

**HD** **Missing Uwa Ivory**

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Dec 02, 2014 (The Independent/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX) -- Conservationists ask Government for policy on disposal of impounded ivory

Since news of the missing ivory from the Uganda Wildlife Authority's strong room broke in mid-November, there are several questions that have remained unanswered: Why doesn't the government have a policy on handling ivory confiscated in Uganda? How much ivory has been confiscated by the government over several decades? And for how long will Uganda keep the ivory stockpile?

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The recent revelation of the missing ivory estimated to be weighing up to 1.3 tonnes and valued at about Shs 3 billion has also showed the existence of suspicion and mistrust as well as a lack of coordination amongst key government agencies such as UWA, Police, the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) and court in handling the very much sought after elephant tusks.

For example, when the government committed last year to come up with ivory action plans during the 16th CITES COP hosted in Bangkok, conducting regular stock taking of wildlife species, including trophies was one of them.

This according to the now suspended Andrew Seguya, the executive director of UWA, was the reason as to why he ordered the September count of the ivory--the second time the agency has carried out the exercise since 2012.

But when Seguya wrote to Gen. Kale Kayihura, the Inspector General of Police in the middle of 2014 asking him for permission to transfer all the impounded ivory from the stores of the Aviation Police at Entebbe Airport to UWA's headquarters at Plot 7, Kira Road, Kamwokya, the airport security commandant was uncomfortable about the request.

The commandant wondered why the police should release the impounded ivory when suspects had not been arrested; and secondly, when the confiscated ivory had not been tendered in court as exhibit.

The commandant argued that much as they did not mind UWA keeping the ivory, it would be wrong to take the tusks to another store because they were not sure whether the exhibits would not be compromised.

It is at that point the security organs wondered why Seguya wanted the exhibits at UWA.

"We started raising concerns about the safety of all the impounded ivory. We were wondering whether all the exhibits and trophies that had already been tendered in court and those under UWA's custody were actually there," said Asan Kasingye, the Assistant Inspector General of Police and director Interpol and international relations.

Kasingye told The Independent recently that it did not surprise him when a 'whistle blower' from UWA released information about missing ivory from UWA's strong room.

But UWA senior officials have since argued that it was in fact the agency's intelligence unit "while on routine checkup that discovered some irregularities in the management of the store where impounded ivory is kept."

According to a statement published on Nov. 14 in the local media, UWA immediately set up an internal investigation team to undertake a preliminary inquiry into the scam, to verify the physical stocks of ivory against the records, and if need be, establish the reasons and circumstances of discrepancy.

The missing 1,335 kilograms of ivory is part of the consignment collected over the last 25 years from both dead Ugandan elephants and impounded ivory from neighbouring countries such as Tanzania.

Seguya says there is no record of confiscated ivory before 1990 since there was no formal handover of ivory records to UWA at its inception in 1996.

Seguya told The Independent on Nov. 24 that the September stock taking was yet to be concluded when details of missing ivory were leaked to the media. He expects official results at the end of November which will swiftly be followed by analysis and required action taken.

How about the recent scandal in his backyard that has seen the suspension of five of his junior staff?

Seguya who was in Australia when news of the missing ivory at UWA first got published says what has been going on in the past two weeks is nothing but 'politics at play.'

"There are six people in between the executive director's office and the strong room where ivory is kept. How is it possible that when ivory goes missing, it is the UWA executive director who is liable?" he said while scoffing at suggestions that he too should resign.

Seguya insists it is UWA that confiscated the ivory, and it is UWA that put in place mechanisms for stores management and the same management that instituted the stocktaking exercise.

"To hijack the matter and call for the disbandment of management and UWA as an institution is absurd," he said.

"Even if the investigation establishes that ivory has been lost from the store through corrupt tendencies of UWA staff, this is not justification to condemn the whole institution and its management."

"The Executive Director is certainly not the ivory storekeeper and the question should be whether they are taking action, not why they are not stepping down."

Similar cases in East Africa:

UWA's missing ivory comes just a month after a UK-based conservation agency, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)--implicated the Tanzanian government and security officials in helping a high-profile Chinese delegation to buy and ship out a huge consignment of Ivory during the visit of China's president to Tanzania in March, 2013.

The Chinese government spokesperson Hong Lei reacted angrily calling the allegation 'groundless,' adding that China has consistently opposed poaching and has sought to crack down on ivory smuggling.

EIA's report: "Vanishing Point: Criminality, Corruption and the Devastation of Tanzania's Elephants," gave details of how Chinese diplomats and military personnel jumped at the opportunity of Xi Jinping's visit to Tanzania and colluded with local officials and Chinese crime syndicates to send illegal ivory to China, massacring elephant population in the process.

Records from global conservation agencies show that China remains the largest importer of poached ivory thanks to its voracious hunger for the tusks.

China is remembered for lobbying hard and getting permission in 2008 from CITES to buy up to 68,000 kgs of ivory from Africa.

Back then, China argued that the one-off sale would demoralize poachers and thus protect elephant herds. But the one off sale has instead led to a tripling of ivory prices in the last four years according to Save Elephants, an international conservation agency.

Tanzania has in recent times become the largest supplier of poached ivory and has in the process lost more elephants to poaching than any other country in the world. The report noted that about 10,000 elephants were killed in Tanzania by poachers last year.

Seguya, however, says Uganda has done a lot in the past decade to protect its elephants.

When Uganda was tasked last year during a CITES conference alongside seven other notorious states to come up with ivory action plans aimed at combating illegal ivory trade within a period of one year, Uganda immediately submitted its national ivory action plan. The government pledged to address five key areas including amending its Wildlife Act to provide for stiffer penalties, and raising awareness within the general public, judiciary, customs and other enforcement agencies on the importance of wildlife conservation and the management of the existing ivory stockpile.

Uganda's stockpiled ivory:

However, one area that is yet to be adequately addressed in accordance with Uganda's ivory action plan is the proper management of the ivory stockpile.

This was particularly identified as an area of weakness as Uganda's ivory record management and storage did not meet the CITES standards.

Seguya says this is the reason Uganda has invited experts from the International Wildlife Conservation and Management Consortium (IWCM) who have already had two missions to Uganda to advise on the proper management of the country's national stockpile.

UWA is also continuing to work with development partners and donors to support the establishment and management of the national ivory stockpile for Uganda.

However, some experts insist a more long lasting solution should be found for the impounded ivory.

They say stockpiles of ivory are vulnerable to theft and custodians who oversee quantities of ivory cannot entirely be trusted and confiscated ivory cannot be safely held in stockpile forever.

The best way to control illegal ivory trade, they say, is to immediately destroy it each time it is intercepted.

Kasingye wants policy makers to quickly come up with a policy of how ivory intercepted within the borders of Uganda should be handled.

"We have noted that our borders, especially Entebbe International Airport is being used and this is not about one kilogram of bungs."

"How can a consignment of 1000kg go through Entebbe Airport when we have scanners? That means that we need to understand and purge this vice," said Kasingye.

He says the UWA scandal will help the government to go behind the scenes and learn about the trail of ivory.

In October, Andrew Ndungutse, the manager cargo, at Entebbe Handling Services (ENHAS) told a **group** of conservationists and security officials during a symposium on illegal ivory trade of how there have been four interceptions of ivory consignments at the airport in recent months, each weighing more than a tonne.

He too suggested government should make the business of ivory risky, arguing that burning the ivory on **site** when confiscated would send a tough message to the criminal gangs.

Policy on disposal of ivory:

Kasingye is in support of this idea as a control measure.

"It could be disposed of in the way Kenya did when President Mwai Kibaki torched the tusks in broad daylight in 2011," he says.

In July, 2011, then President Mwai Kibaki set fire to more than 5000 kilogrammes of elephant ivory worth Shs 45 billion in an attempt to stem growth of illegal trade. This was a follow up on a similar exercise Kenya carried out in 1989.

Kasingye told The Independent on Nov. 17 that to get to the bottom of the ivory scam; a comprehensive investigation should be commissioned since no one knows how much ivory is under the custody of various government agencies, including UWA.

The inquiry should be a joint composite investigation involving all the law enforcement agencies and this team should be set up by a ministerial policy instruction and a report be made within a specific period of time so that Ugandans can know who did what and who didn't do what.

"We also need to understand how this ivory is being kept and we need to know why this ivory is not disposed of."

"We need to have a proper policy on all these agencies [airport, police, DPP, Court, Interpol, ISO, CID, UWA, customs]. Who does what?"

"If it is ivory, what is the policy of its storage? If there are trophies, how long do you need to store?"

Kasingye also wants the policy to clearly stipulate how the exhibits should be analyzed, kept, tendered in court as exhibits and who is supposed to order for the disposal and what kind of disposal it is about.

"For example there is ivory that has been intercepted in Uganda from the neighbouring countries but whose ivory is it anyway?"

William Olupot, the director of Nature and Livelihoods, a local conservation agency also adds that the fiasco surrounding illegal ivory will not go away unless the government develops a policy on how to handle impounded ivory and other wildlife trophies.

"There has been a tendency from the public to think that once the ivory is intercepted from criminal gangs, it is safe with the government agencies, as it turns out this is not the case," Olupot says.

"When the policy is in place then it becomes easier to hold accountable the people who are supposed to be responsible for the custody of the ivory."

Seguya says since the ivory stockpile has brought problems, he too is in support of torching the confiscated ivory.

He also wants the rage with which Ugandans have reacted towards the missing ivory to be transferred to preserving the country's existing elephant population.

"This stock taking exercise at UWA is a count of ivory from dead elephants, both from natural causes as well as poaching."

"UWA is calling for public support to keep our elephants alive, even when they transgress and destroy crops and other **property**... solutions for their survival need to be sought together with the public because these are natural assets that we have a duty to preserve for future generations." Seguya says it would be good to get the same public concern when an elephant dies as happened in Bwenda in Kasese District, where one died out of exhaustion, having been hounded by members of the public for days.

**CO** ugrvau : Uganda Revenue Authority

**NS** c315 : Conferences/Exhibitions | gpol : Domestic Politics | ccat : Corporate/Industrial News | gcat : Political/General News | gpir : Politics/International Relations

**RE** uganda : Uganda | africaz : Africa | austr : Australia | china : China | kenya : Kenya | tanza : Tanzania | apacz : Asia Pacific | asiaz : Asia | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | bric : BRICS Countries | chinaz : Greater China | devgcoz : Emerging Market Countries | dvpcoz : Developing Economies | eafz : East Africa | easiaz : Eastern Asia

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