

Beat: Health

Tanzanian police seize more than 700 elephant tusk pieces

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USPA News - Police in Tanzania have uncovered a haul of more than 700 pieces of elephant tusk after raiding a house belonging to Chinese nationals, police and government officials said on Sunday, as wildlife experts have warned that the country's elephant population could be wiped out by the end of the decade. The discovery was made on Saturday at a house in Dar es Salaam, the country's largest city, and represents one of the country's biggest seizures of its kind in recent years.

Information from Operation Tokomeza - which aims to combat poaching and illegal ivory trade in the country - led to the house, where three Chinese citizens were taken into custody. The pieces of elephant tusk were found hidden under snail shells and mixed with garlic in an attempt to avoid detection. Upon examination of the contents, officers found more than 700 pieces of raw ivory tusks, weighing about 1,800 kilograms (3,970 pounds), which are believed to be from an estimated 200 slaughtered elephants. Natural Resources and Tourism Minister Khamis Kagasheki said the suspects used a minibus using different license plates to transport the ivory during nighttime operations. Officers seized a number of items as evidence at the house, including a weighing unit, fresh garlic onions and sacks of snail shells, but the suspects denied involvement and said "friends" were responsible for the ivory. According to the latest figures, poachers kill an estimated 28 elephants every day in Tanzania, or about 850 every month. The number of elephants in the country has dropped from 130,000 in 2002 to 109,000 in 2009, and wildlife experts have warned that the entire population could be wiped out by 2020 if the poaching continues. In October 2012, more than 1,200 pieces of ivory tusk worth an estimated \$26.7 million were confiscated in Hong Kong after being smuggled in containers from Tanzania, making it the region's largest ever seizure of products from endangered species. It was followed weeks later by the discovery of 214 elephant tusks in Dar es Salaam.

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