

US set to crush \$12m ivory seized by agents

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Washington

THE US will destroy its six-ton stockpile of elephant ivory to combat wildlife trafficking, an international fight that often has law enforcement outgunned by well-financed crime syndicates, White House panelists said on Monday.

The ivory — raw and carved whole tusks and smaller items seized by or abandoned to US agents over the last 25 years — will be crushed as part of a push to publicise the illegal trade that threatens wild elephants, rhino, tigers, great apes and other iconic species, said Interior Secretary Sally Jewell.

Africa, well known for its wildlife tourism, has had to bear the brunt of poachers decimating its elephants, rhino, and other endangered species. The bulk of the trophies are illegally exported to the West and Asia, where they are said to have medicinal value.

"This was shocking to me: wildlife trafficking has doubled since 2007, and it's estimated to be the fourth-largest transnational crime in the world," Ms Jewell told a White House forum.

Fuelled by increased global demand, especially in Asia, prices for items made from some endangered species have soared.

Rhino horn is now worth twice its weight in gold, said Ms Jewell, adding that the US is also one of the world's biggest customers for illegally traded wildlife goods.

"This crisis is not like anything that we have dealt with," US Fish and Wildlife Service director Dan Ashe said. "It's syndicated, it's well-organised, it's well-funded — and it needed a whole government approach."

That approach was specified in an executive order by President Barack Obama on July 1, asking US agencies including the Treasury, defence, homeland security, the office of the director of national intelligence and the National Security Council to work together to tackle the issue.

Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who made illegal wildlife trafficking a priority during her tenure as the top US diplomat, gave the matter a high profile by speaking at the White House gathering, along with daughter Chelsea Clinton, vice-chairwoman of the Clinton Foundation.

One facet of the fight against illegal trafficking is to work with private industry to give law enforcement an edge over well-financed poachers and those who pay them, said World Wildlife Fund president Carter Roberts.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service plans to crush and destroy the US stockpile of ivory on October 8. The ivory is stored in a secure repository near Denver, the interior department said.

The department did not estimate the value of the ivory. However, one ton of ivory has been valued at \$2m in recent years, so the total value of the US stockpile could be about \$12m. *Reuters*