



UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
District of Minnesota

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**ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR PLEADS GUILTY TO
TRAFFICKING IN ELEPHANT IVORY AND RHINOCEROS HORN**

Andrew M. Luger, United States Attorney for the District of Minnesota and Ed Grace, Deputy Assistant Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced that today in federal court a St. Cloud State University Professor pleaded guilty to smuggling elephant ivory and to illegally exporting rhinoceros horns from the United States in violation of the Lacey Act. Under the Lacey Act, it is unlawful to import, export, transport, sell or purchase wildlife, fish or plants that were taken, possessed, transported or sold in violation of a state, federal or foreign law. When it was passed in 1900, the Lacey Act became the first federal law protecting wildlife.

YIWEI ZHENG, A/K/A STEVE ZHENG, 43, of St. Cloud, Minnesota, pleaded guilty today in U.S. District Court in Minneapolis to knowingly and fraudulently smuggling elephant ivory out of the United States on April 30, 2011, to a recipient in Shanghai, China, contrary to U.S. smuggling statutes. ZHENG also pleaded guilty to violating the Lacey Act by knowingly exporting two rhinoceros horns from the U.S. between July 25, 2010 and July 27, 2010, with knowledge that the two rhinoceros horns were transported and sold in violation of the laws and regulations of the United States, including the Endangered Species Act.

In addition to his employment as a Professor of Philosophy at St. Cloud State University, ZHENG operated an online business known as *Crouching Dragon Antiques*. As part of this business, ZHENG offered for sale and sold a variety of items, including items made of elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn.

As alleged in court filings and admitted to during the plea hearing today, on May 5, 2011, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers at the International Mail Facility in Chicago, Illinois identified a parcel being exported from the United States and destined for an individual in Shanghai, China. The shipper was identified as YIWEI ZHENG, a Professor at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wildlife inspector determined the package contained a number of elephant ivory carvings. The accompanying Customs Declaration and Dispatch Note completed by the shipper described the contents as "Chinese artifact: Desk Decorative item" with a declared value of \$35.00. Additionally, the ivory contained within the shipment had not been declared to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service upon

export nor had ZHENG obtained any Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) permits for the ivory being exported as required.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agents determined through investigation that ZHENG purchased the elephant ivory items found in the intercepted shipment through the online auction site eBay and that the value of those items was actually \$6,961.41 rather than the \$35.00 ZHENG declared on the exported shipment. During the course of the investigation, agents also documented that ZHENG purchased two rhinoceros horns from an individual in Florida for more than \$20,000 and subsequently smuggled the two rhinoceros horns out of the United States to China where they were ultimately sold at auction for approximately \$68,000. At the time, ZHENG knew that all rhinoceros species were protected under CITES and were listed as endangered or threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). ZHENG further knew that the ESA made it unlawful to import or export any endangered wildlife species.

In total, agents documented that ZHENG smuggled into and out of the United States and sold in China and elsewhere, elephant ivory, rhinoceros horn and products with a fair market value in excess of \$1,000,000. Pursuant to the plea agreement presented in U.S. District Court earlier today, ZHENG agreed that the fair market value of the illegal wildlife documented in his case was between \$550,000 and \$1,500,000.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Laura Provinzino stated “the U.S. Attorney’s Office is committed to protecting the environment and natural resources by prosecuting those individuals who violate our federal laws. Cases like this are important to curb the market for rhinoceros horn and elephant ivory to help ensure the survival of those species across the globe.”

“This is another significant case which documents the extent of global wildlife trafficking and the pressure it places on the world’s most rare and endangered animals,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Deputy Assistant Director for Law Enforcement Ed Grace. “These types of investigations remain the top priority for us as we carry out the President’s National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking,” continued Grace.

ZHENG faces a maximum sentence of up to 10 years imprisonment and a criminal fine of up to \$500,000. The defendant will be sentenced on May 9, 2016 in Minneapolis before Chief Judge John R. Tunheim of the U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota.

This case is the result of an investigation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Laura M. Provinzino.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

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