



**Biologists**  
WITHOUT BORDERS

## 2018 Online Ivory Listed for Sale in the United States



Photo credit: Shannon Wild



## Introduction

A moratorium on the international trade in African elephant ivory was enacted in 1989<sup>1</sup> with further restrictions in subsequent years (Martin and Stiles 2008). However, the global demand for ivory has skyrocketed in the last decade, sending poaching rates soaring. Ivory from recently poached elephants has been regularly smuggled into the United States (US) and sold both in storefronts and online (IFAW 2014). Past studies have determined that the US was the second-largest retail ivory market in the world – behind only China (Martin and Stiles 2008, IFAW 2014); however, more recent studies have indicated much of that trade may have pivoted to the online marketplace (Kramer et al. 2017). Further, the global illegal ivory trade is increasingly dominated by organized criminal syndicates and militant groups (IFAW 2014).

Although much effort and financial resources have been dedicated to fighting elephant poaching on the ground in Africa, much less attention has been paid to the demand side of the equation in destination countries. In the hopes of addressing this imbalance, Biologists without Borders undertook a project to gather data on potential illegal ivory sales. The project has two components:

- (1) Conduct an internet search for online vendors and auction sites listing ivory items for sale. The purpose was to identify sellers and to analyze the demographics of the current elephant ivory trade on the internet.
- (2) Develop and launch our free mobile app, *i of the Elephant*, which allows individuals to report where ivory is being sold. *i of the Elephant* is a community action tool that enables participants to help tackle the illegal ivory trade and gives them the power to make a positive difference. Unlike most other efforts to document the US ivory market, which suppress the names of stores selling ivory, our approach identifies store names and provides the information to the public. This approach will help raise awareness and increase pressure on the stores to stop selling ivory. We are still collecting reports and will produce our findings at a later date.

Both components share a main objective – to facilitate prosecution by law enforcement of individuals engaging in illegal ivory sales and to assess the current scope and locations of the elephant ivory trade.

This report is a summary of our findings from the first component – internet searches – only. Continued monitoring of the online ivory market has been recommended in order to gauge compliance with any new regulations (IFAW 2014). In 2016, a near-total ban on commercial trade in African elephant ivory went into effect in the United States, which prohibited interstate and international sales of ivory. Several states subsequently imposed a complete ban on all ivory sales statewide. Our internet surveys are the first to provide some insight into the consequences of these new regulations.

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<sup>1</sup> The USA African Elephant Conservation Act went into effect 1989, followed by the CITES ban in 1990.

All our reports have been submitted to State and Federal wildlife agencies and have already resulted in successful prosecutions. In addition, we are collaborating with the National Whistleblowers Center and the Department of Homeland Security, which are also pursuing prosecutions.

## Survey Methods

We limited our internet searches for ivory items to those offered by US-based sellers and auction sites (vendors). Searches were conducted daily between March 1 to December 31, 2018 and divided into eight search periods. We used keywords (i.e., ivory) to search for target items being advertised or sold by a range of online vendors, including independent vendors and galleries (auction and non-auction), and large auction and non-auction sites. Craigslist and eBay were also surveyed but only on a quarterly basis and only in selected areas for Craigslist; consequently, these findings were excluded from the dataset as they were intended only to assess if those sites continued to be top-selling ivory markets (IFAW 2008, IFAW and WCS 2015). We also utilized the automated keyword search feature at four prominent auction platforms (Liveauctioneers, AuctionZip, Invaluable, Bidsquare); this provided email alerts when items matched our keywords, which allowed for continuous coverage.

Due to the varied quality of the photos, in many cases it was difficult to tell if items were real elephant ivory. Inclusion was determined by considering several criteria: presence of Schreger lines or grain pattern indicative of ivory, language used in product description (e.g., listed as elephant ivory), and no dark spots or streaking indicative of bone. We did not distinguish between likely or suspected ivory items as have previous publications.

Because vendors often listed their items on more than one auction site and items were often relisted, we compared new items to previous listings so that any duplicates could be eliminated from the dataset. Vendors previously listed in a search period were counted again only if they offered new ivory items for sale. If an item was sold as a “set” or “group” with one price for all, it was counted as one item. All items listed as mammoth ivory were included, but those listed as walrus, hippo, or whale ivory were not. We excluded items that were likely true antiques (>100 years old) such as European miniature portraits on ivory or ivory-handled weapons. Also, because we only searched for items labeled as ivory, we may have missed actual ivory items mislabeled as bone, resin, or faux ivory.

All advertisements were captured as pdf files (which included picture of item, price, description, and any shipping restrictions and permits held). To facilitate investigations/prosecutions, we included emails, websites, and addresses of the site owners where possible via web searches and background check websites. These reports were then submitted to state (i.e., New York, Hawaii, California) and federal (US Fish Wildlife Service) wildlife agents for investigation. We also sent selected reports to the National Whistleblowers Center and the Department of Homeland Security.

For this summary report, we tallied the online sales by state and search period. State sales were tallied over all search periods and included all search results. Data within each search

period were standardized by the number of search days within that period and only sites searched every search period were included in our timeline analysis.

Because our searches were not intended to establish a standardized baseline but rather to provide wildlife authorities with potential cases to prosecute, we endeavored to be as thorough as possible and cover an extended period of time.

## Results

Our 10-month internet search yielded a total of 1339 ivory items offered by 179 vendors based in 34 US states. The highest number of vendors selling ivory were found in Florida (24), New York (22), California (17) and Massachusetts (13) (Figures 1 and 2). Only 26% of the vendor/auction sites (vendors) had actual brick and mortar stores (physical stores). The highest number of items for sale were found in Massachusetts, Florida, Michigan, New York, Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and California respectively ( $\geq 50$  items) (Figures 1 and 3). Carved ivory figures were the most common items encountered across all states (Figure 4).

Online vendors varied in size from large-worldwide operations to small sellers. Aggregator websites (both auction and non-auction), which offer multiple sellers an online platform to access a much greater audience, represented almost 90% of the online market. The top four aggregator websites were Tracadero (non-auction), AuctionZip, Invaluable, and Liveauctioneers. Vendors often listed items on multiple aggregate auction sites. Table 1 presents the online vendor and auction sites that had the highest number of items for sale or the greatest number of listings over the 10-month survey. Our separate sample search of Craigslist and eBay, found only one item on each site.

The number of newly found vendors selling ivory fluctuated widely with higher numbers within the first three search periods but still did not appear to be decreasing over time (Figure 5). The number of items found dropped off substantially after the initial search period, but then did not fluctuate much in the proceeding search periods (Figure 5). This initial drop was primarily due to a couple of the top ten vendors (Table 1) offering numerous ivory items during the first search period but had no new items in subsequent periods. In fact, many of their items were still for sale during the last survey period.

Most of the vendors referred to their advertised items as being “antique,” or “vintage,” from 1900 century, or “pre-ban” but only one provided minimal documentation of legal import. Consequently, many of the items could be true antiques ( $>100$  yrs old). Several vendors stated that they would not ship internationally or to certain states.

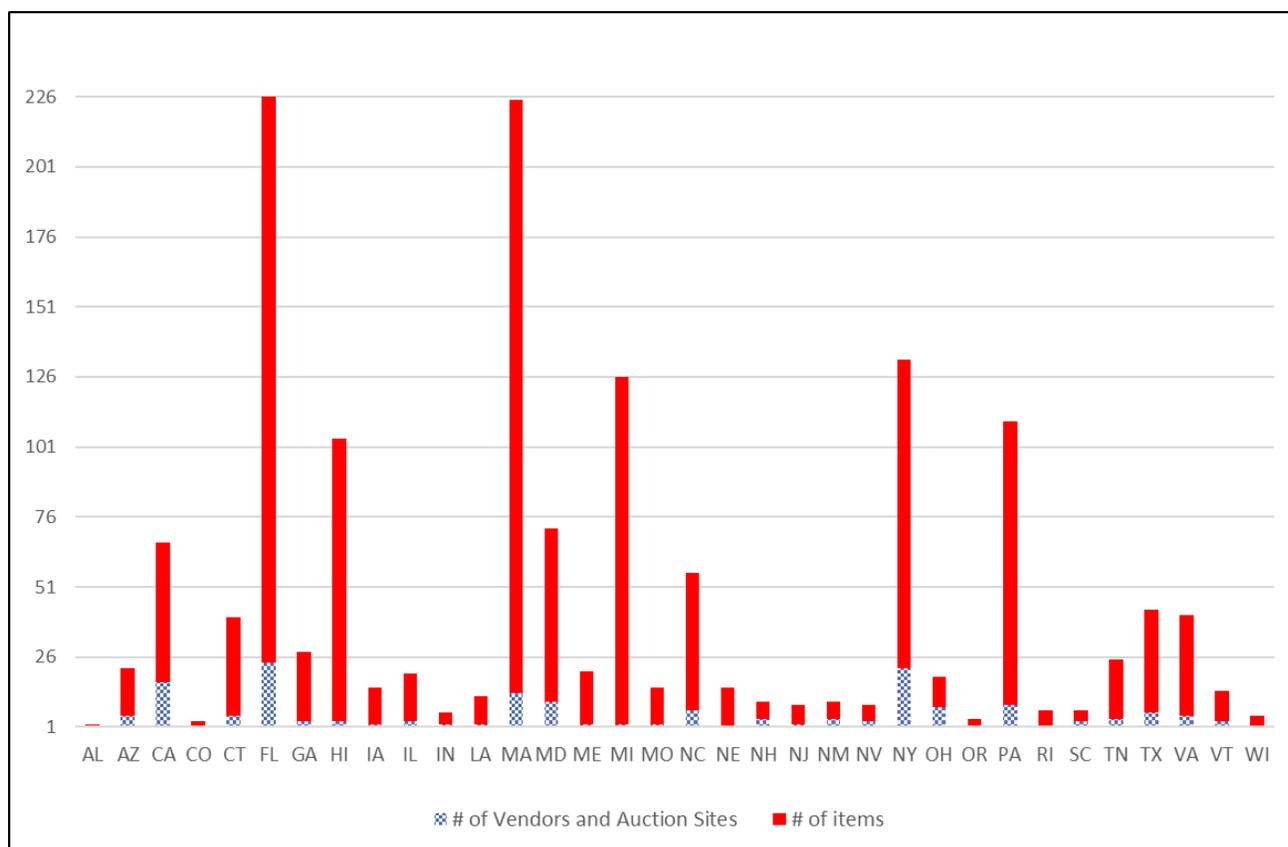


Figure 1. Online ivory for sale by state: number of vendors/auction sites and items (March 1 to December 31, 2018).

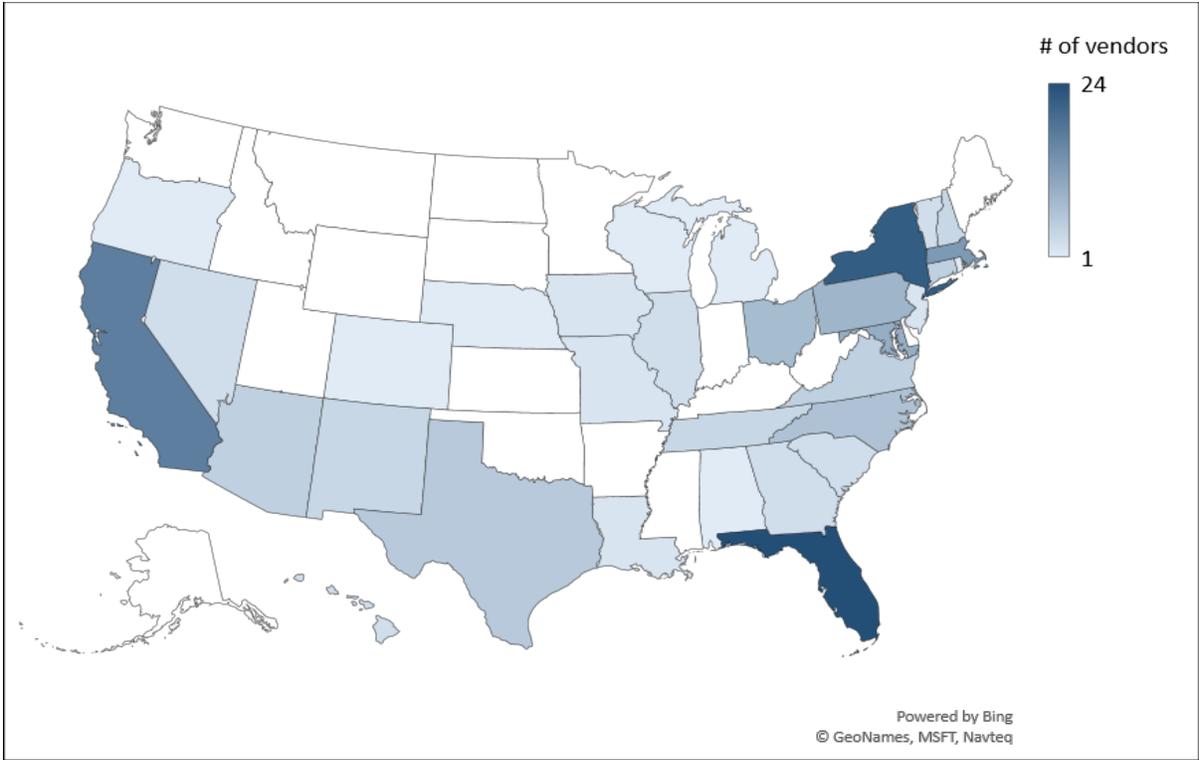


Figure 2. Number of online vendors selling ivory by state (March 1 to December 31, 2018).

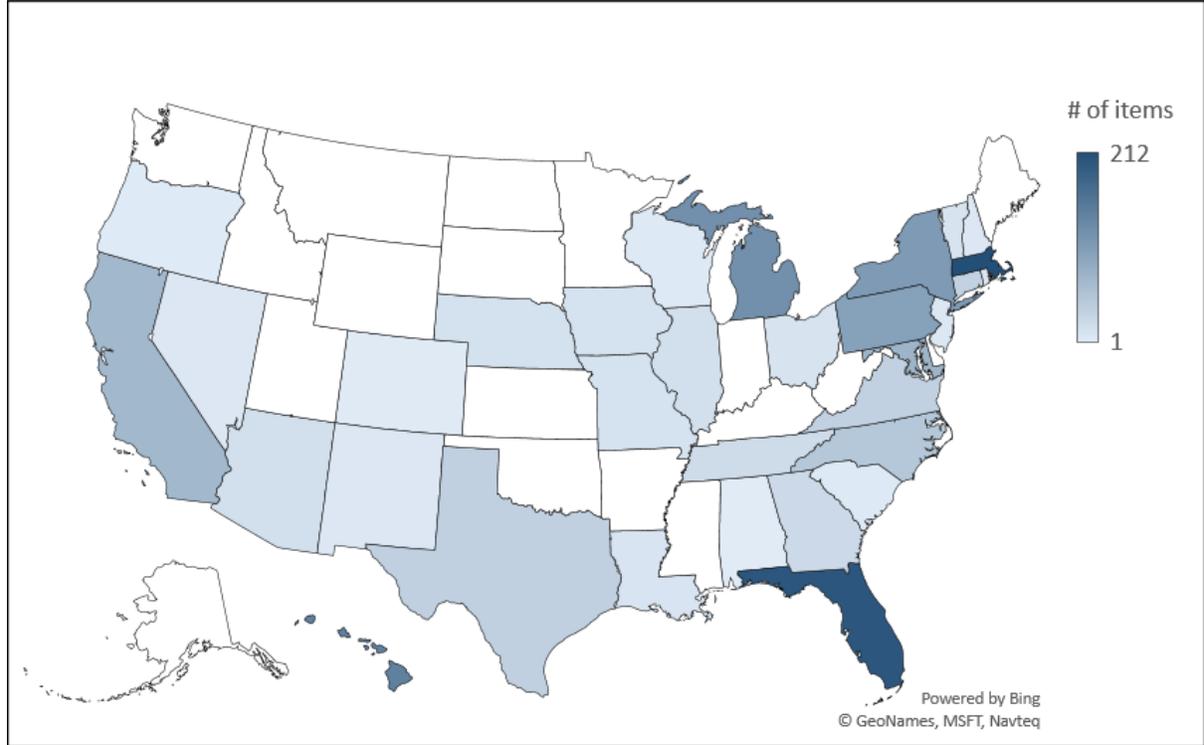


Figure 3. Number of online ivory items for sale items by state (March 1 to December 31, 2018).



**Lot 458: 2 Very Old African Elephant Ivory Carvings**

by [Blackwell Auctions LLC](#)

April 14, 2018, 12:00 PM EST  
Clearwater, FL, USA

Estimate: \$200 - \$300

Description: Two very old African carved ivory statues. Measure 7" and 5-1/8". Smaller figure has lost the back of her right hand. Will not ship where

[View additional info](#)

Live Auction

Live Auction: 28 days 21 hours

Starting bid: \$100 (0 bids)

[LEAVE BID](#)

[Watch this lot](#)

[Register to bid](#)



**Lot 461: Vintage African Elephant Ivory Tusk Carving Woman**

by [Blackwell Auctions LLC](#)

April 14, 2018, 12:00 PM EST  
Clearwater, FL, USA

Estimate: \$200 - \$300

Description: Very skillfully carved bust of a woman. Head wrap and features are smooth and well-executed. Measures 5-3/8". Will not ship where

[View additional info](#)

Live Auction

Live Auction: 28 days 21 hours

Starting bid: \$100 (0 bids)

[LEAVE BID](#)

[Watch this lot](#)

[Register to bid](#)



**Lot 462: Antique African Elephant Ivory 6" Carving of Woman**

by [Blackwell Auctions LLC](#)

April 14, 2018, 12:00 PM EST  
Clearwater, FL, USA

Estimate: \$200 - \$300

Description: Vintage ivory carving of woman wearing strapless dress. Measures 6-1/2". Will not ship where prohibited by local, state or Federal

[View additional info](#)

Live Auction

Live Auction: 28 days 21 hours

Starting bid: \$100 (0 bids)

[LEAVE BID](#)

[Watch this lot](#)

[Register to bid](#)



**Lot 465: Antique African Ivory Carved Crocodile 14" Long**

by [Blackwell Auctions LLC](#)

April 14, 2018, 12:00 PM EST  
Clearwater, FL, USA

Estimate: \$100 - \$200

Description: Old African elephant ivory carving of crocodile (or alligator, if you're a UF fan). Measures 14-1/2". Will not ship where prohibited by local,

Condition Report: The cost of packing this item and shipping via UPS or USPS may be significant due to labor, materials and dimensional weight --

Live Auction: 28 days 21 hours

Starting bid: \$50 (0 bids)

[LEAVE BID](#)

[Watch this lot](#)

[Register to bid](#)

file:///C:/Users/Sue%20Orloff/Desktop/Bid%20online%20on%20upcoming%20[ivory]%20lots%20at%20auction%20now.html[3/16/2018 11:46:01 AM]

Figure 4. Example of our online ivory reports from one vendor.

**Table 1. Top Ten Online Vendors/Auctions Selling Ivory<sup>1</sup>.**

Name	Location <sup>2</sup>	# items	# listings <sup>3</sup>	Vendor/Auction
Bamboo Grove	Ann Arbor, MI	124	1	Vendor
Jewelry Kingdom	Honolulu, HI	100	1	Vendor
Blackwell Auctions	Clearwater, FL	97	4	Auction
The Incurable Collector	Rochester, NY	65	1	Vendor
Morphy Auctions	Denver, PA	38	4	Auction
Manu Antiques	Honolulu, HI	39	1	Auction
Eldred's	East Dennis, MA	38	6	Auction
Pook & Pook	Downingtown, PA	28	3	Auction
Kodner Auctions	Dania Beach, FL	18	7	Auction
Carroll's Auctioneers	Guilford, CT	15	6	Auction

<sup>1</sup> Selection Criteria: >25 items or >5 listings (listings are number of search periods in which a vendor/auction listed new ivory items for sale).

<sup>2</sup> No vendor/auction sites in California or Maryland made the top ten because those states had numerous vendors who sold fewer items and listed items less frequently.

<sup>3</sup> Vendors/auctions in Hawaii and Trocadero (Bamboo Grove and The Incurable Collector) were only surveyed quarterly.

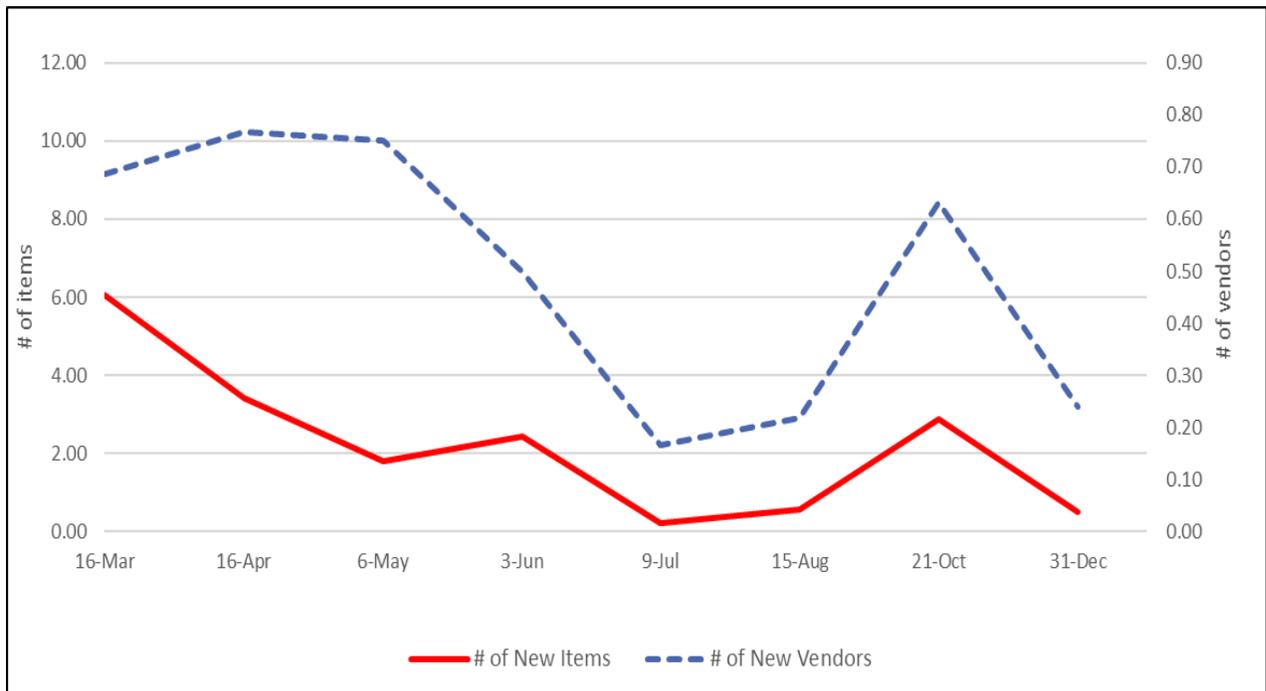


Figure 5. Number of new online vendors and new ivory items by search period (March 1 to December 31, 2018).

## Discussion

### *Transition to Online Markets*

US ivory markets are largely ignored and unregulated and the online market seems to further facilitate the undocumented trade of ivory, making it increasingly difficult for enforcers to regulate (IFAW 2014). Starting in the 2000s a growing portion of the ivory market began to occur on the internet (IFAW 2008, Martin and Stiles 2008).

Prior to the state ivory bans in New York (2014), California (2016), and Hawaii (2017), these three states were among the largest US ivory markets at physical stores (IFAW et al. 2016, Martin and Stiles 2008, Stiles 2015). However, a more recent study (Kramer et al. 2017) found relatively limited quantities of elephant ivory at top historical physical markets. Our study supports their contention that while the decline in ivory availability at physical stores appears to be in response to more restrictive ivory laws, the decline may also be due to stores transitioning to online platforms and/or pivoting to states without ivory bans.

### *Comparisons to Past Studies*

Our survey appears to indicate that some state bans may have had an effect in reducing online ivory sales. Previous studies have shown that Florida, California, New York, Oregon, and Hawaii are top online markets (IFAW et al. 2016, Kramer et al. 2017).

Based on our data, Oregon, which was a top seller prior to the 2015 ban, now ranks 26<sup>th</sup> (of 34 states selling ivory) in number of online sellers and 31<sup>st</sup> in number of ivory items. Almost a year after banning the sale of ivory in 2017, Hawaii – another top seller – now ranks 15<sup>th</sup> in the number of online sellers and 5<sup>th</sup> in number of ivory items. However, our findings indicate that even with state bans, Florida, California, and New York remain top online ivory markets.

Of the top-selling 28 online sellers identified in a 2014 study (IFAW 2014), all but two are still online, and we found only 8 (29%) still offering ivory. Although this suggests that most of the 2014 online sellers have stopped selling ivory online, new sellers appear to have replaced them. In addition, sellers in both New Jersey and Washington state, which banned ivory sales in 2014 and 2015 respectively, were on the top-selling 28 list, but both of these states had minimal online ivory offerings in our study.

Interestingly, eBay had an “alarming amount of potential illegal ivory for sale” in 2008 (IFAW 2008), but our data indicate that eBay is no longer a top internet seller. This may be because eBay voluntarily banned the sale of ivory on all its internet auction sites in January 2009. Likewise, Craigslist had large amounts of ivory for sale just a few years ago (IFAW and WCS 2015), but we only found a few items for sale. However, we only sampled eBay and Craigslist quarterly and limited the Craigslist sample to the San Francisco Bay Area.

Despite possible decreases in sales after state bans, our findings make it clear that there is still a significant online market for ivory. However, if state bans could be enacted in Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, it likely would further

reduce the ivory trade in the US. In addition, if the large aggregator sites were shutdown it would severely limit the US online market.

### ***Study Limitations and Strengths***

Our investigation was not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the US online ivory market. However, because the online data were sampled and analyzed in a systematic manner, the findings should provide a reliable picture of the demographics and scope of the current online ivory market. Only two other previous studies of online nationwide ivory markets (IFAW 2014, Kramer et al. 2017) have been conducted in this decade covering 7 to 9-week periods on 2 to 6 internet platforms. Our study differs from these previous studies by being significantly longer (ten months of continuous sampling) and including more internet platforms (10 aggregator sites, independent auction sites, independent non-auction sites as well as eBay and Craigslist).

## **Citations**

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