

Ancestors help the living

It is old, in fact, it is ancient and was used by people in pre-historic times. It is from an animal, and it is still a very popular material today; it is also very valuable. What is it? It is ivory, but not elephant ivory – it is mammoth ivory.

Earlier this autumn, carvings from mammoth ivory were exhibited in part of the Russian pavilion in the Shanghai Expo 2010. In addition, Michelle Obama was recently photographed wearing a mammoth ivory necklace.

Elephant ivory has been banned in most cases since 1989, as the numbers of African elephants were falling so rapidly. However, sale of mammoth ivory is legal and also ethical, due to the fact that the animals are already dead! Carvers who used elephant tusks in the last century, now use mammoth ivory. At first, demand for this new product was quite slow, but nowadays this type is more valuable than elephant ivory (up to \$1,000 a kilo, depending on the quality). This is partly because of its age.

Finding the bones of a woolly mammoth is not as difficult as one might think, thanks to climate change: the frozen land in Siberia is melting. As a result, mammoth skeletons are slowly coming to the surface and thousands more are thought to be buried there. For three months a year in the summer, the ice melts and local people search the land for mammoth tusks, which can be up to five metres long. These are then exported, mainly to Hong Kong and China, where the ivory is carved and made into jewellery and ornaments. This is sold within China and also exported worldwide. Approximately 50,000 kilograms are exported legally from Russia every year, generally 10,000–40,000 years old.

Conservationists worry that its growing availability will lead to an increasing demand for ivory, and as a result elephants will be further endangered. They fear that people may try to disguise elephant ivory as mammoth ivory. For now, it seems that elephants are safe, but only if the ivory is checked carefully. Although the two types can look very similar experts, such as the people who check imported ivory, can easily see the difference. They can also find out the animal's age, sex, diet and even environmental conditions of the time. Ivory shows the age of an animal through line patterns in the material, rather like the rings of a tree.

At least for now, it seems that an Ice Age material is helping an endangered species – its distant relative the elephant.

1 Read the text and match the paragraph headings to the relevant paragraphs, for paragraphs 2–5. There is one heading that you do not need to use.

- a How experts tell the difference between the two types of ivory _____
- b What mammoth ivory was used for in prehistoric times _____
- c Where the ivory comes from and what happens afterwards _____
- d Evidence to show the growing popularity of mammoth ivory _____
- e Brief historical details of the use of elephant versus mammoth ivory _____

2 Read the text and find out what these facts and figures refer to.

FACTS	FIGURES
Shanghai Expo 2010	Three months
Michelle Obama	five metres
Hong Kong and China	1989
Siberia	50,000 kilograms
the rings of a tree	\$1,000
	10,000-40,000

3 Read the text and answer the following.

- 1 Has demand for mammoth ivory always been high?
- 2 Why has trade in mammoth ivory become possible only in recent years?
- 3 What is the ivory used for, according to the text?
- 4 Why are animal rights campaigners worried?
- 5 What kind of details does ivory tell us about the ancient animals?

4 Which of the following points do you agree with? Tick (✓) those you do and discuss with a partner.

- I understand why ivory is so much in demand because it is a very beautiful material. _____
- I would like to own some mammoth ivory myself – an ornament or some jewellery. _____
- I think it is acceptable for public figures to wear mammoth ivory jewellery. _____
- Growing fashion for ivory may endanger elephants. Celebrities should not promote it. _____
- Using mammoth ivory lessens the danger to elephants. _____
- In time, criminals will try to disguise elephant ivory as mammoth and so increase the danger to living animals. _____
- This new trade provides employment in different countries: for the local people who find the tusks, craftspeople, exporters, etc. _____
- Mammoth skeletons hold valuable information about prehistoric times so the tusks should not be removed or damaged. _____

5 Complete the sentences below with the correct word / phrase.

thanks to

because of

as

due to the fact that

- 1 Elephant ivory has been banned in most cases since 1989, _____ the numbers of African elephants were falling so rapidly.
- 2 However, mammoth ivory is legal and also ethical, _____ the animals are already dead!
- 3 Finding the bones of a woolly mammoth is not as difficult as one might think, _____ climate change.
- 4 Nowadays this type is more valuable than elephant ivory. This is partly _____ its age.

Glossary

availability (*noun*) - the state of being available to be used or obtained

ban (*verb*) - to say officially that people must not do, sell, or use something: *the book was banned from school libraries*

carve (*verb*) - to make an object by cutting it from wood or stone; (*noun*) **carving** - an object that has been carved

conservationist (*noun*) - someone who works to protect the environment from damage

demand (*noun*) - the amount of a product or a service that people want, or the fact that people want it: *demand for organic food is growing in some parts of the world*

disguise (*verb*) - to make someone or something look like something else: *little tape recorders were disguised as cigarette packets*

ethical (*adj*) - morally right or acceptable: *is it ethical to keep animals in zoos?*

right (*noun*) - something that you are morally or legally allowed to have: *human rights*

skeleton (*noun*) - the set of bones that supports a human or animal body