Record ivory seizures point to trafficking rise

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Jumbo-sized ivory seizures have reached record highs this year. This might be bad news for elephants, indicating a rise in poaching, or it could be a sign of better enforcement, according to a report released this week at the African Elephant Summit in Gaborone, Botswana.

The summit was convened to galvanise action against poaching. Questions around the bumper seizures won't be resolved until all the information is in next year.

So far this year there have been 18 seizures classified as large, meaning they exceed 500 kilograms. Totalling 41.5 tonnes, this year's haul from large seizures is already higher than the previous record of almost 35 tonnes in 2011. "This is the largest volume from large-scale seizures we have seen in the past 25 years," says Tom Milliken of TRAFFIC UK, the Cambridge-based organisation that collates the data. This year's average haul is about 2.4 tonnes, he says, "and that's a higher level than we have seen before".

Another ominous trend, says Milliken, is that two-thirds of the large seizures in 2013 were from container ships, rather than air or land transport. Typically, less than 5 per cent of shipping containers are inspected, making these shipments particularly difficult to detect.

Countries like Uganda have stepped up enforcement, Milliken says, and Tanzania has made it a higher priority. But he believes the size of the seizures points to increases in illegal trafficking as the most likely explanation. "This has all the hallmarks of organised crime, so it's a hugely worrying situation," Milliken says.

To counter that, delegates at the meeting agreed 14 new measures to fight trafficking, including one that could enlist vital new support against the organised-crime networks suspected of coming to dominate the ivory trade. By redefining wildlife trafficking as a "serious crime", the African range states attending the summit should be entitled to support through the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, including stronger enforcement of asset seizure and forfeiture, extradition of suspects, mutual legal help and other measures designed to hold criminals accountable.