

AALF Report

An ivory trafficker and his accomplice arrested in Lambaréné

An ivory trafficker was arrested in the night of the 9th of November in the act of selling 5 elephant tusks. The said trafficker is a dealer in the “meat” trade at Débarcadère d'Isaac. His accomplice, a taxi driver, facilitated the ferrying of the ivory tusks. The operation was carried out by the Judicial Police with the collaboration of Water and Forestry and Conservation Justice, an NGO.

Two ivory traffickers arrested in Libreville

On the 13th of November 2012, after lengthy investigations, two ivory traffickers were arrested with 40 kg of ivory. One of them is of Cameroonian nationality and the other is of Senegalese nationality. This is an important network that organises the buying of ivory coming in from all over the country for resale to diverse exporters who export to China, West Africa and to other destinations where the prices are higher. This is a very lucrative business because the prices in some countries are 5 to 10 times higher than in Gabon. This is why many foreigners clandestinely transport these products to other destinations. It should be highlighted that the traffickers were arrested in a local hotel in the act of selling. Their own car was with them when they were arrested. The Cameroonian manages a well-known sculpting workshop and just recently invested in a property at Cap Estérias.

Strengthening wildlife products trafficking controls at the airport

The Gabonese customs in collaboration with Water and Forestry and the high authority at the Libreville airport carried out an operation with the assistance of Conservation Justice, an NGO. The goal of this initiative called HOPE and which is part of the World Customs Organisation GAPIN programme is to strengthen controls and law enforcement at the borders on the trafficking of protected wildlife species. During the period from 23 to 31 October 2012, about 15 passengers were stopped at the Libreville airport and were found red handed in possession and exportation of such products. They were trying to illicitly transport the products overseas. Similar operations were organised all over the planet and Gabon showed effectiveness and motivation.

It is now time for conclusions. First of all, organisation between the different state structures was exemplary and effective as the results obtained show.

A total of over 40 kg of shark fins, 32 bracelets, 2 necklaces, 8 hankos (Japanese or Chinese seals), 2 pieces of fabrics, 12 pendants and 3 cigarettes packets made of ivory as well as a bag of pangolin scales, 6 leopard teeth and 31 hippocampus (sea horse) were confiscated. Some of these products do not have a big value in Gabon but are widely sought after in other markets, mainly in China. Moreover, during the same period, Hong Kong customs officials had a spectacular result with the seizure of 4 tons of ivory coming from Africa! This represents a veritable pillage of the continent's natural heritage and thus the necessity to strengthen controls and legislation. And also, the vast majority of persons arrested are of Chinese nationality, confirming their interests in products derived from wildlife species that are for the most part rare and protected.

In addition to the national law that stipulates fines of up to 10 million F CFA and imprisonment terms of up to 6 months for trafficking in wildlife products, the CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora or the Washington Convention) and eventual

export authorisations were never respected. Moreover, some exporters use false and illegal authorisations and certificates to dupe custom controls and to avoid the paying of stipulated taxes to the State. This is particularly the case with products derived from fishing such as shark fins.

Remarks

Despite the energy put in by the country's authorities to save the natural heritage, traffickers have not stopped developing strategies and complicities to profit from products derived from totally protected species. The prices of these products have exploded, notably, because of their scarcity and the high demand in the international market, mainly in Asia. This present case once more confirms the magnitude of ivory trafficking in the country and also the efforts made by the Forces of law and order to fight this scourge. In fact, ivory trafficking is orchestrated by mafia-like networks that create serious insecurity. The crossroads town of Lambaréné that is cut through by River Ogooué needs a particular attention considering the many roads that could be used by those who are involved in wildlife trafficking. Their activity includes money laundering and arms and ammunition trafficking also, without which the slaughtering of elephants would not have been possible. Drug trafficking and even human organ trafficking cases have already been linked to ivory trafficking.

It should be recalled that the hunting, capture, possession, transportation and sale of totally protected species is forbidden and offences concerning these species are punishable with an imprisonment term of 3 to 6 months and a fine of from 100 000 to 10 million francs. The arrested traffickers shall therefore answer to the charges brought against them in front of the Gabonese Justice.

Lastly, let us highlight that the forestry code is under revision and that sanctions in the wildlife domain could be made more severe. This seems necessary considering the magnitude of trafficking and this shall ensure the harmonisation of penalties applied by neighbouring countries within the domain where the maximum prison terms are much higher (5 years in Congo and 3 years in Cameroon).