Undocumented ivory for sale in New Bedford

Investigation reveals the need for a state law to combat the trade in elephant ivory

During an undercover investigation in May 2019, the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International found several elephant ivory items for sale in New Bedford at the New Bedford Whaling Museum’s Annual Nautical Antiques Show. Massachusetts has no state law strictly prohibiting intrastate trade in ivory and rhino horn. Legislation has been introduced in the Massachusetts General Court that would prohibit sales of certain ivory and rhino horn products within the state.

The investigator found elephant ivory products for sale by five sellers at the show:

- F & F Inc., of Fall River, Massachusetts, offering for sale two elephant ivory canisters made by F & F, and elephant ivory-handled canes
- Richard’s Antiques and Art, of Barrington, Rhode Island, offering for sale a wood and elephant ivory pocket watch stand
- Nantucket Antiques Depot, of Nantucket, Massachusetts, offering for sale elephant ivory-handled canes
- White’s Nautical Antiques, of North Yarmouth, Maine, offering for sale several small elephant ivory trinkets, including miniature ivory dollhouse furniture
- Sydnas Sloot Woodworking Tool and Nautical Antiques, of Westport, Massachusetts, offering for sale an assortment of small elephant ivory tools and miscellaneous pieces

When asked by the investigator, these sellers were unable to produce documentation to verify the age or origin of the ivory items. Without such documentation, it is impossible to know whether items were imported in violation of federal law. The federal Endangered Species Act prohibits the interstate sale and interstate transport in the course of commercial activity involving endangered and threatened species, including Asian and African elephants with limited exceptions.

The New Bedford Whaling Museum resides in the state legislative districts of Senator Mark Montigny and Representative Antonio Cabral.
This current investigation reinforces findings from previous investigations in Massachusetts. A 2017 investigation by the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International found nearly 700 ivory items for sale by 64 vendors in Massachusetts stores, an auction, outdoor markets and an antique festival, including locations in New Bedford. In this previous investigation:

- One seller offered tips for smuggling ivory out of the country. At Acushnet River Antiques, four absentee vendors had ivory for sale. An employee said she knew no details about the items but told the investigator that Chinese citizens buy Asian ivory items there and ship them back to China. The clerk said this not a problem if the items are packed in a suitcase and not mentioned to customs agents.
- At New Bedford Antiques at the Cove, one vendor had multiple confirmed ivory items for sale including a large, elaborate figurine; another vendor had a few large items for sale that appeared to be made out of ivory. At another vendor, a clerk would confirm only that ivory was for sale, but didn’t know any details about the provenance of the ivory.
- At New Bedford Antiques Center, one vendor had a figurine that appeared to be made of ivory for sale. A clerk called the seller, who confirmed the item was ivory but knew no details about the item and had no documentation related to the item.
- At Marion Antiques in Marion, Massachusetts, the store owner showed an investigator approximately a dozen small ivory items for sale and said she’d bought the items from the New Bedford Whaling Museum. The store owner told the investigator that the museum sells its surplus to the store.

A 2015 report by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) of the U.S. ivory market that surveyed Craigslist listings identified Boston, Massachusetts as one of the top five markets among all locations surveyed (45 items identified over a five-day survey).

In May 2015, a business owner in Concord, Massachusetts pleaded guilty to conspiring with a transnational wildlife trafficking ring and smuggling ivory and rhino horn products from the U.S. to China, with the value of the shipped goods exceeding $700,000. The owner was also coaching an alleged co-conspirator on ways to ship items with minimal chances of detection by customs inspectors.

A Boston Globe investigative report in 2015 found “brisk trade in illicit ivory” in Massachusetts.

A Philadelphia antique dealer, Victor Gordon, was sentenced to 30 years in prison in 2014 for trafficking elephant ivory from West Africa into the U.S. for decades. He sold his illegal ivory to buyers in many states, including in Massachusetts.

Legislation in the Massachusetts General Court, S.496/H.772 filed by Senator Jason Lewis and Representative Lori Ehrlich, will ensure that Massachusetts does not provide a local market facilitating trade in illegally-acquired ivory and rhino horns by restricting the trade of ivory and rhino horn within the state. Ten states – New York, New Jersey, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, New Hampshire, Illinois and Minnesota – have enacted similar measures in recent years.

The United States is among the world’s largest markets for illegal wildlife goods, including elephant ivory and rhino horn. The illegal wildlife trade is a lucrative, multi-billion-dollar enterprise, fueling transnational crime and incentivizing the cruel killing of animals for their parts.

Legal ivory marketplaces provide an opportunity for illegal ivory to flourish because of the ease of mixing the two. Enforcement efforts are often hampered by a lack of resources or the difficulty of visually distinguishing illegal ivory from legally acquired ivory.

In 2016, the Great Elephant Census revealed a staggering 30% loss of African savannah elephants between 2007 and 2014 in 15 of the 18 countries surveyed, primarily due to poaching. More than 1,000 rhinos were poached in Africa in 2018, with only 29,000 remaining in the wild worldwide.

Media downloads of videos and photos of the investigation are available via the HSUS.