

China destroys six tons of ivory in landmark move

By Kelvin M. Chan
The Associated Press

DONGGUAN, China — China destroyed about six tons of illegal ivory from its stockpile in an unprecedented move wildlife groups say shows growing concern about the black market trade by authorities in the world's biggest market for elephant tusks.

Authorities displayed a pile of ornaments, carvings, and tusks to reporters, diplomats, and conservationists before feeding them into two crushing machines. Tusks that were too long were cut up into smaller chunks by workers with circular saws before they could be pulverized.

Forestry and customs officials organized what they said was the country's first large-scale ivory destruction in Dongguan in southern Guangdong province, where much of China's ivory trade is focused.

Conservation groups say China is the world's biggest market for ivory.

Demand is fuelled by rapid growth in the world's second biggest economy, which has created a vast middle class with the spending power to buy ivory carvings prized as status symbols.

Ivory can fetch up to \$2,000 per kilogram on the black market, earning it the



nickname "white gold."

Officials said the 6.1 metric tons of ivory destroyed was just a portion of the illegal ivory held by China, though they wouldn't disclose how big the country's total stockpile is. The destroyed ivory came from shipments from Africa intercepted by customs officers as well as from carving factories and shops in China.

China is following other countries that

have destroyed their ivory stocks in the past year.

In June, the Philippines burned and crushed more than five tons of ivory worth an estimated \$10 million confiscated since 2009, becoming the first Asian country to do so. In November, the United States destroyed six tons of ivory seized over 25 years. Gabon burned nearly five tons in 2012.

ILLEGAL IVORY. Workers, background, destroy confiscated ivory in Dongguan, southern Guangdong province, China. China destroyed about six tons of illegal ivory from its stockpile in an unprecedented move wildlife groups say shows growing concern about the black market trade by authorities in the world's biggest market for elephant tusks. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

The United States, which sent officials to the ivory destruction, commended China. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said such actions "will send a powerful message to wildlife poachers and traffickers and to the consumers of illegal wildlife products."

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) said the destruction was a powerful symbolic act that shows that the Chinese government is "concerned about the toll ivory trafficking is taking on elephant populations, as well as the other threats to regional security that arise in connection with wildlife crime."

Ivory destruction in countries along the trade chain "clearly tells consumers everywhere that ivory buying is unethical and wrong," IFAW CEO Azzedine Downs, who attended the event, said in a statement. IFAW estimates that more than 35,000 elephants were killed last year by poachers for ivory.



10-HOUR INFERNO. Firefighters fortify a wood building while fire ravages ancient Dukezong town in Shangri-La county, in southwestern China's Yunnan province. The 10-hour inferno razed the ancient Tibetan town in the province that is popular with tourists, burning down hundreds of buildings after fire engines failed to get onto the narrow streets, according to state media and witnesses. (AP Photo)

Fire destroys ancient Tibetan town in southwest China

By Didi Tang
The Associated Press

BEIJING — A fire that raged for nearly 10 hours razed an ancient Tibetan town in southwest China that is popular with tourists, burning down hundreds of buildings after fire engines failed to get onto the narrow streets, according to state media and witnesses.

There was no immediate report of any casualties, and the cause of the fire was not yet known. State media, citing local authorities, said the blaze started in a guesthouse and was ruled accidental.

The fire broke out at about 1:30am on January 11 in the ancient Tibetan quarter of Dukezong, which dates back more than 1,000 years and is known for its preserved cobbled streets, ancient structures, and Tibetan culture. Dukezong is part of scenic Shangri-La county in Deqen prefecture.

Once called Gyaitang Zong, the county renamed itself Shangri-La in 2001, hoping to draw tourists by the reference to the mythical Himalayan land described in James Hilton's 1933 novel. Like hundreds of Chinese cities and counties, Shangri-La renovated its old neighborhood, Dukezong, turning it into a tourist attraction filled with shops and guesthouses.

Photos and video footage showed

Dukezong and its labyrinth of houses engulfed in flames that turned the night sky red.

The fire destroyed about 242 houses and shops in Dukezong, dislocated more than 2,600 people, and torched many historic artifacts, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

He Yu, a resident, said she woke to loud, explosion-like sounds to find the old town on fire.

"The fire was huge," she said. "The wind was blowing hard, and the air was dry. I was scared because my home is a little distance away from the ancient town. It kept burning, and the firefighters were there, but there was little they could do because they could not get the fire engines onto the old town's narrow streets."

With fire engines kept out, local residents lined up to pass buckets of water to combat the fire, the Deqen prefecture government said.

Most of Dukezong's buildings are made of wood and the fire spread easily because of dry weather, state-run China Central Television said.

More than 2,000 firefighters, soldiers, police, local officials, and volunteers responded to the blaze and brought it under control at around 11:00am, the Shangri-La county government said.

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