

# Wild appetite

Globalization is fuelling the international demand for plant and animal products, says Steven Broad, Executive Director of TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network.

Not surprisingly, globalization and the rapid economic development of many countries are having an immense impact on trade patterns, nowhere more so than in China. Home to a fifth of the world's population, ever more people are gaining the affluence and interest to purchase wildlife products from around the world.

Already the effects of consumer-led demand in China are being felt in the world's poorest economy—Africa, a continent rich in natural resources, yet lagging behind in economic development. In 2006, China's investment alone in Africa was estimated at US\$ 50 billion, and is forecast to reach US\$ 110 billion by 2010.

This huge Asian investment in Africa's resources has the potential to bring many positive benefits through increased wealth generation. But there is also the possibility it will lead to even greater exploitation of the continent's natural resources. Without proper control and governance, the danger is that foreign investors will take much and put little back in return.

Already we see evidence of this in the wildlife trade sector through the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), a database of worldwide ivory seizures. In 2007, the message from analysis of the ETIS data was clear: Asian-run organized crime syndicates based in Africa are increasingly implicated in an escalating illegal trade in elephant ivory. There is also evidence of commercial-scale illegal ivory operations involving Chinese nationals in 22 African Elephant Range States.

Asian links clearly exist in the activities of criminal syndicates in other spheres of trade in natural resources too. In May 2007, TRAFFIC launched a report into illegal logging which revealed that China's import statistics included ten times more timber from Tanzania than was documented by Tanzania's export records. TRAFFIC also reported an increase in uncontrolled timber harvesting in southern Tanzania, largely as a result of demand from Asia. A few days later, authorities in Mozambique seized 531 containers of illegal logs awaiting export—a staggering 11,000 cubic metres of timber. The logs had been sold by timber operators to Chinese companies and were awaiting export.

In January this year, President Koroma of Sierra Leone placed a temporary ban on timber exports to halt the damage to his nation's tropical forests and climate. He claimed that indiscriminate destruction by

Chinese loggers in the country's north was wreaking havoc and a restructuring of the timber industry was urgently needed.

The Chinese government has recognized the problem and has begun taking steps to encourage responsible trade by its citizens. It is understood to be sending delegations to its missions in Africa to create greater awareness of the seriousness of illegal ivory trade. In October 2007, China participated for the first time in a meeting of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership. Government delegates from ten Central African countries met representatives of selected European countries and the US to discuss sustainable forest management. With China now on a par with the European Union as a leading importer of Central African timber, its participation was indeed timely.

But much more needs to be done. There is a need for greater awareness amongst government policy makers, industry and consumers in China of the country's worldwide impact on wildlife resources. In recent years, China's CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) Management Authority has become very active in discussions on cross-border wildlife trade with its Asian neighbours and similar initiatives could be extended to key trade partners further afield. African governments

also need to harness the development and conservation benefits of new wildlife trade relations through sustainable trade policies, improving governance and strengthening law enforcement action and co-ordination.

However, it is important not to oversimplify matters and to remember the true nature of the global economy. Whilst there is undoubtedly a rapidly growing domestic demand for African wildlife products in Asia, the final consumers of such goods may be elsewhere. Skilled Asian carpenters turn African wood into beautifully crafted furniture, which is then re-exported to where it will find the highest prices—often in Europe and North America. As ever, it all comes back to the global economy where it is usually a matter of who can afford what, and who can supply the goods in demand at the best price.

More than ever before, actions to address conservation challenges arising from international wildlife trade need to be developed with a global perspective and with a close eye on the opportunities and threats posed by a shifting world economy. ■

Based on an article in TRAFFIC Bulletin 21(3). TRAFFIC is a joint programme of IUCN and WWF.

[www.traffic.org](http://www.traffic.org)

