



Eye on Ivory

Investigations & Inspections

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement helps protect elephants and other global species by enforcing U.S. laws and treaties that regulate trade in elephant ivory and other wildlife parts and products. The United States prohibits commercial import and export of elephant ivory and has done so for decades. Upholding this prohibition has long been a priority for Service Law Enforcement.

Investigative Highlights

Service special agents have investigated multiple smuggling operations involving the trafficking of elephant ivory for U.S. markets over the past decade. Defendants in these cases have ranged from a Cameroonian prince and an internet ivory entrepreneur operating out of the United Kingdom to U.S. companies dealing in pianos, pool cues, and African art.

Some of the Service's most significant investigations of ivory trafficking are spotlighted below.

United States v. Victor Gordon

In this investigation, Service special agents documented the large-scale smuggling of newly acquired ivory from West Africa disguised to "pass" as old ivory and antique tribal carvings and seized over one ton of elephant ivory – the largest seizure in U.S. history. U.S. businessman Victor Gordon, the owner of an African art and antiques store in Philadelphia was sentenced, in June 2014, to 30 months' imprisonment, followed by 2 years of supervised release, for smuggling elephant ivory into the United States. As part of that sentence, the court ordered Gordon to pay a fine of \$7500 and to forfeit \$150,000, along with the approximately one ton of elephant ivory that was seized by agents from Gordon's Philadelphia store in April 2009.



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Small portion of the ivory seized from Victor Gordon

Gordon was originally indicted on 10 felony counts, which included Lacey Act violations and conspiracy charges. According to the indictment, Gordon paid a co-conspirator to travel to Africa to purchase raw elephant ivory and have it carved to his specifications. In advance of the trips, Gordon provided the co-conspirator with photographs or other depictions of ivory carvings, which served as templates for the ivory carvers in Africa, and directed the co-conspirator to stain or dye the elephant ivory so that the specimens would appear old. Gordon then planned and financed the illegal importation of the ivory from Africa to the United States through John F. Kennedy International Airport and sold the carvings to customers at his store in Philadelphia and other buyers as "antiques."

New York City Ivory Sales

In this case, Service investigators teamed with officers from New York's Department of Environmental Conservation to probe illegal ivory sales

by a New York City jewelry distributor and two Manhattan retailers. This investigation, which began after an off-duty wildlife inspector noted an elaborate display of elephant ivory products in a store window in the city, documented a booming and unauthorized trade in ivory. Because of the complexities of tracing ivory at the point of retail back to the point of import and of U.S. ivory regulations, prosecutions were pursued by the Attorney General for the State of New York based on violations of State laws regulating the sale of elephant ivory. The stores prosecuted paid \$50,000 in fines and forfeited over one ton of elephant ivory. The distributor forfeited 70 pounds of elephant ivory valued at \$30,000 and paid \$10,000 restitution.

U.S./Royal Thai Police Transcontinental Ivory Trafficking

Service special agents and the Thai Royal Police worked together to secure the 2010 U.S. indictment of two businessmen (the owner of a Los Angeles area donut shop and a Thai trafficker) and four arrests in Thailand in a case that exposed transcontinental trafficking in elephant ivory. Over the course of this five-year undercover investigation, officers showed that ivory was being smuggled from Africa into Thailand by Thai operatives who then sold it to clients in the United States and other countries. The investigation began in 2006 when Service wildlife inspectors conducting an inspection "blitz" at the international mail facility in Los Angeles intercepted a package of elephant ivory that had been mailed to a U.S. business from Thailand labeled as toys. The U.S. defendant pleaded guilty to Federal charges.

Operation Scratchoff

This multi-year investigation, which was launched by the Service in New York in 2006, documented and disrupted the illegal activities of both international smugglers who were bringing ivory into

the country unlawfully from Africa and U.S. retailers involved in this black market trade. Over the course of the investigation, Service special agents documented smuggled ivory entering the United States from Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. (Some of these countries are “ivory producing,” while others are transit points.)

Most of the ivory smuggled by defendants in this case was shipped from Africa via mail parcel through John F. Kennedy International Airport. These shipments were accompanied by fraudulent shipping and customs documents identifying their contents as African wooden handicrafts or wooden statues. The ivory itself was painted to look like wood; covered with clay; or hidden inside wooden handicrafts (such as traditional African musical instruments).

Work on this investigation resulted in the arrest and conviction of eight individuals in the United States on felony smuggling and/or Lacey Act charges with final sentencing in 2010 and 2011. Prison terms for five of these defendants, which included a 33-month sentence for one, totaled more than seven years. Operation Scratchoff also led to four “collateral” arrests of persons for immigration violations; the arrest in January 2010 of an ivory supplier in Uganda by Ugandan authorities; and the identification of additional ivory trafficking suspects, including Victor Gordon.

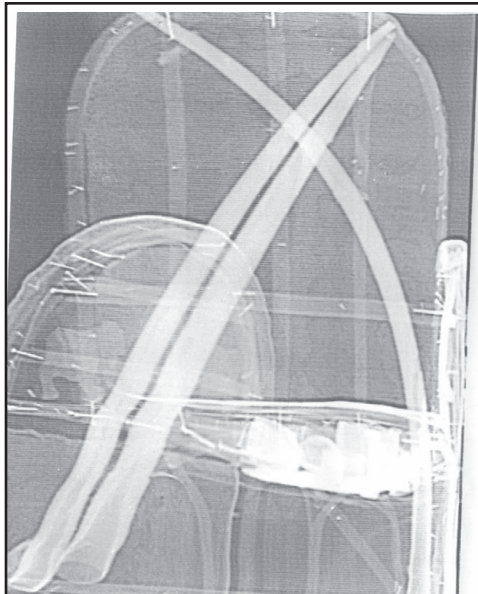
United States v. Tania Siyam

In 2008, Tania Siyam, a Canadian citizen, was sentenced to five years in prison and was ordered to pay a \$100,000 fine for illegally smuggling ivory from the West African country of Cameroon into the United States for sale here. Siyam operated art import and export businesses in Montréal, Canada, and Cameroon that were fronts for smuggling products from endangered and protected wildlife species, including raw elephant ivory. She ran a sophisticated smuggling operation that utilized local artists and craftsmen in Cameroon, operatives within international shipping companies, contacts in the illegal ivory trade, her business in Canada, and partners in three countries. Ivory purchased from her by undercover Service officers included “fresh” ivory from at least 24 elephants.

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Smuggled ivory detected on X-ray at Los Angeles International Airport in Operation Loxa.

United States v. Primitive Art Works & Owners

In 2006, Service special agents secured a 20-count criminal indictment against Primitive Art Works, a Chicago art gallery specializing in high-end exotic artifacts from around the world, and its two owners for smuggling elephant ivory and products made from other protected species into the United States. The Service seized well over 1,000 ivory

carvings and tusks from the defendants, who were asking as much as \$50,000 a piece for these items. The gallery and its owners first came to the attention of Service investigators when a newspaper article on home décor spotlighted their residence and included photos showing multiple items made from endangered species. Both owners pleaded guilty to wildlife violations later that year.

Operation Loxa

In 2001, Service enforcement officers in Los Angeles intercepted more than 250 pounds of smuggled African elephant ivory – the largest ivory seizure ever on the West Coast. The two shipments, which were smuggled in from Nigeria, were declared to Customs as handcrafted furniture. The ivory included whole tusks and pieces hidden inside furniture and concealed in beaded cloth. Four individuals were arrested and indicted for conspiracy to smuggle elephant ivory into the United States, and three were eventually convicted.

Inspections & Interdictions

Service wildlife inspectors are stationed at 38 major U.S. ports of entry to intercept smuggled wildlife and ensure that wildlife importers and exporters comply with declaration, permit and other requirements that help protect elephants and a host of other species. While they work closely with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, they are, in effect, the Nation’s frontline defense against illegal wildlife trade, both inbound and outbound.

Service seizures of unlawfully imported elephant ivory at ports of entry over the years have ranged from whole elephant tusks and large carvings to knife handles, jewelry, and tourist trinkets. With the demand for ivory surging in Asia, inspectors have also started intercepting ivory being smuggled out of the United States, making inspections of outbound passengers, freight, and mail parcels increasingly important to ensure that ivory held in the United States does not find its way to illegal markets outside of the country.

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