Google and the promotion of whale and elephant product sales in Japan

In February 2013, researchers from the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) carried out Japanese language searches on Google Japan’s Shopping site, demonstrating wide scale promotion of the commercial trade in whale and elephant products in Japan, in contravention of Google’s own policies.

A search for ‘whale’ (くじら) within the seafood section of Google Japan Shopping yielded approximately 1,400 whale product ads, including endangered fin whales from Iceland, imported in contravention of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) Appendix 1 listing of this species, as well as internationally protected whales caught in the West Pacific and in the Southern Ocean whale sanctuary. EIA also detected products from whales killed in Taiji, the infamous dolphin hunting village depicted in the Oscar winning documentary “The Cove”. Whales and dolphins are severely over-hunted in Japan’s coastal waters, and killed using inhumane methods that are prohibited in the most of the developed world.

A search for elephant products (象牙) yielded around 10,000 ads on Google Japan’s Shopping site offering elephant ivory for sale – also in direct contravention of Google’s policy. About 80% of the elephant ivory ads are for “hanko”, Japanese name seals used to affix signatures to documents. Hanko sales are a major demand driver for elephant ivory and have contributed to the wide-scale resumption of elephant poaching across much of Africa where an estimated 35,000 elephants are being illegally killed for their tusks each year.
Google policy on promotion of wildlife trade

Google Shopping is a Google controlled activity with specified restrictions. Sellers have to open a merchant’s account and are subject to specified restrictions including a list of restricted products. These restricted products include a list of endangered or threatened species. According to Google, their policy is based on “user feedback and legal factors”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Listing</th>
<th>Allowed?</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elephant ivory</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of elephant ivory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shark products</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of shark products, including squalene, fins, liver oil, or cartilage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiger products</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of tiger products, including bones, claws, fur, or skin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whale products</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of whale products, including bones, meat, or oil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhinoceros products</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of rhinoceros products, including rhinoceros horns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolphin products</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of dolphin products, including dolphin oil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staghorn and elkhorn coral</td>
<td>☞ Not allowed</td>
<td>Google doesn't allow the promotion of staghorn or elkhorn coral.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Google.com Inc and Google Japan

Google.com Inc is the world’s largest search engine, providing products and services in more than 100 languages and in more than 50 countries, regions, and territories. Founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, its headquarters are located in Mountain View, California.

The company’s mission is to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful”. It generates revenue primarily by delivering online advertising. This accounted for $36,531 million or 96% of Google’s $37,905 million revenue in 2011. International revenue (excluding the UK) has grown from 40% to 43% of Google’s revenue from 2009-2011, with the US accounting for 46% in 2011. Outside of the U.S., the majority of its customers are located in Europe and Japan.

Google Shopping, formerly Google Product Search, Google Products and Froogle, is currently available in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, Australia, Brazil, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Italy, and Czech Republic. It provides a facility into which a user can type product queries to return lists of vendors selling a particular product, as well as pricing information.
On May 31, 2012, Google announced that Google Product Search would become Google Shopping, a purely commercial model built on Product Listing Ads, where merchants would have to pay Google in order for their products to be displayed. As such, revenue streams from Google Shopping look set to increase dramatically. In 2012, it was estimated that Google currently earns about $800 million a year in advertising revenue from Google Product Search. By charging merchants to list products in Google Shopping, it has been estimated Google will generate another $1 billion in revenue annually. Google Japan Inc. operates as a subsidiary of Google Inc and was founded in 2001.

Analysis of Whale Product ads on Google Japan Shopping

Online research carried out in February 2013 showed a vast range of whale product ads on Google Japan Shopping, with prices ranging from 298 yen (70g of pilot whale, Wakayama) to 15,980 yen for Icelandic fin whale bacon. Species identified by common name in the ads were fin whale, minke whale, sei whale, Baird’s beaked whale, Bryde’s whale, pilot whale, sperm whale and even humpback whale (despite there being no official hunting of humpack whales by Japan, Norway or Iceland.

Most of the products were fin whale (67 out of 183 examined), imported from Iceland in contravention of the CITES Appendix 1 listing of this species which prohibits international trade, as well as the international ban on commercial whaling. A large number of ads were promoting the sale of whale products from Taiji (36 out of 183 examined), where thousands of dolphins and whales are killed each year. These toothed whale and dolphin species typically exhibit very high levels of mercury, making the consumption of their meat and blubber a serious human health risk.

A number of adverts did not list a species name (27 out of 183), contrary to Japanese labelling laws.

Many of the Google promoted products were being sold by Yahoo! Japan. Previous tests of Yahoo! Japan sold products have revealed dangerously high mercury levels as well as dolphin products mislabelled as ‘whale’.

Recommendations

With the internet credited with facilitating a huge expansion of illegal international wildlife trade over the last decade, it is paramount that global companies like Google take responsibility for enforcing international law as well as their own consumer-led policies. While Google has laudable policies to prevent the promotion of trade in whales, elephants and other threatened wildlife through its shopping sites, it is clear that absolutely no enforcement has been carried out, allowing buyers to find thousands of whale and elephant products through Google services.

Google must act immediately to withdraw all products that are being promoted in contravention of its own stated policies, and ensure strict enforcement of its policies in the future.
ANNEX 1 – screen prints of Google Shopping searches for whale products

Search term: Whale + Iceland

Result of searching for ‘whale’ within seafood section on Google Japan Shopping and ‘google translated’ into English. See
http://www.google.co.jp/search?hl=ja&tbm=shop&q=%E3%81%8F%E3%81%98%E3%82%89&oq=%E3%81%8F%E3%81%98%E3%82%89&gs_l=products-cc.1.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0&psj=1&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.&fp=e94ac1949b9c78d&biw=1600&bih=762
ANNEX 2: Screenshots of Ivory on Google Japan – 22nd Feb 2013

Search Term: “elephant ivory” or 象牙 under Google Shopping. Selection of “Descending Order of Price” in English then Japanese
Search Term: “elephant ivory” or 象牙 under Google Shopping. Selection of “Sorted by Relevance” in English and Japanese.
ANNEX 3: Google Shopping Japan policy against promotion of whale, elephant and other wildlife products

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7 http://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/google-shopping-paid-search-results/#ixzz2LSLjz9vY
8 http://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/google-shopping-paid-search-results/#ixzz2LSLjz9vY
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