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Alaska natives concerned after Etsy bans ivory products

WASILLA, AK - Ivory may be legal for some Alaskans to carve and sell, but the rest of the world, including some lower 48 states, have banned or are debating a ban of any ivory products being sold. These restrictions could hit Alaska native artists especially hard.

Three states have banned sales of all ivory within their borders and recently Etsy banned all sales of products from its website, legal or not. But Alaska native populations are not only allowed to hunt walrus but also sell or trade for their tusks to other natives, like Athabaskan Ivory Carver Leonard Savage. He claims the confusion over what's legal and no legal in the ivory trade is threatening his ability to make a living.

"You know I've done this probably longer than you've been alive I started when I was 15 and 16 years old and you know it was a good way to make a living raised my kids with it. I have lots to do, it never ends," said Savage.

The work may never end, but his ability to sell his products on Etsy did earlier this week when the website added ivory to their list of prohibited items.

In a statement to the Associated press, Etsy said: "We have updated our policies to reflect the increasingly global nature of our business and our community. With increased global regulation surrounding ivory and animal products, we can no longer accommodate such products produced by Native Alaskans in our marketplace."

Savage disagrees complete with the new policy and fears that more pressure to ban ivory, legal or not, will eventually do more damage to a native ivory art industry struggling to stay afloat.

"They don't realize that they're hurting a lot of people that do this legitimately and for a good reason. You know what I do helps a lot of people when I buy my tusks from people in St. Lawrence Isle people in Gambell and Savoonga and they, you know, in turn they are able to go and buy gasoline and things they can't find out there in the middle of nowhere. To me it's wrong I mean they have no idea what happens up here with the Walrus and how it's hunted and what it's used for," said Savage.

According to the Alaska Department of Law Consumer Protection Unit:

Any item produced after 1935 that is marketed with terms like "Indian," "Native American," or "Alaska Native" must have been made by a member of a state or federally-recognized tribe or a certified non-member Indian artisan. That's the law.

A certified Indian artisan is an individual certified by the governing body of the tribe of his or her descent as a non-member Indian artisan.

That's why Alaska Republican Senator Dan Sullivan responded to Etsys ban by saying: "Your policy fails to recognize that Alaska Natives are explicitly authorized under federal laws, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, to work with and sell walrus ivory, whale tooth and bone, and other non-elephant ivory."

Savage said he's tried carving some products using birch trees and was able to fashion various wooden carvings like an intricate nativity scene. But birch products don't pull in as much money Savage said the nativity scene birch carving might get him \$20-\$25 but a smaller ivory carving of say a small single small animal can get him as much as \$200 or more, a big difference in dollars especially when it's his main source of income.