Journal of Nature Studies 25(2): 10-33
Online ISSN: 2244-5226

CONTEMPORARY ELEPHANT IVORY TRADE IN THE PHILIPPINES

Emerson Y. Sy*

TRAFFIC International Southeast Asia
Suite 3.04, 3rd Floor, Dataran Hamodal Block B, Lot 4,
Jalan Bersatu 13/4, Section 13, 46200 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: emerson.sy@gmail.com

ABSTRACT – Elephant ivory utilization in the Philippines dates back to at least the 10th century, as evidenced by a few historical artifacts. The trade expanded further during the Spanish colonial period in the 16th–19th Century, when ivory became a preferred material for religious carvings. However, comprehensive empirical data on contemporary domestic elephant ivory trade remains scarce. This study addresses this knowledge gap by integrating surveys of physical markets, art auctions, and an online platform from 2017 to 2019 including an analysis of legal trade records from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Between 2017 and 2019, researchers documented 1,667 ivory items, with religious and jewelry items comprising the majority of observed items. Prices ranged from PHP 650 (USD 13) for a 15mm spherical pendant to PHP 4,672,000 (USD 91,851) for a 17th-century crucifix measuring 81 cm (L) × 79 cm (H) × 10 cm (W). While the scale of the Philippine ivory market is significantly smaller than in some neighboring Asian countries, the availability of both old and newly carved items suggests an ongoing, though limited, demand particularly among affluent collectors of religious art. The CITES trade database recorded only limited legal imports of elephant ivory into the Philippines since 1981, indicating the likelihood that a portion of the ivory in the domestic market originated from illicit sources. Although the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) drafted an administrative order requiring ivory registration in 2015, it remained unsigned and unimplemented after more than a decade. The absence of clear and enforceable regulation has contributed to a largely unregulated domestic trade. The decisive actions taken in Thailand and China, where stricter regulations and outright bans have been implemented, underscore the need for stronger policy measures, effective public awareness campaigns, and sustained political will in the Philippines to curb the illegal ivory trade and align with global conservation commitments.

Keywords: CITES, conservation policy, Elephantidae, Facebook, wildlife trade

INTRODUCTION

The trade in elephant ivory in the Philippines can be traced back to at least the 10th century, when maritime traders from Asia plying the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea route brought ivory from Asia and Africa to trade with locals in southwestern Philippines (Gatbonton, 1983; Jose and Villegas, 2004). Archaeological evidence includes an ivory seal (6 cm high × 4 cm diameter; Philippine National Museum

To cite this paper: Sy, E.Y. 2026. Contemporary Elephant Ivory Trade in the Philippines. *Journal of Nature Studies*, 25(2), 10-33.

accession number 1988-A-160) excavated in Butuan City, Mindanao, during the 1970s, which was dated to be more than 1,000 years old.

Although the Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) does not naturally occur in the Philippines, historical records indicate its introduction. Around 1395, a Raja from Java (Indonesia) presented two wild elephants as a gift to Raja Baginda (Baguinda Ali) of Jolo, Sulu Archipelago (Saleeby, 1908). The elephants were released into the forest, where they reproduced. A Spanish Augustinian document written in 1573 noted the presence of elephants on "Xoloc" (Jolo) (Anon, 1573). In 1673, an unspecified number of elephants from Jolo were reportedly transported by the Sultan of Jolo to northeastern Borneo, contributing to longstanding debates regarding the origins of Bornean elephants (Cranbrook et al., 2008), later clarified through molecular analyses (Fernando et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2018).

Accounts by Forrest (1779) and Hunt (1837) who visited Jolo Island in 1774 and 1814, respectively, described local efforts to exterminate wild elephants on the island. Motivations for such persecution may have included severe damage caused by elephant herds to plantations (Cranbrook et al., 2008) or the pursuit of prestige by demonstrating bravery and strength to the Sultan (Saleeby, 1908). In contrast, elephants were not mentioned in an account of a visit to Jolo in 1848 (Keppel, 1853), which suggests the successful extirpation of the species on the island in the first half of the 1800s (Cranbrook et al., 2008).

Historically, ivory in the southern Philippines was fashioned into jewelry, including bangles and disc earrings (Fig. 1), as well as sword handles or pommels (Fig. 2), serving as symbols of high social status and wealth within local communities (Jose, 1990; Cato, 1996). During the Spanish colonial period, which lasted for more than 300 years, ivory, although expensive, became the preferred material for carving religious statues, locally known as santos, owing to its fine texture, hardness, and natural luster (Gatbonton, 1983; Jose, 1990). The whiteness of ivory was symbolically associated with purity and power. As Spanish settlers introduced Catholicism and established chapels and churches, the institutional demand for religious imagery increased, further stimulating the ivory trade (Jose and Villegas, 2004; Martin et al., 2011). This trade flourished and reached its peak during the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, between 1565 and 1898.

The earliest documented ivory religious statues in Manila were commissioned by Spanish friars and crafted by immigrant artisans from southeastern China. Demand expanded as wealthy Spaniards residing in the Philippines, along with affluent Filipinos, commissioned similar statues for private devotion within their households (Gatbonton, 1983). During the Filipino-American War (1899–1902) and World War II (1941–1945), widespread destruction of churches resulted in the loss, looting, or damage of numerous religious artifacts (Olivares-Cunanan, 1983; Jose and Villegas, 2004). In the postwar period, many church officials seeking to rebuild opted to discard old or damaged statues in favor of newly commissioned pieces. Capitalizing on this, a prominent collector in central Luzon organized a network of scouts to negotiate with church officials, salvaging or purchasing discarded statues and thereby popularizing the collection and trade of religious ivory carvings (Olivares-Cunanan, 1983). Over time, a portion of these artifacts entered the antique market, where they were acquired by private collectors (Jose and Villegas, 2004).

The earliest documented ivory religious statues in Manila were commissioned by Spanish friars and crafted by immigrant artisans from southeastern China. Demand expanded as wealthy Spaniards residing in the Philippines, along with affluent Filipinos, commissioned similar statues for private devotion within their households (Gatbonton, 1983). During the Filipino-American War (1899–1902) and World War II (1941–1945), widespread destruction of churches resulted in the loss, looting, or damage of



Figure 1. A 1901 photograph depicts a Bagobo chief from Mindanao wearing a disc earring crafted from elephant ivory.



Figure 2. Ivory handle of a barong, a traditional short sword distinguished by its broad, leaf-shaped blade, from southern Philippines. Photo © E.Y. Sy.

numerous religious artifacts (Olivares-Cunanan, 1983; Jose and Villegas, 2004). In the postwar period, many church officials seeking to rebuild opted to discard old or damaged statues in favor of newly commissioned pieces. Capitalizing on this, a prominent collector in central Luzon organized a network of scouts to negotiate with church officials, salvaging or purchasing discarded statues and thereby popularizing the collection and trade of religious ivory carvings (Olivares-Cunanan, 1983). Over time, a portion of these artifacts entered the antique market, where they were acquired by private collectors (Jose and Villegas, 2004).

The large-scale killing of approximately one million wild elephants over the past four decades for the ivory trade led the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to impose a global ban on international commercial ivory trade in January 1990. All Parties to the CITES are obligated to comply with the decision. The Philippines became a Party to the CITES in 1981, designating the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB) as the national CITES Management Authority. The CITES-implementing law in the Philippines is the Wildlife Resources Protection and Conservation Act of 2001 (Republic Act No. 9147), which prohibits the collection, possession, transport, export, import, or trade of wildlife and derivatives without corresponding permits.

Between 1996 and 2009, Philippine authorities intercepted five large-scale ivory smuggling attempts involving more than 20 metric tons of tusks originating from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia (DENR, 2013). Because traffickers repeatedly exploited Philippine ports as transit points for the movement of illicit ivory to consumer markets, the Philippines was designated as a "country of primary concern" at the 16th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP16) in Bangkok, Thailand, in March 2013 (Anon, 2006; CITES, 2013). In response, the government created the Philippine Operations Group on Ivory (POGI) under DENR Special Order No. 2013-354, tasked primarily with investigating ivory smuggling and other forms of illegal wildlife trade, and submitted a National Ivory Action Plan to the CITES Secretariat (DENR-BMB, n.d.).

As part of this action plan, the DENR drafted an administrative order in 2015 requiring the registration of both raw and worked elephant ivory (DENR, n.d.). However, as of 1 October 2026, the department administrative order remains unsigned, and the registration process has yet to be implemented.

The domestic ivory trade, particularly the use of ivory in the production of religious statues, has drawn greater scrutiny in recent years. This was fueled by the subsequent theft of several tons of ivory tusks while under government custody (Delfin, 2009; Andraneda, 2010; Lapeña, 2013). International and domestic attention intensified following a National Geographic exposé that implicated a senior Catholic priest in Cebu Province in ivory smuggling activities (Christy, 2012). Although the priest was investigated and later exonerated by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) in 2014 (Mayol, 2014), the controversy prompted a broader response from the Catholic Church. In 2015, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued a formal statement urging bishops and clergy to reject the use of ivory and other materials derived from endangered or protected species in the creation of religious devotional objects (CBCP News, 2015).

On 21 June 2013, the Philippines became the first non-range country to publicly destroy more than four metric tons of confiscated elephant tusks, with an estimated market value of USD 6.5 million (Agence France-Presse, 2013; DENR, 2013). This action was recognized by CITES at the 17th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP17) in 2016, when the Philippines was reclassified to the lowest compliance category, identified as a country of "importance to watch" (CITES, 2017). Between 2010 and

2019, Philippine law enforcement agencies, including the Bureau of Customs and the DENR, recorded only one seizure incident of elephant ivory, consisting of two items weighing a total of 800 g in 2011 (Sy, 2021).

Market surveys conducted in the National Capital Region (NCR; also known as Metro Manila) have documented the continued sale of both old and newly carved ivory items. Assessments of the Philippine ivory market vary, with some considered it as significant (Martin et al., 2011), while other described it as small (Vigne, 2016). To better understand the current dynamics of the ivory trade in the country, and in light of the increasing role of the Internet in facilitating ivory transactions across the region (Zhao et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2018; Indraswari et al., 2020), TRAFFIC researchers carried out surveys in physical markets across selected major cities as well as art auctions and on a widely used social media platform. The study aimed to document availability of ivory items in selected major cities, types of ivory items, prices, and other pertinent information.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection

This study was conducted between November 2017 and July 2019 in selected major cities and Facebook groups in the Philippines.

a. Online market survey

An initial 10-week online survey was conducted on 10 Philippine Facebook groups specializing in the trade of old and collectible items from 26 November 2017 to 3 February 2018. Monitoring was carried out on weekdays (i.e. Monday–Friday). A follow-up survey was conducted over an 8-week period from 1 June 2019 to 26 July 2019. All posts offering ivory items for sale during the survey periods were manually reviewed. Duplicate listings across multiple groups were recorded only once in the dataset. To prevent double counting, listings featuring identical photos and matching physical descriptions were identified as duplicate advertisements and removed from the dataset.

Keyword searches were also employed using common trade names for elephant ivory in the Philippines such as “ivory”, “ivo”, “haybory”/”hayboree”/”aybori” (intentionally misspelled by traders to avoid being flagged by Facebook’s algorithm), “marfil"/”marfiles” (Spanish word for ivory), “garing”, “ipin”/”ngipin” (tooth in Tagalog language), and “sabon” (soap in Tagalog language; referring to a brand of soap). For each identified listing, researchers captured screenshots and recorded associated information, including quantity, item type, price, and the general location of the trader.

b. Art Auction Survey

Two art auction companies based in Makati City, the National Capital Region (NCR), were monitored for this study, both of which conduct regular auctions throughout the year. All items offered during the periods of December 2017–March 2018 and June–July 2019 were examined to identify and categorize elephant ivory objects. When available, the final sale prices, inclusive of buyer’s premiums and taxes, were recorded.

c. Physical Market Survey

Physical market surveys were conducted between December 2017 and February 2018 across 195 religious, jewelry, antique/collectible, and hotel gift shops. The locations and shops were selected based

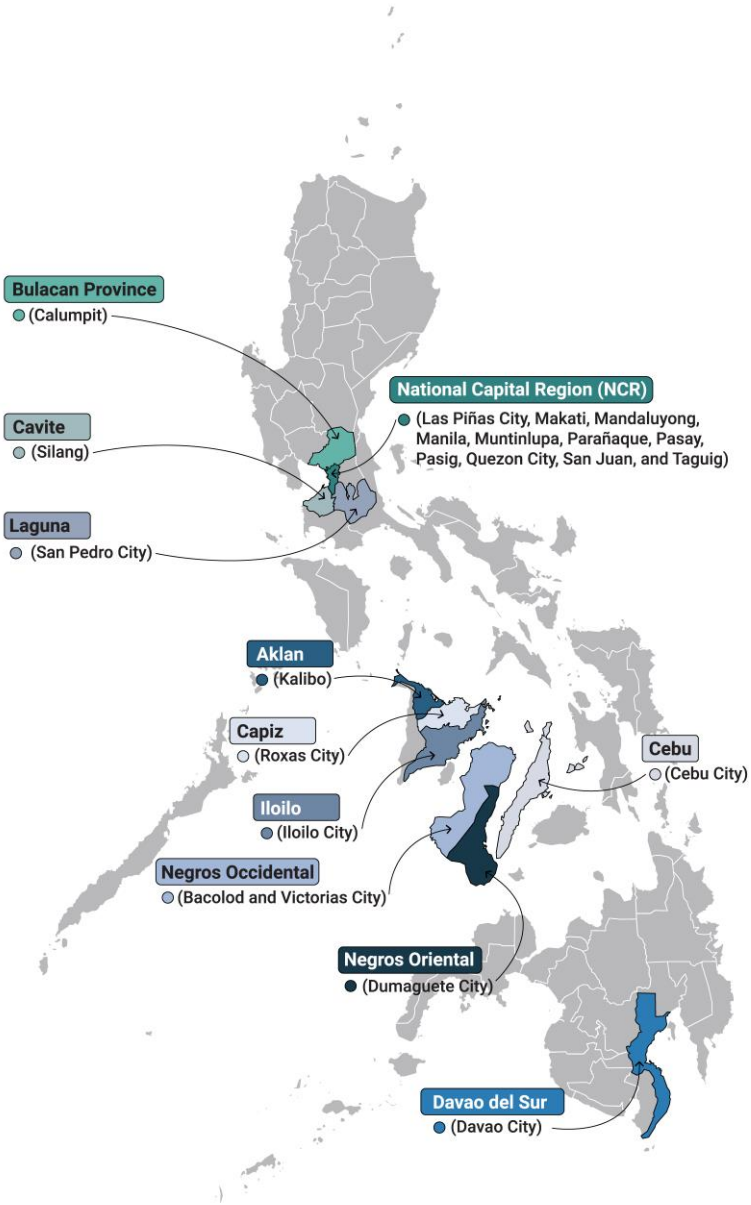


Figure 3. Locations of physical market surveys.

on their perceived likelihood of offering elephant ivory items. Surveys covered multiple locations including the NCR (Las Piñas City, Makati, Mandaluyong, Manila, Muntinlupa, Parañaque, Pasay, Pasig, Quezon City, San Juan, and Taguig), Bulacan Province (Calumpit), Cavite (Silang), Laguna (San Pedro City), Cebu (Cebu City), Negros Occidental (Bacolod and Victorias City), Negros Oriental (Dumaguete City), Aklan (Kalibo), Iloilo (Iloilo City), Capiz (Roxas City), and Davao del Sur (Davao City) (Fig. 3). A follow-up survey, restricted to the NCR, was carried out from June to July 2019.

Data collected included item price, approximate age of the item, reported source, and legality were gathered through informal interview with shop keepers. Photographs were taken whenever possible. Ivory items observed during the first survey were recounted in the second survey to estimate turnover. Because not all displayed items could be examined closely for Schreger lines, unconfirmed ivory items were excluded from the dataset to prevent overestimation of market availability. Similarly, objects claimed to be ivory but determined not to be elephant ivory were also excluded (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. A carved bone item, misrepresented as elephant ivory, being offered for sale In Chinatown, Manila City in 2018. Photo © E.Y. Sy.

d. CITES Trade Database

Import records of elephants and their derivatives covering the period from 1975 to 2020 were retrieved from the CITES Trade Database in December 2021 (CITES, 2021) to quantify legal imports into the Philippines over the 46-year period. Search criteria were specified as follows: Year: 1975-2020; Importer: Philippines; Source: all sources; Purpose: all purposes; Trade terms: all; Species: Elephantidae (family level). Records with purpose codes Q (Circus/Travelling exhibition), E (Educational), and S (Scientific) were excluded from analysis because these transactions represent temporary or non-commercial trade that did not contribute to the domestic elephant ivory trade.

Ivory items were broadly classified into five categories: religious, jewelry (wearable items), utility (e.g., kitchenware), ornamental (display objects), and raw tusks (unworked ivory). Each category was further subdivided into specific subcategories to provide a more precise description of items. For consistency, all monetary values in this report were standardized using the exchange rate of USD 1 = PHP 50.8652 (as of 31 July 2019; https://www.oanda.com/currency-converter). No ivory items were purchased during this study.

RESULTS

Overall Result

During the first survey period (November 2017–March 2018), a total of 882 ivory items were documented and recorded from 81 sellers across online, art auction, and physical markets. In the second survey period (June–July 2019), 785 ivory items were recorded from 62 sellers (Table 1; Table 5). The majority of items (60%–85%) in both survey periods were observed in physical shops. Approximately 80% of the ivory items recorded in physical markets during the first survey were still present during the second survey, suggesting a low turnover rate. Online traders accounted for 12%–38% of recorded ivory items, while art auctions contributed only 1.6%–3.7%. Despite their smaller share, art auctions generated the highest recorded selling prices.

Table 1. Number of sellers and ivory items offered for sale in the Philippines.

Market	1st Survey Nov 2017–Mar 2018		2nd Survey Jun–Jul 2019	
	Seller/Shop	Quantity	Seller/Shop	Quantity
Online	47	337	28	92
Art Auction	2	13	2	29
Physical	32	532	32	664
TOTAL	**81**	**882**	**62**	**785**

Online Survey

During the first survey period (November 26, 2017 – February 3, 2018), researchers recorded 94 posts from 47 online traders offering a total of 337 elephant ivory items. The majority of posts (n = 69; 73.4%) explicitly identified the items as ivory, whereas the remaining posts either used code words or omitted reference to ivory altogether. Prices were provided in nearly 70% (n = 65) of the posts. Jewelry items were priced between PHP 650 (USD 13) for a pendant (Fig. 5a) and PHP 6,200 (USD 122) for a ring (Fig. 6a). Religious items commanded substantially higher prices, ranging from PHP 5,000 (USD 98) for a small child Jesus statue with ivory mask and hands to PHP 150,000 (USD 2,949) for a saint and child Jesus with ivory masks and hands (Fig. 5b).



Figure 5. Examples of elephant ivory items for sale on Facebook during the first survey period: A. round pendant and B. religious statue. Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

During the second survey period (June–July 2019), researchers documented 60 posts from 28 traders offering a total of 92 ivory items. Posts that explicitly mentioned ivory (n = 8; 13.3%) were markedly fewer compared to the first survey period. The decline may be attributed to the deactivation of active ivory trader accounts and posts following TRAFFIC's reporting to Facebook, as well as difference in survey duration between survey periods. Jewelry prices ranged from PHP 1,299 (USD 26) for a ring (Fig. 6a) to PHP 15,000 (USD 295) for a 46-cm necklace (Fig. 5b). Prices for religious items remained relatively higher, ranging from PHP 1,700 (USD 33) for a small bead rosary (Fig. 7a) to PHP 450,000 (USD 8,847) for a figurine with ivory head and hands (Fig. 7b).

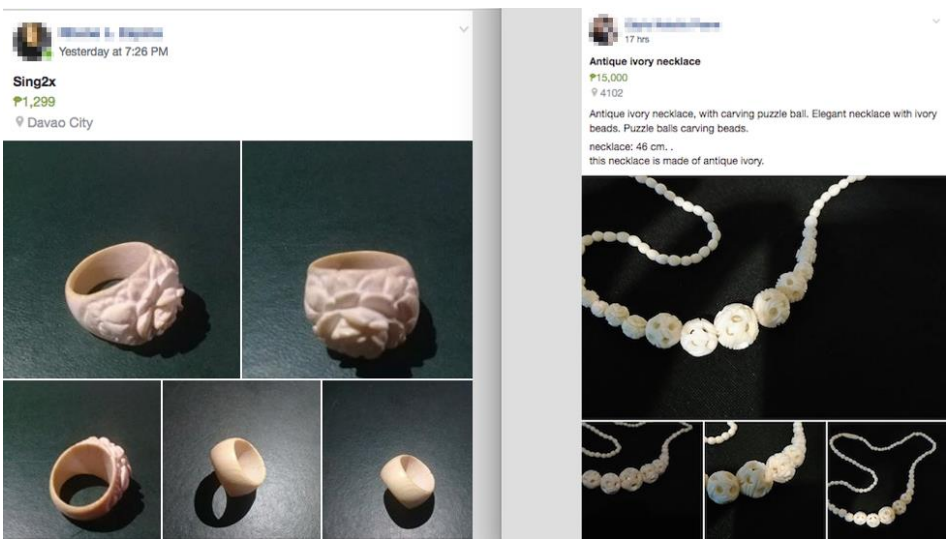


Figure 6. Jewelry items made from elephant ivory: A. ring and B. necklace. Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

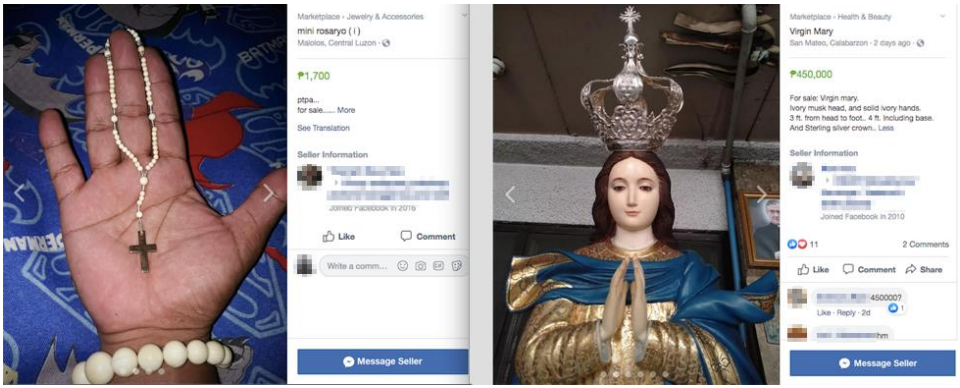


Figure 7. Elephant ivory items offered for sale on Facebook: A. rosary and B. religious statue. Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

Art Auction

The two auction companies based in Makati City, NCR, held a total of eight auctions—four between 2 December 2017 and 3 March 2018, and four between 1 June and 26 July 2019 (Table 2). Of the 3,036 lots offered during these auctions, only 24 lots (<1%), comprising 43 individual items, were identified as elephant ivory.

Table 2. List of art auctions held between December 2017 and July 2019.

Auction Date	Total number of lots	Ivory lots	Quantity of ivory items
2-Dec-17	144	2	3
8-Dec-17	284	1	1
20-Jan-18	408	6	7
3-Mar-18	150	3	3
1-Jun-19	210	3	3
22-Jun-19	169	2	2
20-Jul-19	117	-	-
20-Jul-19	1,554	7	24
TOTAL	**3,036**	**24**	**43**

The majority of ivory lots (n = 19; 79%) were successfully sold, generating total sales of PHP 10,354,020 (USD 203,558) (Table 3). Final prices ranged from PHP 2,336 (USD 46) for a set of five hair sticks to PHP 4,672,000 (USD 91,851) for a 17th-century crucifix measuring 81 cm (L) × 79 cm (H) × 10 cm (W) on 3 March 2018 (Fig. 8).

Table 3. Final prices of auctioned ivory items between December 2017–Mar 2018 and June–July 2019.

Item No.	Description	Dimension (cm)	Final Price (PHP)
1	A pair of hands with a wooden base, 19th Century	20 x 15 *	93,440
2	Head of a virgin, 18th Century	27 x 14 x 13	1,168,000
3	Carved tusk, 19th Century	76	128,480
4	Fan	56 x 30	4,672
5	Earrings and ring with gold, sapphire and diamond	-	32,704
6	Crucifix, 17th Century	21 x 20 x 6	175,200
7	Holy family in a virina	64 x 43 x 28 *	315,360
8	Madonna and child	60 x 32 *	292,000
9	Holy family, 19th Century	45 x 33 x 19 *	327,040
10	Saint, ivory and wood, 18th Century	132 x 46 x 30	1,518,400
11	Crucifix, 17th Century	81 x 79 x 10	4,672,000
12	Sleeping infant Jesus with Virina, 18 Century	13 x 5	642,400
13	Infant Jesus/Sto. Niño, ivory head and hands, 1980s	134 x 48 x 48 *	280,320
14	5 pieces of hair sticks	-	2,336
15	Elephant figurine	6 x 13 x 4	7,008
16	2 pieces of elephant figurine	8 cm each	23,360
17	11 human and 2 Buddha figurines	various sizes	525,600
18	Infant Jesus/Sto. Niño	65 x 41 x 32 *	93,440
19	Virgin Mary	34 x 10 x 14 *	52,260
Total			**10,354,020**

Note: * Measurement included the base or virina (glass domecover)



Figure 8. A 17th Century crucifix was sold for PHP 4,672,000 (USD 91,851) during the auction on 3 March 2018. Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

Physical Market

The initial physical market surveys were conducted across 22 cities in six regions (NCR, Region 3, 4A, 6, 7, and 11). Of the 195 shops surveyed, 32 (16.41%) were found to offer elephant ivory items for sale (Table 4). The majority of shops with ivory items were located in the NCR (n = 29; 91%). Follow-up surveys were conducted in June-July 2019 focused specifically on the NCR. The number of Ivory items per shop ranged from 1–110, with products varying in size from small jewelry pieces (<2cm) (Fig. 9) to carved religious statues exceeding 60 cm in height and 10 cm in diameter (Fig. 10).

Table 4. Location of surveyed shops during the study period.

Province/ Region	City	1st Survey Nov 2017–Mar 2018		2nd Survey Jun–Jul 2019	
		No. of stores surveyed	No. of stores with ivory items	No. of stores surveyed	No. of stores with ivory items
National Capital Region	Las Piñas	1	1		
	Makati	12	5	8	3
	Mandaluyong	2	2	2	2
	Manila	68	8	74	14
	Muntinlupa	4	-		
	Parañaque	3	-		
	Pasay	1	-		
	Pasig	9	7	9	6
	Quezon City	21	2	17	2
	San Juan	6	2	4	2
	Taguig	8	2	9	2
Bulacan (Region 3)	Calumpit	7	-		
Cavite (Region 4A)	Silang	1	-		
Laguna (Region 4A)	San Pedro	1	-		
Cebu (Region 7)	Cebu	3	1		
Negros Occidental (NIR)	Bacolod	9	2	4	1
Negros Occidental (NIR)	Victorias	2	-		
Negros Oriental (NIR)	Dumaguete	7	-		
Aklan (Region 6)	Kalibo	7	-		
Iloilo (Region 6)	Iloilo	7	-		
Capiz (Region 6)	Roxas	6	-		
Davao del Sur (Region 11)	Davao City	10	-		
TOTAL		**195**	**32**	**127**	**32**



Figure 9. Ivory items in a jewelry store in Taguig City, NCR. Photo © E.Y. Sy.



Figure 10. A religious statue in a collectible shop in the NCR. Photo © E.Y. Sy.

Outside the NCR, only 3 of the 60 surveyed shops were found to have ivory items available. A newly crafted Child Jesus/Sto. Niño statue observed in a shop in Cebu (Fig. 11a) was traced to a source shop located in Manila City (Fig. 11b).



Figure 11. Sto. Niño statue in a shop in Cebu (A) and in Manila (B). Photo © Lyle Uytico (A) and E.Y. Sy (B).

Table 5. Elephant ivory items documented for sale in the Philippines between November 2017 and July 2019.

		Size in cm	First Survey				Second Survey			
			Online	Art Auction	Physical	Total	Online	Art Auction	Physical	Total
Religious	Angel		2		2	**4**			4	**4**
	Buddha	5	1		11	**12**		2	8	**10**
	Crucifix	10-81	9	2	15	**26**	1		23	**24**
	Holy Family (3-4 figures/ set)		1	2	3	**6**	1		9	**10**
	Parts only (detached)	1-27	27	2	36	**65**	4		34	**38**
	Religious pendant	2-5	8		1	**9**			9	**9**
	Rosary				1	**1**	4		1	**5**
	Saint	18-61	4	1	18	**23**	2		26	**28**
	Santo Niño / Child Jesus	7-15	4		52	**56**	10	3	39	**52**
	Shiva		1			**1**			2	**2**
	Unspecified		100			**100**			1	**1**
	Virgin Mary	15-29	18		28	**46**	4	1	17	**22**
	Madonna and child		4	1	7	**12**	2	2	17	**21**
Jewelry	Bangle		3		54	**57**			55	**55**
	Bracelet - beads		6		4	**10**	3		12	**15**
	Brooch / pin	3-5	1		1	**2**	9	5	27	**41**
	Comb	13			3	**3**			4	**4**
	Cuff Link (pair)				1	**1**				
	Earrings (pair)			1	24	**25**	2		28	**30**
	Glass holder				1	**1**			4	**4**
	Hairpin				13	**13**			3	**3**
	Necklace		40		61	**101**	22		101	**123**
	Pendant	3-6	16		107	**123**	2		28	**30**
	Ring		2	1	8	**11**	2		13	**15**
Utility	Binoculars								1	**1**
	Book cover						1		1	**2**
	Brush rest	10			1	**1**			1	**1**
	Chopsticks (pair)		8			**8**	2		2	**4**
	Cigarette holder				6	**6**	1		4	**5**
	Cup	10			1	**1**			3	**3**
	Fan			1	3	**4**	1		1	**2**
	Home furnishings		2			**2**			1	**1**
	Kitchen ware with ivory handle		3	1	13	**17**	12		25	**37**

Table 5 (Continued). Elephant ivory items documented for sale in the Philippines between November 2017 and July 2019.

		Size in cm	First Survey				Second Survey			
			Online	Art Auction	Physical	Total	Online	Art Auction	Physical	Total
	Letter opener	13			2	**2**			4	**4**
	Magnifying glass with ivory handle				1	**1**			3	**3**
	Mirror case								1	**1**
	Musical item / picks	3	2			**2**			5	**5**
	Name seal / hanko		20		4	**24**	1		4	**5**
	Small bottle (e.g. perfume, snuff bottle)								10	**10**
	Snail/dessert fork	8	4		12	**16**			13	**13**
	Sword/Dagger with ivory pommel/handle	8			1	**1**		1	2	**3**
Decorative	Ball						1			**1**
	Boat	10			1	**1**			2	**2**
	Figurine - human	15-25	10		33	**43**	4	11	43	**58**
	Figurine - animal	5-15	32		3	**35**	1	3	46	**50**
	Figurine - other		3			**3**			11	**11**
	Netsuke	5	1			**1**			10	**10**
	Carved whole tusk	30-76	4	1		**5**			3	**3**
Raw tusk	Whole Tusk		1			**1**				
	Tusk Tip								3	**3**
	Scrap									
	Dust									
	TOTAL		**337**	**13**	**532**	**882**	**92**	**28**	**664**	**784**

Clusters of antique shops with ivory items were located in Manila City (n = 8) and Pasig City (n = 7). However, the shop with over 100 ivory items was located in a mall in Mandaluyong City. Across the two survey periods, a greater number of jewelry items (n = 667) were recorded compared to religious items (n = 587) (Fig. 12A–B).

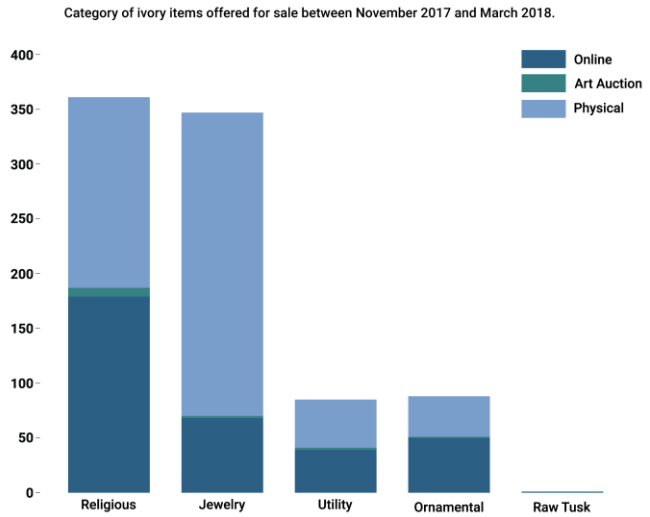


Figure 12A. Category of ivory items offered for sale between November 2017 and March 2018.

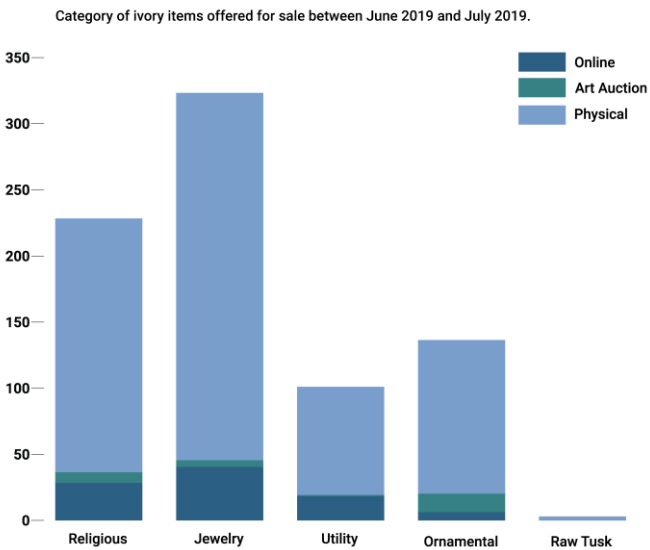


Figure 12B. Category of ivory items offered for sale between June 2019 and July 2019.

CITES Trade Database

The CITES Trade Database contained 90 import and export records involving Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) imported into the Philippines between 1981 and 2020. No import records were documented from 1975 to 1980, prior to the Philippines becoming a Party to CITES. A total of 16 records had the purpose code of E (Education; n = 4), Q (Circus or travelling exhibition; n = 10), and S (Scientific; n = 2), which were excluded in the subsequent analysis. Among the 74 remaining records classified under the purpose codes T (Commercial; n = 37), P (Personal; n = 27), H (Hunting trophy; n = 5), and undeclared (n = 5), notable discrepancies were observed between importer-reported (Philippines) and exporter-reported data. The Philippines reported 17 imports comprising 99 elephant items and 0.45 kg of ivory carvings of unknown quantity, whereas various exporters reported a total of 59 records covering 282 items, two live individuals, and 284.65 kg of worked and raw elephant ivory (Table 6). The 1989 record submitted by the United States for the export of two live African Elephants to the Philippines likely reflects either a permit issuance or an error in the purpose code, rather than an actual transaction, as there is no evidence that live African Elephants have ever been held in any zoological park in the Philippines.

Table 6. Elephant derivatives imported into the Philippines based on the CITES trade database between 1981 and 2020.

Commodity Type	Importer-reported	Exporter-reported	Unit
Ear	2	-	pcs
Foot	1	2	pcs
Ivory carving	12	152	pcs
Ivory carving	-	6.85	kg
Ivory piece	-	68.00	kg
Leather product	20	30	pcs
Live	-	2	
Piano key	53	-	pcs
Bone	-	88	pcs
Skin pieces	1	1	pc
Skull	-	1	pc
Tail	1	-	pc
Trophy	2	3	pcs
Tusk	7	5	pcs
Tusk	-	209.80	kg
	99	**282**	**pieces**
TOTAL	**-**	**2**	**live**
	0.45	**284.65**	**kg**

DISCUSSION

This study provides the most comprehensive assessment of the domestic ivory trade in the Philippines to date. The number of ivory items documented in both online and physical markets was substantially higher than in previous surveys, likely attributable to the longer survey periods and the broader geographic coverage, rather than evidence of an increase in domestic ivory trade. For instance, an earlier online survey by Ceballos (2013) recorded 163 items, compared with 337 items documented during the first survey period of this study. Similarly, previous physical market surveys reported 264–350 items (Martin et al., 2011; Vigne, 2016), whereas this study recorded 532–664 items.

Interviews with antique dealers indicated that the wholesale price of raw elephant ivory between 2016 and 2019 ranged from PHP 70,000 to PHP 80,000 (USD 1,376 to USD 1,573) per kg. However, a pair of raw ivory tusks (Fig. 13), each measuring 53 cm in length and 10 cm in diameter with a combined weight of approximately 4 kg, was sold at a net price of PHP 93,440 (USD 1,837) on 24 January 2021 or equivalent to PHP 23,360 (USD 459) per kg.

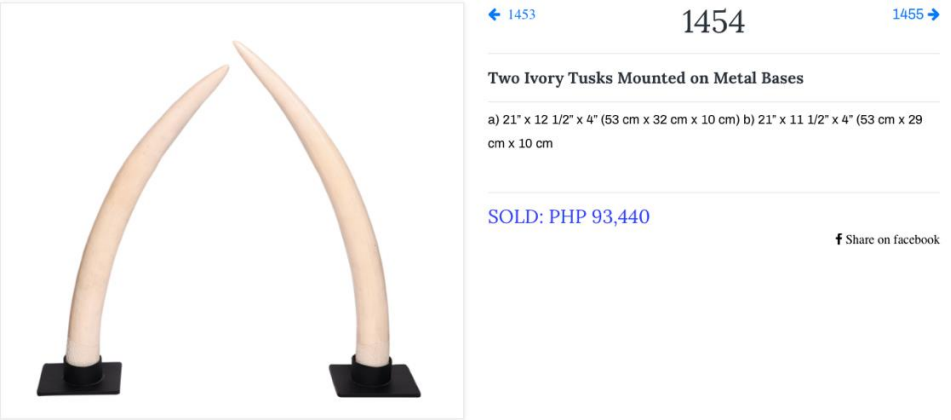


Figure 13. A pair of elephant tusks sold in an auction. Screen captured by TRAFFIC.

Researchers did not identify any specialized ivory shops in the Philippines, in contrast to other Asian countries and territories such as China, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (Shepherd & Nijman, 2008; Stiles, 2008; Stiles, 2009). Instead, all physical stores offering ivory items primarily sold other products, including furniture, jewelry, artwork, and collectibles. While the scale of the domestic ivory trade in the Philippines is relatively small compared to other countries, CITES records show that only a very limited number of ivory items were legally imported into the Philippines over the past four decades. This discrepancy suggests that a substantial proportion of ivory items and raw materials currently in circulation in the country may have unknown, undocumented, or unverified legal origins.

Religious statues carved from elephant ivory are generally priced beyond the reach of most Filipinos and specifically cater to a small, affluent collector base. The limited demand likely contributes to the low turnover of ivory items observed in physical markets. Under Republic Act No. 9147, possession of wildlife derivatives such as elephant ivory must be registered with the DENR. Ivory objects over 100 years old may be assessed and certified by the National Museum of the Philippines as pre-Convention items before they can be legally sold (Cariño, 2012).

However, it remains uncertain whether the National Museum of the Philippines has in practice assumed this responsibility or possesses the qualified personnel required to conduct such evaluations. In principle, traders and collectors are required to provide evidence of legal acquisition (i.e. legal importation or purchased from a legal local dealer) and obtain the necessary permits from the DENR-BMB to possess or trade ivory (Anon, 2012).

CONCLUSION

In several Asian countries with historically significant domestic ivory markets, including Thailand and China, measures have been adopted to mitigate domestic ivory trade through public awareness campaigns, stricter regulations, and enhanced oversight of ivory possession and trade. In Thailand, the Elephant Ivory Act B.E. 2558 mandates the registration of all ivory items held by private owners (Chaitae et al., 2021), while China implemented a nationwide ban on domestic ivory trade in 2017 (Chen et al., 2023).

In contrast, the DENR has yet to finalize and implement the proposed administrative order on ivory registration. The lack of clear, enforceable guidelines has limited the capacity of authorities to verify the legality of ivory in the domestic market, thereby contributing to a largely unregulated domestic trade.

Effective public awareness campaigns, robust legislative frameworks, and sustained political will are essential to effectively reduce the scale of domestic ivory trade in the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was made possible through the support and contributions of many individuals and institutions. I sincerely thank C. Canlas, M. Encomienda, J. Raymundo, and L. Uytico for their invaluable assistance in conducting physical market surveys across the NCR, Bulacan, Cebu, Negros, and Panay; I also thank my colleagues in TRAFFIC and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Financial support for the first survey period was provided by Wildlife Reserves Singapore, while the second survey period was made possible through the generosity of a donor who wishes to remain anonymous.

REFERENCES

Andraneda, K. (2010 March 3). P3 million worth of elephant tusks stolen. Philippine Star. http://www.philstar.com/headlines/554165/p3-million-worth-elephant-tusks-stolen

Agence France-Presse. (2013 June 21). Philippines first in Asia to destroy ivory tusks. Philippine Daily Inquirer. http://globalnation.inquirer.net/78337/philippines-first-in-asia-to-destroy-ivory-tusks

Anon. (1573). Agustinian memoranda, pp. 273-285. *In*: Blaire, E.H. and Robertson, J.A. (1903 [first edition]; 1973 [reprint edition]). The Philippine Islands 1493–1898, Volume 34: 1519–1522; 1280–1605. Cachos Hermanos, Inc. Mandaluyong, Rizal.

Anon. (2006 July 30). Smuggled saints. *News Break*. http://archives.newsbreak-knowledge.ph/2006/07/30/smuggled-saints/

Anon. (2012 September 29). Is that ivory new or antique? Burden of proof is on owner. Cebu Daily News.

http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/279468/is-that-ivory-new-or-antique-burden-of-proof-is-on-owner

Cariño, J. (2012 September 28). Ivory possession a criminal offense - PAWB. ABS-CBN News. http://news.abs-cbn.com/-depth/09/28/12/ivory-possession-criminal-offense-pawb

Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippine News (CBCP News). (2015 November 4). CBCP: No to 'religious ivory.' CBCP News. http://www.cbcpnews.com/cbcpnews/?p=67208

Cato, R. (1996). Moro swords. Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd., Singapore. ix + 106 pp.

Ceballos, E. (2013). Internet trade of elephant ivory in Africa and Asia. Campaigns Against the Cruelty to Animals and Animal Conservation and Welfare Foundation, Westminster, BC, Canada. 14 pp.

Chaitae, A., Gordon, I.J., Addison, J. and Marsh, H. (2021). Protection of elephants and sustainable use of ivory in Thailand. Oryx 56(4): 601-608.

Chen, Y.W., Wang, Y.F. and Mumby, H.S. (2023). Five years of the ivory ban in China: developments, limitations, and potential for improvement. Biological Conservation, 284, 110177.

Christy, B. (2012). Ivory worship. National Geographic, 222(4), 28-61.

CITES. (2013). CoP 16 Doc. 53.2.2: Monitoring of illegal trade in ivory and other elephant specimens. Available at: https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/16/doc/E-CoP16-53-02-02.pdf

CITES. (2017). SC69 Doc. 29.3: Interpretation and implementation matters: general compliance and enforcement: compliance matters: national ivory action plans process: report of the secretariat. Available at: https://cites.org/sites/default/files/common/prog/niaps/E-SC69-29-03.pdf

CITES. (2021). CITES Trade Database. Available at: https://trade.cites.org

Cranbrook, E.O., Payne, J. ad Leh, C.M.U. (2008). Origin of the elephants *Elephas maximus* L. of Borneo. Sarawak Museum journal, 63, 95-125.

Delfin, C. (2009 December 20). RP market for icons fuels forbidden ivory trade. GMA News. http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/179824/news/nation/rp-market-for-icons-fuels-forbidden-ivory-trade

DENR. (2013). DENR destroys huge stockpile of illegal ivory. *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*. Available at: http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2013/06/21/denr-destroys-huge-stockpile-of-illegal-ivory/

DENR. (undated). DENR Administrative order no. 2015-___. Registration of raw and worked elephant ivory. Available at: https://bmb.gov.ph/downloads/BPKMD/proposed_p/draft_dao_on_ivory_registration.april_2015.pdf

DENR-BMB. (undated). Philippine biodiversity strategy and action plan 2015–2028. Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Biodiversity Management Bureau, Diliman, Quezon City. 236 pp.

Fernando, P.J., Vidya, T.N.C., Payne, J., Stuewe, M., Davison, G., Alfred, R.J., Andau, P., Bosi, E., Kilbourn, A. and Melnick, D.J. (2003). DNA analysis indicates that Asian Elephants are native to Borneo and are therefore a high priority for conservation. PLoS Biology, 1, 1-6.

Forrest, T. (1779). A voyage to New Guinea and the Moluccas, from Balambangan: including account of Magindano, Sooloo, and other Islands. W. Price et al., Dublin. 447 pp.

Gatbonton, E. B. (1983). *Philippine religious carvings in ivory*. Intramuros Administration, Manila. 78 pp.

Hunt, J. (1837). Some particulars relating to Sulo, in the Archipelago of Felicia. *In*: Moor, J.H. Notices of the Indian Archipelago and adjacent countries. Singapore. Appendix, pp. 31-60.

Indraswari, K., Leupen, B.T.C., Nguyen, M.D.T. and Phassaraudomsak, M. (2020). Trading faces: a snapshot of the online ivory trade in Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam in 2016 with an update in 2019. TRAFFIC, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. xi + 63 pp.

Jose, R.T. (1990). Images of faith: religious ivory carvings from the Philippines. Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California. viii + 142 pp.

Jose, R. and Villegas, R. (2004). Power + Faith + Image: Philippine art in ivory from the 16th to the 19th century. Ayala Foundation, Makati City, Philippines.

Keppel, H. (1853). A visit to the Indian Archipelago in H.M. Ship Meander, Volume I. Richard Bentley, London. 301 pp.

Lapeña, C.G. (2013 March 31). Ivory figures still seen on display in PHL despite decades-old ban. *GMA News*. http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/301764/ivory-figures-still-seen-on-display-in-phl-despite-decades-old-ban/story/

Martin, E., Martin, C., and Vigne, L. (2011). The importance of ivory in Philippine culture. Pachyderm, 50, 56-67.

Mayol, A.V.S. (2014 January 31). NBI clears Cebuano priest in illegal trade of ivory. Cebu Daily News. https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/14651/nbi-clears-cebuano-priest-in-illegal-trade-of-ivory

Nguyen, M. D. T., Indenbaum, R. A. and Willemsen, M. (2018). From tusk to trinket: persistent illegal ivory markets in Viet Nam. TRAFFIC, Ha Noi, Viet Nam. xii + 47 pp.

Olivares-Cunanan, B. (1983). Ermita! Ermita! pp. 57-69. *In*: Sta. Maria, F. (Ed.). Household antiques & heirlooms, GCF Books, Manila.

Saleeby, N.M. (1908). The history of Sulu. Bureau of Printing, Manila. 283 pp.

Sharma, R., Goossens, B., Heller. R., Rasteiro, R., Othman, N., Bruford, M.W. and Chikhi, L. (2018). Genetic analyses favour an ancient and natural origin of elephants on Borneo. Scientific Reports, 8, 880.

Shepherd, C.R. and Nijman, V. (2008). Elephant and ivory trade in Myanmar. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. iv + 32 pp.

Stiles, D. (2008). An assessment of the illegal ivory trade in Viet Nam. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. vii + 27 pp.

Stiles, D. (2009). The elephant and ivory trade in Thailand. TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. viii + 61 pp.

Sy, E.Y. (2021). Wildlife from forests to cages: an analysis of wildlife seizures in the Philippines. USAID

Philippines, Manila. 45 pp.

Zhao, Y., Xu, L., Xiao, Y., Guan, J. and Lau, W. (2017). Revisiting China's ivory markets in 2017. TRAFFIC briefing paper. 21 pp.

Vigne, L. (2016). Ivory and religious statues in the Philippines today. Pachyderm, 57, 48-56.