

State authorities seize hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of illicit ivory in Los Angeles County

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A California Department of Fish and Wildlife investigator inspects a sculpture for ivory at a Los Angeles store this week. (California of Department of Fish and Wildlife)

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Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of illicit ivory was seized from shops in Los Angeles County this week as part of authorities' effort to enforce a law that bans the sale of the precious material.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife agents on Wednesday and Thursday inspected 10 shops for illegal ivory in the Los Angeles County area, including sites in Beverly Hills, Pomona and Long Beach.

The enforcement marked a step forward for the agency in halting the serious issue of wildlife trafficking, said Lt. Chris Stoops, a spokesman for the California Fish and Wildlife's law enforcement division.

"This is our active approach to enforcing this law and making it clear that illegal trafficking of animals in California won't be tolerated," he said.

Officials found dozens of illegal ivory items such as combs, brushes and knife handles. Larger pieces included marble and bronze sculptures with ivory inlays.

Ivory has long been lauded by some as an exotic status symbol, and California legislators in 2015 enacted a law making it more difficult to sell and purchase the illicit material.

Assembly Bill 96 closed a loophole in state law that allowed some elephant ivory to be bought and sold in California as long as it was originally obtained before 1977. The law, which became effective in July 2016, imposed a near-total ban on the commercial trading of African elephant ivory, as well as teeth or tusks from hippopotamuses, mammoths, mastodons, walruses, warthogs, whales and narwhals.

Fish and Wildlife officials gave business owners about six months to adjust to the new rules, and now they're beginning to crack down, Stoops said.

"The grace time has seen its light," he said. "Most people know or should now know about the law."

The more stringent regulations mean that people caught selling, buying, importing or possessing ivory with an intent to sell face a misdemeanor charge with fines that range between \$1,000 and \$40,000 for a first offense depending on the value of the ivory. They also can face jail time, according to the law.

Fish and Wildlife officials plan to compile reports on the businesses where they found ivory this week and forward them to each shop's local district attorney's office, which will determine whether to file charges, Stoots said.

He declined to name the businesses inspected.

Animal poaching is a global issue that officials have been working for decades to combat as populations of elephants and other mammals targeted for their teeth and tusks decline. Despite public awareness campaigns and international enforcement, it continues to be a critical problem, officials say.

[A 2015 report](#) commissioned by the National Resources Defense Council, which investigated illegal African ivory trafficking, found that as much as 90% of the ivory examined in Los Angeles markets and stores was illegal under state law.

Daniel Stiles, who wrote the report, investigated more than 100 vendors in Los Angeles and the Bay Area in March and April 2015 and examined more than 1,250 items.

Stiles concluded that illegal ivory trade remains a prevalent problem statewide and must be addressed.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife officials agree.

"The big issue for us is we're taking a stand against wildlife trafficking on a global perspective," Stoots said. "What we can control is what's going on here in California."