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A deadly game of cat and mouse

How tiger criminals
give China the
run-around



Executive summary

- In August 2009, EIA completed an investigation into the illegal trade in Asian big cats in China and documented the availability of tiger skin, bone and teeth, leopard skin and bone, and snow leopard skin.
- Using historical intelligence, analysis and suspect-profiling, EIA investigators targeted retail premises in five cities in Qinghai, Gansu and Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and attended one horse festival in TAR.
- Traders described trafficking routes, methodologies of concealment and revealed substantial information on the dynamics of the trade. All this could facilitate targeted operations by the professional enforcement community.
- Traders were aware of the scarcity of wild tigers and of the forthcoming Chinese Year of the Tiger and view this as an opportunity to increase profits.
- The market for skins among the Tibetan community continues to decline except in areas where government employees are reportedly forced to wear skins.
- The condition of many of the skins and statements from the traders indicates that the use of skins for home décor, taxidermy and bribery continues to be the primary market, reinforcing the trend seen since 2006.
- Traders stated that the military, Han Chinese businesspersons and public officials are the main customers for skins, and that Han Chinese individuals and wholesalers are the buyers of bone.
- EIA investigators encountered traders that had been documented as operating in previous years in areas where local corruption and the absence of enforcement prevails.
- Confidential intelligence reports have been passed to INTERPOL and the CITES Secretariat.
- As a matter of urgency, the government of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) should establish a specialised multi-agency enforcement unit that has the skills and resources to proactively investigate criminal networks engaged in trafficking and selling Asian big cat parts and derivatives.
- The unit should have the authority to operate at a national level, in order to overcome local corruption, and engage with international enforcement bodies, such as INTERPOL, World Customs Organisation (WCO), and CITES Secretariat.
- The Government of the PRC must stop sending mixed messages to user groups by declaring a permanent ban in *all* trade in *all* parts and derivatives of tigers and other Asian big cats, in addition to consolidating and destroying stockpiles and supporting international efforts by phasing out tiger farms.
- Government and non-government consumer awareness and anti-corruption campaigns need to keep pace with the changing patterns of consumption and target emerging user groups.
- Irrespective of proposed regional enforcement agreements, neighbouring source and transit countries need to immediately use existing channels for communicating intelligence on transnational criminal networks and for coordinating international investigations (INTERPOL, WCO and CITES).
- Donors should increase investment in existing intergovernmental enforcement bodies (INTERPOL, WCO and CITES), and their relevant national points of contact, creating a network of operational enforcement professional support dedicated to combating Asian big cat trade.

Introduction

The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) commenced its investigations into the illegal trade in Asian big cat skins in China in 2004. Every year since then EIA has documented both the open and 'under-the-counter' sale of skins, and uncovered important information about the changing patterns of consumption and trade dynamics.

Following each investigation, sufficient information has been provided to the Chinese authorities to act as a catalyst for government enforcement efforts to investigate and disrupt the criminal networks involved in sourcing, trafficking and selling Asian big cat skins and body parts.

The findings of this most recent EIA investigation were obtained using appropriate and experienced investigators, asking the right questions of the right people, over a 21-day period, on minimal resources.

If EIA can return to previously visited markets and find skin, bone, repeat offenders, year on year, it begs the question: What on earth are the Chinese authorities doing?

This is not to say there is no enforcement in China. There are seizures being made, though some Provinces seem more proactive than others. There are designated periods of time set aside for special operations, although these are often advertised in advance. More effective enforcement strategies are available and used to combat other forms of crime, but they are simply not being

deployed in China in the fight to save the wild tiger.

The volume and scale of the trans-Himalayan big cat skin trade really came to light in 1999 with the first of a series of high volume seizures in the region. Since then the CITES Tiger Missions, EIA, the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), TRAFFIC and others have all explored the trade and made constructive recommendations regarding more targeted and sophisticated enforcement initiatives.

Whether it is a case of outdated enforcement tactics, a lack of capacity and resources, localised corruption, ethnic minority dispensation, or a lack of political commitment at the national level, China has run out of excuses.

Ten years have passed, and the forthcoming Chinese Year of the Tiger is just months away. Those involved in the illegal trade are well aware of this, with one skin dealer in Lhasa anticipating an increase in profits in 2010, saying everyone will want a tiger skin in the Year of the Tiger.

There is still so much that China could do to end the tiger trade if its Government really wanted to. It will take a much higher level of investment and leadership than committed to date. It is a challenge, but one thing that EIA has clearly demonstrated, is that it is possible to find the people behind the trade - the criminals profiting from the tiger's decline. If EIA can do it, so can the Government.

About EIA

EIA is a small charity set up 25 years ago to fight environmental crime. We have developed innovative and effective investigative methods for defending the environment and seeking lasting solutions. Whether it is getting the elephant ivory trade ban in place in the late 1990s, shutting down one of the biggest illegal timber trade routes, or raising the impact of F-gases on climate change, EIA's work has changed the world for the better.

EIA plays a unique and essential role in efforts to save the wild tiger - gathering first hand intelligence on the criminal networks behind the trade in Asian big cat skins and body parts.

Summary of findings

Between 25 July and 14 August 2009 EIA carried out an investigation in the markets of Xining (Qinghai Province), Linxia (Gansu Province), Lhasa (TAR), Shigatse (TAR) and Nagchu (TAR). A team also attended the Nagchu Horse Festival (TAR).

In just 21 days, EIA documented a range of items for sale, some openly displayed (see Table 1).

In addition, EIA documented at least 9 people wearing real tiger skin chupas and at least 25 people wearing real leopard skin chupas at the Nagchu Horse Festival.

Numerous ivory bangles, prayer beads and other carvings were documented for sale without State Forest Administration / CITES certificates in Xining, Linxia and Lhasa.

Methodology

The investigation involved the deployment of appropriate investigators to engage retailers in discussion about the availability of Asian big cat parts and derivatives.

Locations were selected on the basis of previous investigations and desk-based research. Individual retailers were selected by a number of means; either they had been identified in previous EIA investigations, were observed openly selling Asian big cat parts, or were selected on the grounds that they openly sold

other wildlife products e.g. ivory, otter skins, yasa gombe (caterpillar fungus) and, raw Chinese medicinal ingredients.

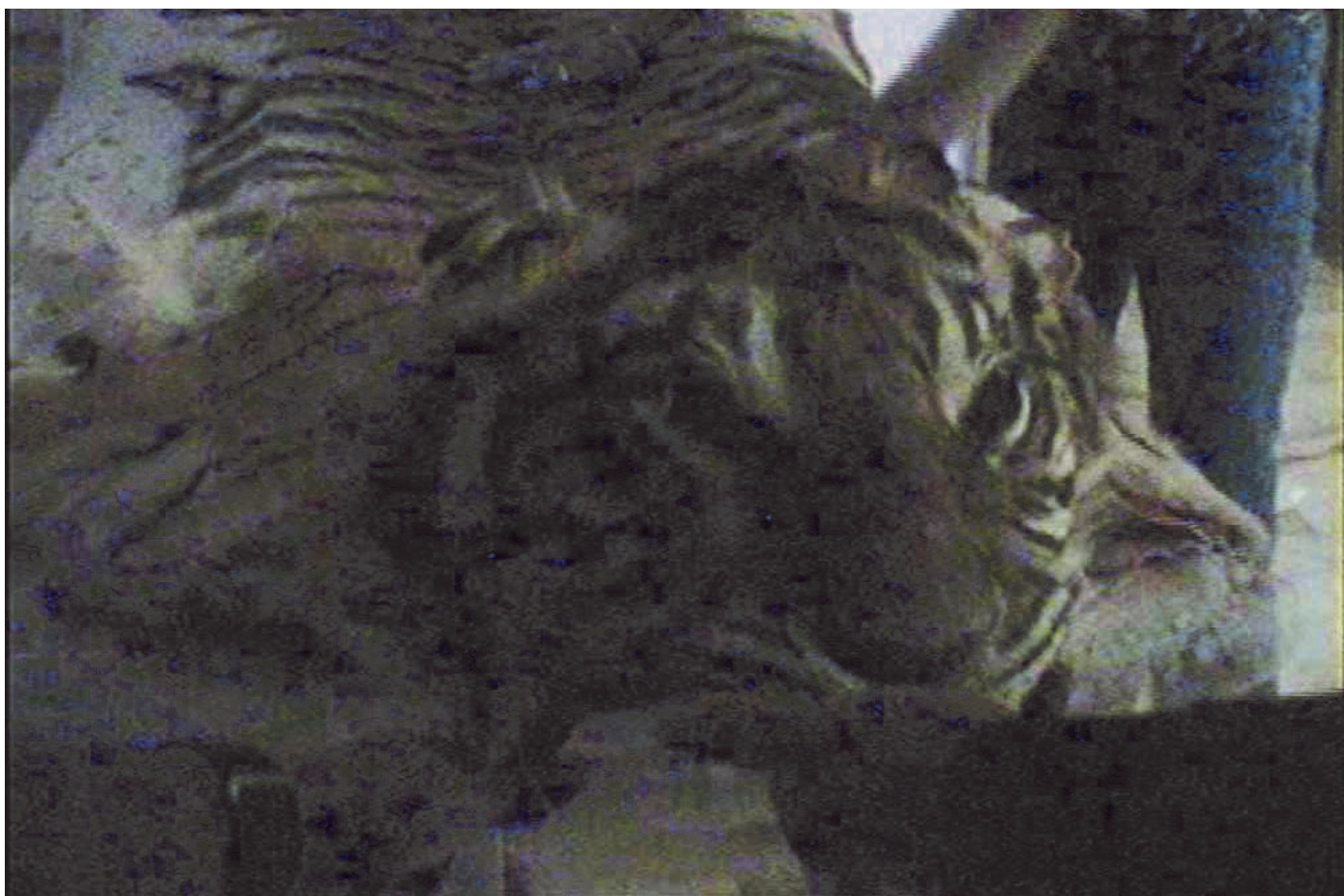
It was not EIA's intention to undertake a quantitative market survey exploring every possible retail outlet. EIA was aware from previous investigations that traders operating at the retail level are networked within cities and sometimes between cities. In light of this, if a trader responded by offering to show EIA their stock of big cat parts, arrangements would be made to schedule a viewing and the objective would be to obtain as much information as possible about the item. This tried and tested approach can result in useful information about the dynamics of the trade, but could be jeopardised through overuse.

EIA is conscious of the limitations of NGO investigations. An adequately resourced and trained government enforcement agency would have the capacity and authority to undertake covert operations involving test purchases and surveillance. Being able to infiltrate the criminal networks through the point of sale would generate a great deal of information about individuals involved at both ends of the chain, from source to consumer.

As an NGO, EIA does not purchase samples nor will EIA pay a deposit to view stocks. EIA is cautious in its questioning of traders not to solicit goods where they may not be readily available, and will not act as an *agent provocateur*.

Table 1. Items uncovered by EIA's team for sale in five cities in Western China, 2009

Location	Items Seen
Xining	1 Full Tiger Skin Rug
	1 Full Leopard Skin
	2 Tiger Teeth
Linxia	5 Full Leopard Skins
	7 Full Snow Leopard Skins and 1 Snow Leopard Rug
	3 Pieces of Tiger Skin Trim
	40 Pieces of Leopard Skin Trim
	2 Full Clouded Leopard Skins
	5 Skulls of leopard and smaller cats, several pieces of bone and approximately 100 leopard claws
Lhasa	3 Full Tiger Skins
	2 Full Leopard Skins
	4 Full Snow Leopard Skins
	One Incomplete Tiger Skeleton (including skull)
	1 Tiger Leg Bone
Shigatse	3 Full Leopard Skins
	7 Leopard Skin Chupa
Nagchu	1 Tiger Skin Chupa
	1 Full Leopard Skin
	2 Leopard Skin Chupa



ABOVE This tiger skin for sale in Xining was backed on to red material with a full intact head and paws, clearly for the home décor market.

In most instances, conversations were recorded and illegal wildlife products documented on film. Upon conclusion of the investigation and analysis, EIA provided confidential reports to INTERPOL and the CITES Secretariat containing sufficient information to help national authorities plan enforcement strategies. These reports have subsequently been disseminated to relevant National Central Bureaus, including China.

Results

Every location required a different approach based on the traders' perceptions of enforcement and corruption.

Xining

In Xining there were three main target groups: Binhe Road market, Shuijing Alley market and the numerous yasa gombe and traditional Chinese medicine wholesalers and retailers around the city.

The retailers in Binhe Road and Shuijing Alley sold Tibetan / Nepali handicrafts and artefacts but the majority of retailers were themselves Hui or Han, with only a few Tibetan traders.

Traders in Xining were very aware of the illegality of the trade in tigers and other big cats, were aware of

enforcement actions and were extremely cautious. While some individuals sold ivory, they did not sell Asian big cat parts. One trader explained how it was much easier for skin traders in Linxia, Gansu Province, where traders had the patronage of local officials.

Nonetheless, one trader in Xining, who claimed to have a local ivory carving factory, showed investigators a photo of a tiger skin on his mobile phone, that he was offering for sale. Following arrangements to meet at a secure location, he showed investigators a full tiger skin and a full leopard skin, claiming that he had more leopard skins.

The tiger skin was backed with red material, the head and paws were intact, clearly prepared for ornamental purposes. The trader was not inclined to discuss the source of the item or other information, unless investigators purchased a skin. He stated that he has regular customers - people with whom he has built up trust.

Another trader in Xining stocked ivory and tiger teeth and claimed to stock tiger bone. Tiger teeth are highly prized and sold as amulets to ward off evil spirits. The trader insisted that new potential buyers must pay a deposit of RMB 3000 (USD 440), before arrangements

RIGHT Potential big cat skin and bone traders were identified through the open sale of other big cat and wildlife parts, including these tiger teeth. **FAR RIGHT** This snow leopard skin in Linxia was prepared for taxidermy. Buyers from all over the country know to visit Linxia for skins.



can be made to view tiger bone. EIA did not pay a deposit and so did not view tiger bone from this trader. But the investigation was managed in such a way that the trader pursued the investigators and offered detailed insights into the nature of the trade as a means of assuring potential clients of the authenticity of the bone.

He cited earlier methods of concealment, where skins and bones were sent over in sealed trucks from Nepal, sandwiched in cargo. According to this trader, following an earlier seizure of tiger, leopard and otter skins in Zhangmu (Nepal-Tibet border), skins and bones are now carried via mountain passes by porters trekking for 3 days. Tiger skeletons are divided up between porters. Porters are paid RMB 9000 (USD \$1300) each.

He explained how he travels to India and Nepal to source his materials, where he can select the items he wants - "it's like in my own shop". Local contacts then make arrangements for the consignments to be delivered across the border. He insisted that he had a passport full of stamps that can prove the

regularity of his visits, and that he is an authentic dealer. Documentary evi-

dence like this would be invaluable to investigators.

He was aware of the rarity of the wild tiger, suggesting that any traders who say they can supply more than 10kg on a regular basis are probably selling fake bone. He talked about poverty and corruption in India and how that facilitates poaching. The same trader also claimed that he could supply rhino horn.

Linxia

EIA has found Asian big cat skins openly for sale in Beida Street,

Linxia every year since 2005. There has been a gradual decline in the number of shops selling big cat skins and a decline in the overall number of skins for sale. However, traders have put this down to changes in the market demand, with the decline in demand from the Tibetan community and thus monthly sales.

Enforcement has never appeared to be a major concern to the traders in Linxia. In 2005, when trade was prolific, they stated they had special dispensation as a minority. Following CITES attention on Linxia, local authorities confiscated a number of skins in 2006, but traders were not charged, instead promising not to continue with the trade.

In June 2008, one trader offering tiger skin stated that a contact in the Forestry Bureau alerts him in advance of any inspections. The CITES Management Authority of China reported that they inspected the market in December 2008 and found nothing for sale. Yet in July 2009, the same trader was still stocking leopard and snow leopard skins, some of which were visible from the street.

Another trader in Linxia claimed that officials within the State Administration of Industry and Commerce (the department responsible for market inspection), turn a blind eye to the trade as they are often the customers and recipients of skins in a culture where bribery of local officials with exotic goods is increasingly common. With street renovations making business slow, traders were comfortable discussing the state of affairs.

As documented in previous years, the skin market has clearly shifted towards demand for taxidermy and home décor among wealthy Han Chinese businesspersons.

One trader showed investigators business cards and postal receipts of buyers in Inner Mongolia and

'Enforcement has never appeared to be a major concern to traders in Linxia'

Henan Provinces. Another trader revealed that he has previously sold skins to interior decorators in Beijing as well as other collectors and buyers in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Shigatse. He claimed the national postal service is often used to transport skins to end destinations.

The nature of the market is evident from the preparation of the skins themselves, which have intact heads and paws. Increased prices also reflected the change, with skins no longer being cut up and sold to make more than one chupa (traditional Tibetan costume), but being sold as a single item.

Skins arrive in Linxia via different routes and means as previously reported by EIA and WPSI. In 2009, one trader stated that he travels to Ali on the border with Nepal and India, to procure skins during seasonal markets where a variety of commodities are sold.

A number of Linxia traders stocked and offered small amounts of leopard bone and bones of smaller cats. One trader stated that his bone buyers are from Chengdu's Hehuachi medicine market. Traders there suggested that skins and bones appear to travel together and are traded by the same individuals.

Shigatse

South of Lhasa, Shigatse was one of the two cities EIA visited where skin

chupas were still openly available. In one of the main tourist and shopping areas in Shigatse, a number of tailors openly displayed leopard skin chupa for sale.

According to traders, unlike other Tibetan areas, people still wear skin chupas in Shigatse, Nagchu and Tsangpo. They did not reveal the reasons for this anomaly.

They stated that Shigatse is well known as a market where buyers commission skins through tailors, although Lhasa is still the hub of the trade. Traders stated that the Chinese military stationed nearby are the main customers of whole leopard skins.

One trader showed investigators a full leopard skin in the retail premises, claiming that others keep their skins at home in the nearby town of Gyantse.

By chance, one trader had two full leopard skins that he expected to be delivered the following day for another customer and offered EIA investigators a preview. The same trader was expecting the imminent delivery of two full tiger skins.

The main leopard skin trader described the same trafficking route and methods as the Xining trader, with skins coming from India via Nepal, but stated that once the items had crossed the border they

BELOW Leopard skin chupas are still openly for sale in Shigatse, offering prime leads to engage traders in discussion about the skin trade.





LEFT Straightforward suspect-profiling led investigators to a tiger bone trader in Lhasa.

are put onto China Post trucks for onward delivery. Another leopard skin trader suggested that leopard skin also crosses via Yadong, on the border with India.

This trader added that unworked skins are usually not permitted for sale, but once they have been made into a *chupa*, they are permitted. This suggests that special dispensation is given to ethnic minorities for the wearing of skins.

Nagchu

EIA visited the markets of Nagchu and attended the local annual horse festival.

In the town, investigators focused on two tailors that sold *chupas*, both of whom offered the contact details of a skin dealer in Lhasa. One trader claimed that he has sold tiger and leopard skin *chupas* to government

employees, whilst another trader suggested that they have no choice but to wear skins at festival times.

Both traders said that whole skins with paws are purchased by the Chinese military as home décor (rugs, wall hangings, sofa coverings).

One of the Nagchu traders explained that skins are trafficked across the Tibet-Nepal border by nomads. He has relatives in Burang and elsewhere in Nepal who can arrange the smuggling. The skins are carried via Mount Kailash and Ngari in TAR and some come in via Gyirong on the Nepal-Tibet border. These are all well known and documented trafficking and trade routes.

At the Nagchu horse festival, EIA observed a number of people wearing real and fake tiger and leopard skins. Wearers of real tiger and leopard

Table 2. Prices recorded for Asian big cat products

Item	Price Range in 2009 (\$1 = 6.8 RMB)
Full Tiger Skin	RMB 80,000–150,000 Approx USD 11,764–22,058
Full Leopard Skin	RMB 7000–19,000 Approx USD 1,029–2,794
Full Snow Leopard Skin	RMB 1,500–11,000 Approx USD 220–1,617
Full Clouded Leopard Skin	RMB 2,000 Approx USD 294
Tiger Teeth	RMB 4500 each Approx USD 661
Tiger Bone	RMB 6000–8000 / kg Approx USD 882–1176



ABOVE Nagchu skin traders claimed that the people still wearing skins at festivals were government employees

RIGHT Investigators met with a trader previously encountered in Lhasa in 2006.

In 2009 he was offering two full leopard skins and two full tiger skins

and skin included some presiding officials, county representatives carrying banners, dancers, horse racers and spectators.

Investigators visited one county tent where there were five dancers wearing real tiger skin and five dancers wearing real leopard skin. When asked why people at the Nagchu festival wear skins but that Tibetans in other areas don't, the county spokeswoman stated that they wear tiger and leopard skin "because they love their country". The spokeswoman's answer may have been influenced by the fact she was being interviewed in Mandarin in the presence of foreigners.

Lhasa

In addition to following the lead from Nagchu to Lhasa, EIA sought out known skin traders previously encountered and targeted new retail premises suspected of selling bones.

While it is not possible to see tiger and leopard skins or skin chupas openly for sale in Lhasa, a lead from Nagchu led to investigators being shown a very large, 2.5 metre tiger skin, which the trader claimed had been trafficked via mountain passes around Zhangmu. He stated that his usual buyers are the Chinese military. He anticipates an increase in profits and demand for tiger parts in 2010, the Year of the Tiger.

EIA investigators tracked down a known trader from the 2006 EIA/WPSI investigation. He was operating from the same premises in the main circuit of Barkhor but no longer openly advertised the sale of skins or skin chupas.

Nonetheless, when investigators

enquired about the availability of skins, the trader made arrangements to bring two full leopard skins to the shop. He claimed he had purchased the skins about six months previously and had experience of arranging shipment of skins for customers to other parts of China and even to Malaysia.

The trader then revealed that he had tiger skin for sale. He took investigators to his house and showed them two full tiger skins which he said were from India and that he had purchased in 2009. In 2006, this same trader had shown investigators a tiger skin and introduced them to two other Lhasa skin traders who offered investigators one additional tiger skin.

EIA also took the opportunity in Lhasa to investigate the availability of tiger bone. Having been led to believe that the tiger bone trade was difficult to infiltrate, EIA targeted shops that visibly sold raw materials for traditional Chinese medicine. Among a row of medicinal shops just off the Barkhor area of Lhasa, one trader offered investigators one tiger leg bone from a Han Chinese trader. This trader claimed that the tiger bone comes from Heilongjiang via Chengdu.

The other area of Lhasa where EIA explored the availability of tiger bone was the Hui district, where the main entrance was lined on either side by shops selling *yasa gombe*. EIA selected the first shop and recognised the owner as one of the traders encountered in Barkhor in 2006, who had previously offered tiger, leopard and snow leopard skins. The Barkhor shop had closed



ABOVE Tiger Skin for sale in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, August 2009

down and he was now operating from the Hui district only.

On this occasion, he showed investigators a sample of tiger bone he kept on the shop premises and then took them to his residence where he offered them an incomplete tiger skeleton (approx 10 kg including the skull). He also keeps his stock of wildlife skins at home, including four snow leopard skins. He claimed to have two other "sets" of tiger bone.

The trader does not travel to India and Nepal to buy the skin and bone. Instead, he relies on sellers bringing products to his shop and selling it to him there as it is 'easier' and 'safer' to source in Lhasa. He added that he also goes to Ali to procure them from Tibetan and Nepali "nomads" who bring them across the border.

The trader revealed that his customers are all Han Chinese, and that he has a regular customer from Hebei Province, who works for a major pharmaceutical company. He speculated that the bone is not used to manufacture their packaged and patented medicinal products, but is used as a bribe for officials.

When asked if he was concerned about the risk of being caught keeping tiger bone in his shop and at home, he dismissed the idea, saying enforcement was not as much of a concern in Ali and Lhasa compared to undertaking the business in Nepal itself. He suggested that without contacts in the Nepal and Chinese Customs, trafficking was a serious risk.

The status of Lhasa as an ongoing centre for the trade continues, despite the decline in local Tibetan demand. The pattern of traders procuring skin and bone at market towns along the borders with India and Nepal, or crossing in to source countries has been substantiated by traders elsewhere.

In February 2009, EIA investigators in Nepal met with a Tibetan trader who splits his time between Lhasa and Kathmandu. He showed investigators two full tiger skins that he was preparing to take back to a customer in Lhasa.

Stock and Prices

While some strips and pieces of skin were apparently cast-offs from unwanted skin chupas, all of the whole tiger, leopard and snow leopard skins had been procured by the traders within the previous 12 months. The Lhasa tiger bone trader stated that the skeletons he has are a few years old.

In Linxia, where business was slowing down following the decline in demand among the Tibetan community, one trader informed EIA that up until 2006 he would sell an average of 25 leopard skins / month, but in 2009, he was selling a "handful" throughout the year.

By contrast, in Shigatse, one trader revealed to EIA that they sell 20+ leopard skins a year. There were about 40 tailors in the same street. Only four were questioned, but at least two stocked leopard skins and

one other said they could obtain skin.

Elsewhere traders suggested a turnover of between one and five leopard skins, while tiger skins were less frequently acquired.

Other wildlife products

In addition to Asian big cat parts, EIA investigators also observed skins and bone of smaller cats, including clouded leopard, marbled cat and leopard cat. Ivory, red coral, saiga antlers, Tibetan antelope horns and musk pods were also seen. Given the nature of the investigation however, it was not possible to explore the trade in these items in depth.

Conclusions

While there is some enforcement in China, the strategies and tactics employed have not kept pace with the changing patterns of consumption. Methods used are too outdated to combat the trade effectively.

Recent enforcement initiatives have been orchestrated operations conducted over a limited period of time with the objective of confiscating illegal wildlife products. There are instances of these operations being announced in advance, including in the media.

Clearly police agencies in China have the capacity to conduct undercover investigations, but there are only sporadic signs that such skills are being used to tackle wildlife crime.

There is clearly a huge gap in enforcement in the absence of a national, proactive and persistent multi-agency effort to gather intelligence through covert sources and to use that information to sustain efforts to disrupt transnational criminal networks.

At a bureaucratic level, there is a tendency to return to a default position when discussing the tiger trade in China i.e. that it is a human issue based on tradition. The use of skins for taxidermy and home decoration, and the use of skins and bones as bribes seems to be conveniently ignored.

The confusion created by discussions surrounding the lifting of the domestic trade ban, tiger farming and the introduction of a scheme that effectively legalises trade in skins from farmed tigers and leopards, seriously undermines enforcement. It also raises questions about government commitment to wild tiger conservation.

The international community has called for the phase out of tiger farms where they exist, in recognition of the threat they pose to wild tigers. Leading economists have examined the arguments promoted by the pro-tiger trade movement and found them to be flawed and based on invalid assumptions.■

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Recommendations

- Corruption and the role of the military as consumers of Asian big cat parts in China necessitates a renewed and high level commitment to investing in targeted and intelligence-led enforcement strategies, which were recommended ten years ago by the CITES Tiger Missions, including the establishment of a specialised enforcement unit.
- Where specialised enforcement units do exist, or are proposed, in source and transit countries, there is a need for sustained investment to ensure sufficiently trained and resourced personnel are empowered to collate, analyse, disseminate and act upon available intelligence.
- At a regional level there needs to be far more communication between operational enforcement officers in source and transit countries, as well as in China. Existing mechanisms for communicating securely, such as INTERPOL and the CITES Secretariat, are woefully underused.
- Donor agencies should consider investing in the international agencies that have the authority to channel intelligence securely and coordinate international investigations, at both headquarters level and at the national points of contact. Specifically INTERPOL, World Customs Organisation and CITES.
- In particular, donors should consider supporting the creation of INTERPOL "Tiger Desks" - dedicated investigators at the National Central Bureaux of tiger source, transit and destination countries, whose sole focus would be gathering, analysing and disseminating intelligence on criminals engaged in the tiger trade.
- Additional support should be provided to INTERPOL's Environmental Crime Programme, responsible for coordinating international police operations and delivering professional enforcement capacity building and training.
- The government of China could choose to send a strong message in unity with the international community by phasing out tiger farms and consolidating and destroying stockpiles of tiger parts and derivatives, as called for by CITES.



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