand was one of only five Parties (with Cambodia, Indonesia, New Zealand and the UK) to submit the required report on the implementation of Decision 18.226 on *Trade in Asian elephants (Elephas maximus)*.<sup>7</sup> In addition, between 2016-23, out of 13 range States, Thailand and India were the only Parties to regularly submit their Annual Illegal Trade Report (AITR).<sup>8</sup> Thailand is one of only three Parties to have reported to the present meeting (SC78). It is vital for range States and implicated Parties to report regularly as required in order to inform policy and law enforcement measures regarding Asian elephants.

### Intelligence-led investigations

In late 2023, Thailand established the Wildlife Crime Intelligence Unit (WCU) to support law enforcement agencies in the investigation and investigation of wildlife crime suspects. Intelligence analysis plays a pivotal role in detecting and disrupting activities of organised wildlife crime groups and intelligence-led investigations can deter poaching and illegal trade in Asian elephants and their parts and derivatives.

### Enhanced regional cooperation

Thailand has been active in promoting coherent regional responses to wildlife trafficking in South-East Asia, including illegal trade in Asian elephants. This is exemplified by its leading role in the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network<sup>9</sup> and the Working Group on Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife and Timber under the framework of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime<sup>10</sup> – key platforms for exchanging law enforcement cooperation to address wildlife crime in the region.

