



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I was surprised to see a recent photograph of Michelle Obama wearing a necklace made from woolly mammoth tusks. Mammoth ivory is already the height of fashion, and the President's wife was giving it a special boost.

There are believed to be as many as 150 million mammoths lying under the permafrost in northern Siberia. Until recently, they were largely out of reach. But now, possibly due to global warming, the permafrost is dwindling and offering up this remarkable collection of bones and tusks.

So mammoth-mining has become big business. Every summer, thousands of Russians scour the melting tundra for tusks. Traders send planes to pick them up, paying the locals by weight and exporting a staggering 60 tonnes a year.

According to a recent report by Care For The Wild, Hong Kong is the major importer, and from there most tusks are distributed to carvers in mainland China. These products then make their way around the world, into markets in Asia, North America and Europe.

Some people believe that this is good news. Mammoths have been extinct for thousands of years, and they argue that their tusks are an ethical alternative to elephant ivory. They even claim that so much mammoth ivory is entering China that it may reduce the poaching of elephants for their tusks.

I'm not so sure. I believe that all ivory, wherever it comes from, fuels the ivory trade, and there's a risk that mammoth ivory will be used as a front for laundering illegal elephant ivory, too.

The evidence suggests that this is not yet happening – if only because mammoth ivory products have yet to find their way into Africa (mammoth ivory is worth much more than elephant ivory and so is beyond the reach of most Africans). But, if we turn a blind eye, this could change.

India is the only country that bans mammoth ivory, specifically because of fears that it could be used as a cover for elephant ivory. Shouldn't the rest of us be erring on the side of caution, too?



Is mammoth ivory the ethical alternative to elephant tusks?

Mammoth ivory mining has become big business, with thousands of Russians scouring the tundra for tusks every summer.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and tv presenter.