

Have You Ever Wondered...

by Steve Mroczkiewicz

While the value of anything is certainly in the eye of the beholder, all things valuable have something in common: rarity. From gold and silver to diamonds and other precious stones, all of those items are difficult to come by and it is that rarity that makes them valuable. There's another item that does not come from the earth, at least not directly, that is also highly valuable because it's difficult to obtain. Humans have treasured ivory for millennia. It was used during the Greek and Roman eras as a carving material for antiquities and in China for at least 2000 years. Prehistoric humans made use of it long before that.

We associate ivory with elephant tusks, and while that has been the primary source, it can also be found in the tusks of walruses, hippos, some whales, and other mammals that sport tusks. Ivory differs from regular teeth, which are composed mainly of dentine. Ivory also contains mineralized collagen, lending it its unique, namesake color and

incredible strength and durability. While regular teeth are amazingly durable, tusks must be even more indestructible. Elephants and the mammoths before them used them for stripping bark, digging, and fighting. Walruses, hippos, and other mammals bearing large tusks also use them for fighting, so they need to be as unbreakable as mother nature can make them.

Human fascination with ivory tusks has led to great pressure on the animals that possess them. And like most items that we associate with great value, they've shaped our own development. Northern Africa and up into what we now consider the Middle East used to harbor elephants, a race that was wiped out over 2000 years ago by the ivory trade. Ivory Coast, a country on the southern coast of West Africa, was named for the product that enriched and gave birth to it as a nation. Coastal Connecticut became the Western Hemisphere's hub of the ivory trade in the mid-1800's, the

hub of which was the town of Ivoryton. Now a small town known for its historic buildings, Ivoryton was a company town that existed almost solely to receive and process African ivory into the 1930s. During that period, ivory was used for everything from billiard balls to buttons and, of course, piano keys. It was the discovery of plastics, more than any other factor, that led to the demise of ivory as a valuable material used for everyday items. Still, ivory remains sought after, particularly in parts of Asia. The 1980s were particularly hard on African elephants as they were relentlessly poached for their tusks, most of which were bound for Japan. Roughly 700,000 elephants were poached during that period, during which over 800 tons of elephant ivory was exported to Japan. Today there are close to half a million wild elephants, and while poaching is still a problem in certain areas, they are overpopulated enough to threaten their own existence in others.

To combat poaching activity, it is currently illegal to trade in ivory in most of the world, the U.S. included. But there are a few exceptions, and one of them is an American original. Elk populations are soaring in parts of the American West and, believe it or not, elk possess ivory. Though not large, elk canine teeth are made of ivory, molecularly identical to elephant ivory. There are a few species of small deer in other parts of the world that carry tusks instead of big antlers. Elk ancestors had smaller antlers and larger tusks used in fighting, but as evolution moved them toward large antlers, the need for tusks diminished. So while modern elk don't have tusks, the canid teeth that used to be tusks are still made of ivory. Native Americans knew this, and elk ivory was highly prized among them as a material for making jewelry. It seems that humans have always had a thing for ivory, regardless where the ivory or the humans were found.