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CONTEMPORARY ELEPHANT IVORY TRADE IN THE PHILIPPINES

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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

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