

China steps up efforts to combat ivory smuggling

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Status symbols for China's middle class (*Image: Li Xin/Rex*)

It was a small but important step. This week, China publicly crushed 6.2 tonnes of seized ivory tusks and trinkets, at a ceremony in Dongguan.

The headline-grabbing haul came from about 700 slaughtered elephants. That is a fraction of the estimated 22,000 animals killed annually in Africa, more than half of which [end up in the Chinese market](#).

The Chinese authorities are now responding to international pressure to act against the illegal trade, says Tom Milliken of [TRAFFIC](#) in Cambridge, UK, which monitors the wildlife trade. Last year, eight Chinese smugglers were imprisoned for up to 15 years. And this week's ivory crushing had wide coverage in Chinese media.

"The ivory destroyed included Chinese figurines and sculpture, Buddhist rosaries and Canton magic balls," says Milliken. "The images will have a powerful impact in a country where the government still shapes public opinion."

They need to. China has a voracious demand for carved ivory products, which are viewed as high-value status symbols by its growing middle class. As a result, [elephant poaching in Africa](#) is currently at a 20-year high, reversing the downward trend that followed a worldwide ban on the ivory trade introduced in 1989 by the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

Some of its trade is legal, including items made from 62 tonnes of poached ivory that had been seized by African law enforcers and that China, sanctioned by CITES, bought in 2008. Opinion is divided over whether that purchase undermined the illegal market or provided a cover for its expansion.