



Surge in the illegal trade of giant clam shells points to potential nexus with organised crime, new report suggests

New report by the Wildlife Justice Commission raises concerns on giant clam shells being used as a substitute for elephant ivory, which may perpetuate the demand and increase pressure on wild elephant populations

The Hague, the Netherlands, 6 October 2021 – The Wildlife Justice Commission has released today a [new report](#) that highlights the significant volume of giant clam shells seizures in the Philippines and China during the past three years as an emerging and concerning trend, given the potential involvement of organised crime and the current lack of insight into this trade, which is crucially important to understand all potential criminal factors at play.

The report *Giant clam shells, ivory, and organised crime: Analysis of a potential new nexus* examines the rapid rise of this illegal trade since 2019 and raises concerns about giant clam shells being used as a substitute for elephant ivory by the carving industry and markets in Asia. This demand for ivory products increases the pressure on vulnerable giant clam populations and may perpetuate the demand for elephant ivory, sustaining the ongoing threat to wild elephant populations.

Since China's 2017 ban on the domestic elephant ivory trade, and subsequent enforcement, giant clam shells are an increasingly popular ivory alternative, as they resemble elephant ivory when carved and are used to make similar products, such as jewellery and ornaments. These factors are likely to have contributed to the overexploitation and rapid decline of giant clam populations throughout many of their natural habitats. In fact, about half of the wild populations of the world's largest giant clam species is either severely decimated or locally extinct at some sites.

In 2021, the Wildlife Justice Commission identified that seizures of giant clam shells had increased in frequency and volume in the Philippines, following a series of shell seizures in a relatively short period of time (less than three years), mostly from stockpiles of product at coastal locations. Since 2019, there have been 13 seizures of giant clams, with a combined weight of 120,639 tonnes and a total estimated value of more than USD 85 million. The frequency and scale of these seizures, along with the structured coordination, financing and logistics required to collect and transport such vast quantities of product, indicates the possible involvement of organised crime.

Conversely, there have been very few seizures of giant clams outside of the Philippines, suggesting smuggling is conducted with impunity. Reported seizures in China [2] of giant clam shells with other wildlife products, most prominently marine products, could also point to a potential convergence in the supply chain for marine products, such as source locations and/or smuggling routes.





China is the primary suspected destination of the giant clam shell shipments from the Philippines, while Japan could be a potential secondary location of concern. However, direct links have yet to be identified between the Philippine seizures and either of these countries. The report identifies a series of intelligence gaps on the smuggling of giant clam shells that must be addressed (such as the routes, criminal drivers and enabling factors and the extent of the illegal retail market in China, amongst others) in order to effectively understand the threat posed by this trade, which will enable a more effective law enforcement response to it.

Olivia Swaak-Goldman, Wildlife Justice Commission Executive Director, said:

“We urge the governments of China, Japan and the Philippines to consider the findings of our report and any potential association to transnational organised crime given the use of giant clams as an alternative to elephant ivory. The ongoing trade of giant clam shells is putting increasing pressure on an already vulnerable species, and requires that further intelligence gathering and investigations are conducted to address current intelligence gaps and obtain a better understanding of this criminality, to assess the level of threat it poses and to effectively tackle it.”

The Wildlife Justice Commission continues to gather intelligence and conduct its own analysis and investigations to assess further developments of this criminality. This report is the first of a two-part series that the Wildlife Justice Commission is publishing into the use of alternative ivory-like products as a substitute for elephant ivory. The second report is due for publication at the end of October 2021.

Notes to editors:

[1] All giant clam species are listed in Appendix II under CITES and are protected by national legislation in most range countries. Despite these protections, large-scale poaching and illegal trade of giant clams continue to pose a serious threat.

[2] The 46 reported seizures in China (January 2016 - July 2021) indicate a high rate of convergence of giant clam smuggling and trade alongside other wildlife species. 17% involved carved clam shell products seized along with carved elephant ivory and other types of ivory or ivory-like products, although the most frequent convergence observed in the seizures was with other marine products. This convergence could suggest that the same criminal groups are involved in the illegal trade of both commodity types in China.

The [Wildlife Justice Commission](#) is a non-profit organisation based in The Hague, the Netherlands, and established in March 2015 with the mission to disrupt and help dismantle transnational criminal networks trading in wildlife, timber and fish. We do this by collecting evidence and turning it into accountability.

