

The Tiger Skin Trail



The logo for the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). It features the lowercase letters 'eia' in a white, sans-serif font. The letter 'i' is replaced by a blue and white globe icon. Below the logo, the text 'environmental investigation agency' is written in a smaller, white, lowercase sans-serif font.

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Right:
Hunted for their
hides the illegal skin
trade takes it's toll
on tigers and other
Asian big cats.



Introduction

This report is a call to action to stop the international illegal trade in tiger and other endangered Asian big cat skins. It draws together information from India, Nepal and China, as source, transit and destination countries. It also highlights the urgent need for governments to improve wildlife crime investigation, analysis, enforcement, communication and cooperation.

Parties to the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) need to demonstrate greater political commitment and treat wildlife crime more seriously. Key range, transit and destination countries need to establish specialised enforcement units capable of combating the organised criminal networks controlling the trade. Professional enforcement agencies need to be involved in ensuring greater cross-border communication and coordination and the international community, both government and non-government, needs to provide adequate technical and financial assistance in mobilising new enforcement initiatives.

There can be no doubt that the skin trade is spiralling out of control. On a remote road in the west of the Tibet Autonomous Region (hereafter referred to as Tibet), in October 2003, customs officers at a temporary checkpoint made a startling discovery that lifted the lid on the true scale of the illegal trade in tiger and leopard skins.

In a single consignment officers recovered the skins of 31 tigers, 581 leopards and 778 otters. The skins came from India and were on route to Lhasa, capital of Tibet, a major hub for the trade.

This incident did not come out of the blue. For a decade the trade in skins has been escalating, but in the last five years the international community has borne witness to a dramatic increase in the volume of consignments that have been seized in India, Nepal and China, and to the level of organisation behind the trade.

The trade is well financed and coordinated between poachers, couriers and dealers with international connections. Whilst India, Nepal and China should be commended for the seizures they have made, it is clear that, far from being deterred, the organised criminal networks have continued unabated.

Herein lies the problem. The enforcement community is impotent in the face of this trade because national governments fail to treat wildlife crime seriously enough.

Unless full political backing from national leaders and adequate resources are provided to enforcement officers to combat wildlife crime, efforts to stamp out the trade in tiger skins will be doomed to failure.

This report provides a short catalogue of incidents that illustrate how the lack of a coordinated enforcement approach in India has led to the skin traders running rampant. It shows how analysis of the clues left behind at the scenes of crimes can provide valuable insights into how the trade networks operate. It demonstrates how a heavily burdened judicial system and the failure of penalties to provide any real deterrent, result in repeat offenders trading whilst out on bail.

The lack of cooperation between India and Nepal is evident in the failure to apprehend Nepalese nationals associated with seizures in India. The judiciary has acted swiftly in seizure cases in Nepal, but the penalties are again too weak to deter those who drive the trade.

Though the skin trade is poorly understood and the end markets quite diffuse, it is clear that China is the primary destination for tiger and leopard skins from India. Traders in Tibet have told the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) that they sell tiger and leopard skins to wealthy Chinese and Europeans, while skin is also used locally as trim on traditional costumes. The October 2003 seizure shows that the Chinese authorities have the capacity and willingness to investigate the trade and individuals in China face severe penalties if convicted, however greater efforts are needed to untangle and break up the distribution networks and markets.

If the remaining populations of wild tigers and Asian leopards are to survive this current onslaught, renewed political will is required in India, Nepal and China to tackle the obstacles to effective enforcement. They need to work together to stop the illegal skin traders before it is too late.

Debbie Banks
EIA Senior Campaigner
October 2004

Wild Tigers Under Threat



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Tigers (*Panthera tigris*) have been listed on Appendix I of CITES since 1975, with the exception of the Siberian sub-species, which was added in 1987. In spite of this protection, dramatic declines have occurred in all populations as demand for tiger bones in traditional medicines spread throughout the 1990s.

Demand was widespread with a proliferation of patented and packaged medicines claiming to contain tiger bone available for sale across Asia, Europe and the USA. Significant efforts were made to amend legislation in many countries to outlaw the manufacture and sale of tiger parts and products. Given that forensic tests are prohibitively expensive many countries have banned the sale of products that claim to contain tiger. There has also been a great deal of investment in outreach and public awareness campaigns launched to educate target audiences.

Nonetheless, the demand for real bone appears to continue and has spread to populations of Asian leopards (*Panthera pardus*) and snow leopards (*Uncia uncia*), reportedly targeted as substitutes for tiger bone¹. Both these species were listed on Appendix I of CITES in 1975. While the trade in tiger bones has largely been pushed underground, the survival of wild tigers is now further imperilled by the menace of a burgeoning trade in skins.

Above:
The demand for bone in traditional medicine led to widespread poaching in the early 1990s.

Right:
Potential consumer countries like the UK launched enforcement and community outreach programmes in the 1990s.

Wild Tigers Under Threat

Over 100 years ago, there were an estimated 100 000 tigers worldwide. Today there are probably fewer than 5000 wild tigers across an ever shrinking range. Tigers are found in India (home to around half of the world's remaining wild tigers), Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, the People's Republic of China, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Laos PDR, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Russian Far East.

On the Indian sub-continent trophy hunting led to massive declines, whilst in China the tiger had been persecuted as an agricultural pest. By the 1970s new initiatives were established in India to protect tigers from hunting and trade. Other tiger range states followed this example, but tigers are still threatened throughout their range by poaching to cater for the illegal international trade in skins and bones, by habitat destruction and decline in natural prey populations.



© Metropolitan Police

The Skin Trade Menace

While great effort has gone into addressing the demand for tiger bone used in traditional medicines, far less attention has been devoted to the international illegal trade in tiger and leopard skins, despite the fact that it has operated alongside the trade in tiger bone and in the last four years has rapidly escalated.

This growing threat is vividly illustrated by the analysis of seizures of consignments of skins since the end of 1999, revealing a level of organisation and confidence among trafficking networks that has led to them taking greater risks in moving large consignments of skins to satisfy a growing market.

Evidence of the frightening scale of this illegal trade is provided by the seizure of 31 tiger skins, 581 leopard skins and 778 otter skins in Tibet in October 2003². All the skins were stowed in one truck under sacks of wool.

Patterns have emerged that indicate strong clandestine networks between traders in Indian cities, who collect and process Indian tiger skins, and traders in Nepal and China, who buy the skins for a potentially diffuse end-market.

The demand for skins is associated with luxury use and a potential consumer can come from any country. Until CITES came into being in the 1970s, leopard skin was popular on the fashion catwalks and tiger skin rugs were icons of wealth and status. Today the illegal skin trade caters for those seeking luxury fur trim on traditional costumes and for those prepared to pay extortionate sums for the ultimate in home decor.

The criminal networks are able to continue this cruel trade simply as a result of a lack of coordinated and effective enforcement. This is due to a lack of political will to address the problem at higher levels and is not due to a lack of information about the trade. Intelligence from recent seizures of skins provides ample evidence for enforcement officers to focus on smuggling methods, hotspots, key individuals and trafficking routes.

Tiger and leopard skins are often seized with huge volumes of otter skins. There are many accounts of leopard and otter skin being used as trim on traditional costumes worn by Tibetans,^{3,4} including whole leopard skins being sewn into the backs of traditional costumes worn by Tibetans in Zorgei market, Sichuan Province, China.

The legal market for skins of some species of otter can also provide clues to potential market hotspots. Around 10 otter pelts are used to make warm jackets called “bhatta” also sold in Tibet⁵. Thai leather factories also reportedly use



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otter skin for jackets,⁶ and there is a huge market for legal otter skin in China with thousands being imported from North America⁷.

Questions persist concerning the final destination of tiger skins. Raids on the houses of the wealthy elite in India⁸ and China⁹ reveal a continuing desire among such circles for tiger skin rugs. Traders in Lhasa have told EIA that whole tiger skins are sold to wealthy Chinese visitors from Beijing and Hong Kong for decorative use in their homes. Whole leopard skins are also sold out of backrooms in Lhasa to wealthy Chinese and European clients.

Many of the skins seized have been expertly tanned and cured so that they can be folded and smuggled between cloth or wool; not surprisingly, a large number of seizures have been made in Northern India, home to communities of skilled tanners.

Buyers, or their representatives, sign or mark skins, indicating that they have been pre-selected: they want to ensure that the goods they have selected are the ones they receive by courier. The buyers at the top of the trafficking chain do not take any risks by moving the skins themselves. Tibetans are associated with many of the seizures as couriers and suspected buyers.

The individuals that have been arrested tend to be the middlemen, the couriers and the tanners. Huge sums of cash are often recovered at the scene, and some of the individuals obtain legal representation from big city lawyers beyond their means¹⁰, indicating significant financial influence behind the trafficking of skins.

Skin seizures have led to the arrest of Nepalese and Tibetan individuals in India and a number of Tibetans in Nepal. Mobile phones seized from arrested individuals have revealed telephone numbers in Nepal that were called several times during a period of major seizures in India.

Above:
Tiger skin rug seized from a wealthy individual in India.

Incidents and Intelligence

This map illustrates some of the key routes used to move skins across the borders between India, Nepal and China. Research in China also suggests that wildlife from India and Nepal is smuggled to Laos, Vietnam and Burma before moving across borders in southwest China.



Map not to scale. Borders not authenticated.

Right:
The largest ever haul of tiger and leopard skins was made by the Anti-Smuggling Bureau in Tibet, October 2003.



©Anti-Smuggling Bureau Customs Administration of China

Key to Map

- Red dashed arrow** Known and traditional trade routes for wildlife include via (1) Dharchula, (2) Taklakot, (3) Gyirong, (4) Tatopani, (5) Sikkim, (6) Siliguri.
- Yellow dashed arrow** Wildlife trade enters China via ports in Yunnan e.g. (1) Ruili, (2) Wanding, (3) Mengla and (4) Hekou, from Burma, Laos and Vietnam. Wildlife traders in those three countries have said that the wildlife they trade in often originates from India, Nepal, Cambodia and Thailand.
- Blue dashed arrow** The three individuals arrested following the seizure in Sangsang in 2003 spent two months in Shiquanhe and had earlier been caught trying to cross into India. The Ladakh routes used by the tiger bone traders in the early 1990's appear to be in use again.

The following table is a compilation of seizures involving tiger, leopard, and otter skins in India, Nepal and China during the last five years. Whilst it is by no means comprehensive, it shows the alarming level of illegal animal skin trade in the region. Despite the commendable efforts of the enforcement officers in the relevant agencies, it is likely that these seizures represent a tiny fraction of the total illegal trade, with the majority of smuggled skins reaching their intended end market.

Date	Place	Seized
7th Jul 1999 ¹¹	Fuzhou, Fujian Province, China	Tiger and leopard skins
8th Jul 1999 ¹²	Ruili, China	Tiger skins and pieces of leopard skin.
7th Aug 1999 ¹³	Kunming / Ruili, China	11 tiger skins and more than 100 pieces of leopard skins
19th Dec 1999 ^{14,15,16}	Ghaziabad, India	3 tiger skins, 50 leopard skins, five otter furs
12th Jan 2000 ^{17,18,19,20,21}	Khaga, India	4 tiger skins, 70 leopard skins, 221 otter skins, 18080 leopard claws, 132 tiger claws and 175 kg of tiger bones, mobile phones
6th May 2000 ²²	Haldwani, India	50 leopard skins
21st May 2000 ²³	Haldwani, India	30 leopard skins
21st Mar 2001 ²⁴	Nagpur, India	1 tiger skin, 5 tiger skeletons, 10 claws and 3 canine teeth, 4 leopard skins
29th Mar 2001 ²⁵	Coimbatore, India	2 tiger skins, 29 leopards skins
27th Apr 2001 ^{26,27}	Kanpur and Lucknow, India	24 leopard skins, 1 tiger skin, 10 tiger claws, US\$10500 cash, pistol
14th May 2001 ²⁸	Allahabad, India	2 tiger skins
29th Jun 2001 ^{29,30,31}	Arunachal Pradesh, NE India	3 otter skins
8th Aug 2001 ³²	Xiaguan, Yunnan, China	23 tiger skins, 33 leopard skins and 134 sea otter/otter skins
17th Sep 2001 ^{33,34}	Nepal International Airport	3 bags of 359 tiger claws, on route to Thailand
26th Oct 2002 ³⁵	Rayagada, Orissa, India	1 tiger skin
5th Jan 2003 ^{36,37}	Lucknow, India	12 leopard skins, mobile phone, US\$10 000 cash
6th Jan 2003 ³⁸	Bhilwara, India	2 leopard skins
11th Feb 2003 ^{39,40,41}	Siliguri, India	20 leopard skins and 19 otter skins
3rd Mar 2003 ⁴²	Valmiki, India	2 leopard skins
4th Apr 2003 ^{43,44,45}	Kathmandu, Nepal	109 leopard skins, 14 otter skins
22nd May 2003 ⁴⁶	Samalkha, India	7 leopard skins and 18 otter skins, on route to Delhi.
27th Jul 2003 ⁴⁷	Allahabad, India	2 leopard skins. 4 fake tiger skins
8th Oct 2003 ^{48,49}	Sangsang, Tibet Autonomous Region	31 tiger skins, 581 leopard skins, 778 otter skins, 2 lynx skins, 1 fake tiger skin
20th Apr 2004 ⁵⁰	Kathmandu, Nepal	6 leopard skins, pieces of approx 24 leopards & otters
11th Jun 2004 ⁵¹	Barota, Sonipat District, India	15 fresh leopard skins, 9 large steel traps, mobile phone
23rd Jun 2004 ⁵²	Katni and Shahdol, India	7 leopard skins
2nd Jul 2004 ⁵³	Kanpur, India	456 leopard and tiger claws and US\$13 000
6th Jul 2004 ⁵⁴	Samalkha, Haryana, India	1 leopard skin
11th Jul 2004 ⁵⁵	Kathmandu, Nepal	2 tiger skins, 8 leopard skins, 4 sacks of fresh tiger bones

The Himalayan Network

Poached in India

With around 50 per cent of the world's wild tigers, India is the chief target for the skin traders. According to the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), between 1994 and 2003 there have been 784 cases where the skins of tiger, leopard or otter have been seized. Over 1400 individuals have been accused in connection with these cases, yet WPSI can find only 14 records of convictions and sentencing. A further 22 individuals have subsequently been caught re-offending.

Between 1994 and 2003, WPSI documented the poaching and seizure of 684 tigers, 2336 leopards and 698 otters in India alone. These seizures and documented poaching incidents represent only a small percentage of the total illegal trade.⁵⁶

No one has been convicted for the massive Khaga seizure of 2000, despite the fact that this is India's largest seizure to date. Furthermore this incident provided direct leads to traders and middlemen in Nepal, further substantiated by the Kanpur and Lucknow seizures of 2001.

Available evidence from such seizures points towards a tight group of individuals deeply involved in procuring and trafficking skins. A simple link analysis of events can throw light on possible connections between the individuals. The diagram opposite takes a retrospective look at known events. Enforcement authorities in India have access to this same information and could piece it

together in a similar fashion if they wanted to identify individuals and routes for targeted action.

As professional agencies they would have access to the details of police records and photographs of these individuals and could verify the connections between them to a greater extent.

The information available from the seizures provides sufficient detail for enforcement officers in India to launch in-depth investigations and track the key traders down. Apart from traders known as Tamang Tsering and the elusive Tashi and Tamding Khamba, Sansar Chand appears to remain active in the trade despite having been recently convicted and sentenced to five years imprisonment for wildlife trade offences.

Now out on bail Chand allegedly remains involved in the trade. An individual who was arrested in Haryana in June 2004 with 15 fresh leopard skins stated that he was to deliver them to Chand in Delhi and that this was the second consignment in six months.⁵⁷

The main suspect in the Khaga case, Shabbir Hasan Qureshi, also remains at liberty to pursue his illegal activities and has been implicated by a trader caught with seven leopard skins in Madhya Pradesh in June 2004.⁵⁸ In July 2004 one of Qureshi's premises was raided and 456 tiger and leopard claws were recovered along with approximately US\$13 000 in cash.⁵⁹

Right:
The largest seizure in India of tiger and leopard skins took place in Khaga 2000: 4 tiger skins, 70 leopard skins, 221 otter skins, 18 080 leopard claws, 132 tiger claws and 175kg of bone was seized



The signature "Tsering" found on skins seized at Ghaziabad and Khaga⁶⁴ was cross-referenced with the signature of guests staying in hotels in Siliguri and Fathepur at the time of the seizures.⁶⁵ It was confirmed that the signatures on the skins were the same as that of a man calling himself Tashi Tsering and that he was travelling with a man calling himself Tamding Khamba.

Two Nepalese, Tashi alias Wanchoo and Tamding Khamba believed to be the "brains behind the racket" i.e. Ghaziabad and Khaga.^{66,67}

Lucknow 2003, 12 leopard skins and US\$10 000 were seized. Tamang Tsering, though out on bail following the Kanpur and Lucknow seizures of 2001, was arrested.

The Ghaziabad 1999 consignment was sent from Allahabad to Delhi, booked by Sarfaraz Ahmed. It was booked to go on to Siliguri, by Rajesh Kumar and Moti Lal,^{60,61} Information provided leads to the 2000 Khaga seizure.⁶²

Mobile phones confiscated from the arrested individuals at Khaga reveals link to businesses and properties in Kathmandu.⁶⁸

One number was called around six times during the time of the Khaga seizure, registered in the name of Konchok Lama. This telephone number also appeared in the diary of Gopal Gurung, arrested during the Kanpur and Lucknow seizure.^{69,70}

Kanpur and Lucknow 2001. Two Nepalese were arrested, Tamang Tsering (also calling himself Tsering Atup and Sonam Lama) and Gopal Gurung. Both individuals were released on bail but their diaries were confiscated.⁷⁴

Some of the Khaga skins were being tanned 200 metres from the police station.⁶³ The main suspect Shabbir Hasan Qureshi escaped, but his wife and father were arrested.

One telephone number belonged to a shop that was selling Tibetan antiques, including boxes with tiger and leopard skin on the sides of them, but has since closed down.⁷¹

Belongs to a small business engaged in pashmina shawl production and trade.⁷²

One telephone number belongs to the house of Prem Bhutia Gurung, wanted in association with seizures in West Bengal in 1994 and 2003. Some of the skins seized in 1994 came from Khaga indicating activity in that area for a decade.⁷³

A number on the personal page of Tamang Tsering / Tsering Atup's diary is for a carpet company in Kathmandu.⁷⁵

In 1993, a Tsering Atup Tamang of the same carpet company in Kathmandu sent a consignment of 107kg of shahtoosh, which was seized at Delhi airport. Tamang and associates reportedly "admitted their misdeeds".⁷⁶

The Nepal Connection

The skin trade connection between India and Nepal is hardly surprising. Until the early 1990s Nepal was a major centre for the fur trade, including the skins of endangered species.⁷⁷ Whilst Kathmandu does not appear to have the thriving domestic markets for skins it once had, it is clear that there is still residual demand for garments made from skins, with foreigners reportedly buying the products.

Right:
109 leopard skins and 14 otter skins were seized on route to Tibet from Kathmandu.

Below:
Nepal plays a key role as a transit country for the illegal skin trade.

Recent seizures confirm Kathmandu's role as a key staging point for illegal skins smuggled from India bound for Tibet and China. In April 2003, Pasong Chimbel Lama was arrested in Kathmandu for trying to smuggle 109 leopard skins and 14 otter skins across the border with Tibet. A subsequent raid of his residence resulted in the recovery of two tiger skins.

According to EIA's sources, Lama told the arresting authorities that a Tibetan man had



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approached him and paid him approximately US\$680 to carry the bag containing the leopard and otter skins by bus via Dhading and Gorka districts. Lama was to meet the same dealer on the Tibetan side of the border. Of the skins seized, 84 of the leopard and 12 of the otter skins were well tanned and had "PAID" stamped on them. Despite the severity of the crime, the courier, Lama was sentenced to only two years imprisonment and no progress has been made in locating the owner of the skins.

There have been further seizures of tiger and leopard skins in Nepal with four separate incidents in 2004 alone. In March 2004, 15 km from the border with Tibet, seven leopard skins, six otter skins, 165 pieces of leopard and tiger bone and 185 pieces of rhino skin were recovered by the army from a container truck.⁷⁸ In April 2004, six leopard skins were seized from a Mr Jampa Lama in Nepalganj on the border between India and Nepal. Nepalese officials working undercover arrested the buyers of the skins at their workshop in Boudha in the centre of Kathmandu, where skin sections equivalent to 24 leopards and 12 otters were seized.⁷⁹ In July in the Boudha area of Kathmandu, a 24-year-old man was arrested with two tiger skins, eight leopard skins, four sacks of fresh tiger bones, and a sack of rhino bones and skins.⁸⁰

India-Nepal Links

Evidence from the Khaga seizure revealed close links between the apprehended suspects and a group of Tibetan businessmen based in Kathmandu, mostly engaged in the antiques and carpet trade. In addition to phone records and notebooks from the Khaga, Kanpur and Lucknow seizures, the presence of Nepal-based individuals in the area at the time of the seizures has been confirmed by witness statements and hotel registers.

Destination China

The seizure at Sangsang in Tibet in October 2003 of 31 tiger skins, 581 leopard skins and 778 otter skins was the single largest seizure of big cat skins to date. It revealed the scale of the trade and confirmed the role of Tibet as a key location for the smuggling, distribution and use of these skins.

The skins undoubtedly came from India. Not only were there Delhi editions of the “Times of India” newspaper stuck to the back of some of the skins, the three Tibetans arrested spent two months in a town called Shiquanhe in western Tibet, just across the border from Ladakh in India. In fact, according to the Anti-Smuggling Bureau of Lhasa Customs local police had earlier stopped the three individuals trying to cross the border illegally into India.⁸²

Enforcement officials working on the case told EIA that the accused had revealed nothing about the masterminds behind the trade, yet they are facing a lengthy sentence: clearly they fear the crime bosses more than facing the rest of their lives in jail as being caught with just one tiger skin carries a penalty of up to 10 years imprisonment.

Left:
Antiques dealers in Kathmandu sell Tibetan boxes with leopard skin.

Below:
Traditional Tibetan costumes with leopard skin trim on sale in Lhasa.



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Using these leads EIA travelled to Kathmandu in 2002. Due to the deteriorating security situation at that time, EIA investigators were told that the smuggling of wildlife products, including skins, had subsided as a result of checkpoints across the country. EIA also met with some of the individuals implicated in the Khaga seizure. Although unwilling to discuss the animal skin trade directly, it was obvious that these people had the connections and ability to move goods easily between Nepal and Tibet. One individual openly admitted to smuggling antiques out of Tibet.

Another individual, whilst denying personal involvement in the skin trade, did divulge an extensive knowledge of the trade: that the centres for gathering and distributing the skins in India are Delhi and Lucknow, that the skins are destined for Lhasa to be used in trim for traditional costumes and that the primary smuggling routes from India are via Ladakh and Shimla, straight into Tibet.

With many seizures taking place between India and Nepal, and Nepal and Tibet, there had been no recent news of the Ladakh route. Yet this was the route used to smuggle tiger bones and skin from India in the early 1990s. In August 1993, the seizure that woke the world up to the bone trade took place in Delhi: 287 kg of tiger bone, eight tiger skins and 43 leopard skins. The arrested individuals were Pema Thinley, a Tibetan from Leh in Ladakh and Mohammed Yakub. Thinley confirmed that the consignment was to be smuggled to China via Ladakh.⁸¹ This is also likely to be the route that the skins seized in Tibet in October 2003 took.



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The fact that so many skins were smuggled in one truck suggests that the dealers are very confident of avoiding detection, perhaps having used this route on previous occasions. It is not clear how long it would have taken to stockpile the skins on the Indian side or indeed how they would have been moved to the border area given the terrain. It is an alarming prospect to consider how many consignments move undetected given the sheer volume of skins found in one truck.

To better understand the market, EIA followed the skin trail to Lhasa. It was not feasible to conduct a full assessment of the scale and nature of the illegal trade in tiger, leopard and otter skins in Lhasa, but it quickly became apparent that there are two distinct markets for the skins destined for Tibet: a local market for use in traditional garments, and a market for export of whole skins. Visitors from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Europe reportedly purchase leopard and tiger skins for decorative use in homes and smuggle them out in personal luggage.

Right:
Lhasa appears to be a major destination and distribution point for illegal skins.

Box:
Eurasian and smooth-coated otter skins for sale in Lhasa.



© Debbie Banks/EIA

Otter Skin Trade

In Lhasa EIA investigators were also offered whole skins of smooth-coated otter (*Lutra perspicillata*) and Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) for around US\$250 each, with the expert tailors demonstrating how they achieve the patterns on the trim of coats. The dealers told us that these skins were from India, which means they had been illegally acquired. The skins were expertly tanned and had been backed by soft leather and stamped.

The North American species of otter (*Lutra canadensis* also known as *Lontra canadensis*) is legally traded under CITES and is very popular with China's booming fur garment manufacturing industry. According to data recorded by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, China imported more than 160 000 otter skins between 1993 and 2002, with 44 000 being imported in 2000 alone.⁸³



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The Barkhor area of Lhasa is the main area of interest to visiting tourists and is the spiritual heart of the city. At its centre is the Jokhang Temple surrounded by a maze of narrow streets and alleys crammed with shops and stalls catering for tourists and religious pilgrims. In this central thoroughfare, EIA observed at least ten shops with traditional costumes trimmed with otter and leopard skin. Mannequins displaying costumes were positioned on the outside of the shops with further garments clearly visible from the street.

EIA engaged the owners of two different shops in conversation and confirmed that the skin on the trim of the garments was genuine leopard and otter skin. As a result of simply showing interest in the authenticity of the articles, EIA was taken into backrooms of the shops and offered whole leopard skins.

In one store the skin was well tanned and folded in a similar fashion to the skins seized in India, Nepal and Tibet. The trader offered to sell EIA investigators a whole leopard skin for US\$850, and claimed to have regular trade in such skins with Chinese and European customers. He explained that since the skin was so well tanned it could be folded easily and put into a suitcase between clothes and would not be detected by x-ray machines. This particular trader also had a tiger skin but insisted that it would be too expensive for tourists to buy, adding that buyers of tiger skins are wealthy Chinese customers prepared to pay up to US\$10 000, with the skins being used to drape across chairs or as rugs and wall hangings.



© Debbie Banks/EIA

swooped on a smuggling ring in the city of Xiamen, but the ringleader had already fled. When his vast assets were seized and auctioned, one of the lots was a whole tiger skin rug, found at one of the fugitive's palatial homes. It is safe to assume that many more such skins adorn the homes of China's wealthy elite.⁸⁴

In addition to tiger and leopard skins moving into China directly from India or via Nepal, researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences reported that wildlife entering China in Yunnan is moved by traders based in Burma, Vietnam and Laos. The traders interviewed in these countries stated they are responsible for trafficking wildlife that originates in India, Nepal, Cambodia and Thailand.⁸⁵

Worryingly, anecdotal accounts from informed individuals suggest that there is an increasing demand for traditional Tibetan costumes with expensive tiger and leopard skin trim, and cheaper otter trim. Some suggest that this is due to an increase in Chinese tourists to northern and western regions. This not only brings in more money but stimulates the proliferation of traditional dance troupes and shows where traditional costumes are modelled. These costumes serve as a status symbol amongst Tibetans and there are indications that as the economy grows in Tibet demand for cloaks trimmed with tiger leopard and otter skin is increasing.

Seizures in the Yunnan Province of China also suggest that tiger and leopard skins are destined for wealthy Chinese cities. In 1999, the Anti-Smuggling Bureau of China's Customs Administration busted a huge wildlife trade racket that was using the postal system to distribute a range of items, including skins. Over the course of a month the Chinese investigation led to the seizure of 16 tiger skins and more than 100 pieces of leopard skin in Ruili and Kunming. It was reported that two post offices had been used to dispatch the skins to booming cities in southern China.

In 2001 also in Yunnan, officers from the State Forest Administration (SFA) Public Security Bureau discovered a truckload of 23 tiger skins, 33 leopard skins and 134 otter skins and arranged the controlled delivery of the skins to catch the buyers in Xiaguan (Dali). Contradictory reports suggest the skins were either destined for Shanghai or Tibet, or were intended to be made into "luxury items" and smuggled out of China. Another major seizure occurred in the Nujiang area of northern Yunnan in 2002, close to the border with Burma, when SFA officials uncovered a cache of illegal animal skins, including leopard and tiger.

An insight into the final destination of whole skins was provided by the revelations surrounding a massive corruption case in Fujian Province. In 1999 enforcement officials



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Left and above left: Yunnan continues to be an entry point for wildlife products into China.

Map of Seizures



© Wildlife Protection Society of India

The three tiger and 50 leopard skins seized at Ghaziabad in December 1999 were wrapped in cloth and stuffed in jute bags. They were being taken by truck to Siliguri in West Bengal, believed to be heading for Nepal. The consignment was discovered by tax inspectors.



Photo supplied by S. C. Sharma

This signature, "Tsering", was found on some of the skins seized in Ghaziabad December 1999 and Khaga January 2000. This was the first time that signatures and numbers had been found on the backs of skins.

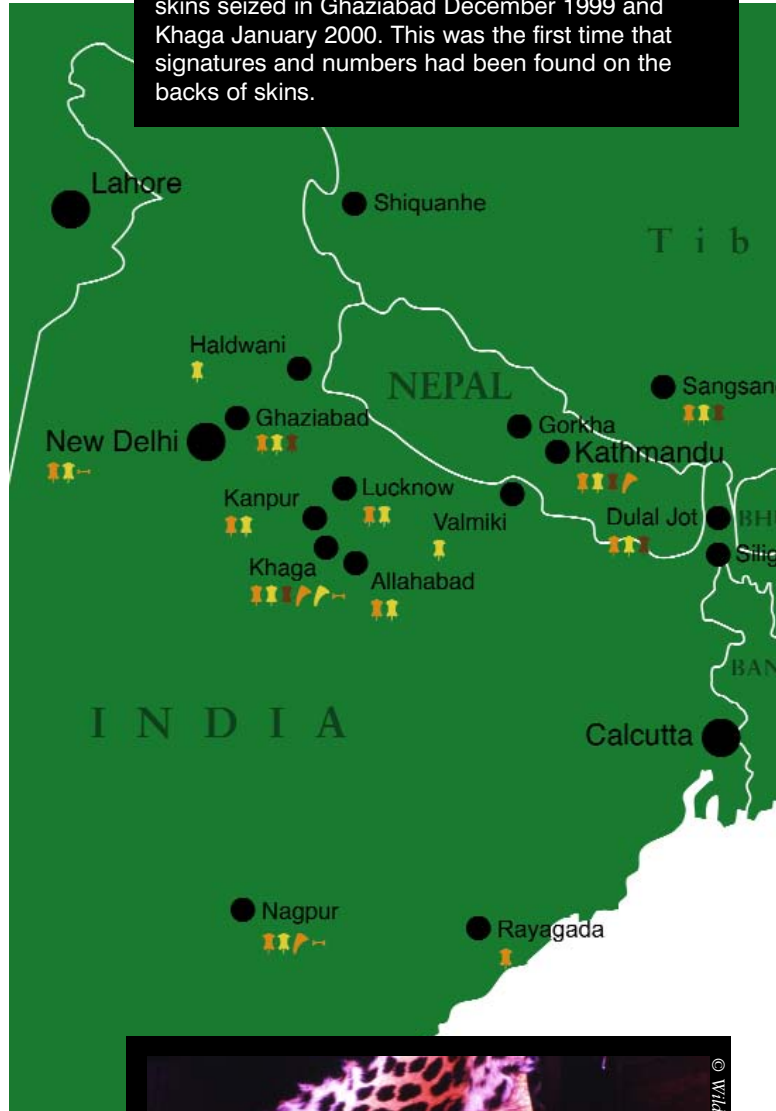
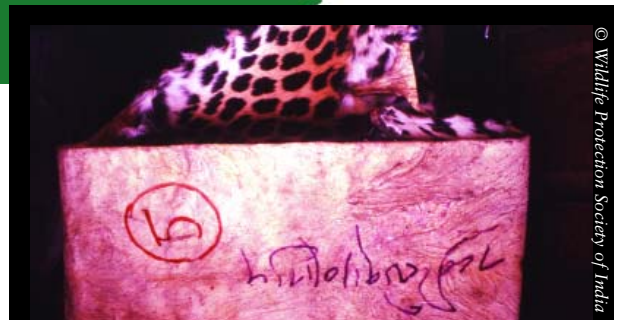


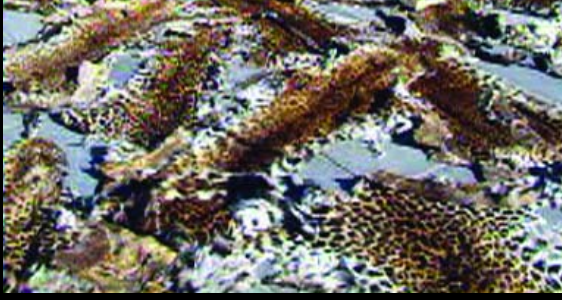
Photo supplied by S. C. Sharma

Four tiger and 70 leopard skins were seized at Khaga in January 2000 along with 18 080 leopard claws and 175kg of tiger and leopard bones. The skins were well tanned allowing them to be easily folded to take up less space.



© Wildlife Protection Society of India

30 Leopard skins seized in Haldwani in May and 50 leopard skins seized in June 2000. Some had signatures on the back. The skins seized in June were seized from a train from Delhi and were believed to be onward bound to Dharchula on the Indo-Tibetan border, by truck.



© Anti-Smuggling Bureau Customs Administration China

The largest ever haul of tiger and leopard skins took place in Sangsang, just west of Lhasa in Tibet in October 2003. The skins of 31 tigers, 581 leopards and 778 otters were recovered from one truck. Three Tibetans were arrested. The skins came from India.



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109 Leopard skins and 14 otter skins in Kathmandu in April 2003 were destined by bus to the border with Tibet.



Map not to scale. Borders not authenticated.



© North East Society for the Protection of Nature

20 Leopard and 19 otter skins with markings on the back were seized in Siliguri in February 2003. One of the accused individuals in this case, Prem Bhutia Gurung, is wanted in association with the seizure of one tiger skin, 89 leopard skins and nine otter skins in the same region in 1994. The original police reports from 1994 indicate that some of the skins came from Khaga, confirming anecdotal information that the Khaga operation had been running for over a decade. Gurung's telephone number was also recorded from the mobile phones of the accused in the Khaga 2000 case.⁸⁶



© Wildlife Protection Society of India

One tiger skin and 24 leopard skins seized at Kanpur and Lucknow in May 2001. One of the Nepalese arrested was released on bail and re-arrested in January 2003 in Lucknow with a further 12 leopard skins.

The Profit Motive

The market for skins is diffuse and driven by a demand for high value luxury products. Not confined to markets in China, there are reports of seizures of skins elsewhere, including a range of endangered cat species.

Big cats are poisoned, shot and snared at relatively little cost. Poachers are usually poor with little alternative means of income and are paid small sums of money for obtaining the skin. Sometimes these animals are killed as a result of livestock predation and the body parts

Snow Leopard Skin

No one really knows how many snow leopards remain in the wild and figures range from 3500 to 7000. Its fur was valued by the fashion industry⁹⁵ until it was listed on Appendix 1 of CITES in 1975. Snow leopard skin is used to make clothing and is used as wall hangings in a number of the snow leopard range states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Xinjiang Autonomous Region in China.⁹⁶ Despite the CITES listing the commercial value is growing again and the markets are spreading.

In May 1999, 17 snow leopard pelts were confiscated in Lianjiang County of Fujian Province, believed to be destined for markets in Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁹⁷ The German Nature Conservation Society reports that in 2000 a German traveller on route to Songpan in Sichuan Province saw snow leopard fur for sale at roadside markets. The sellers told her the furs were popular with Japanese buyers. In Kyrgyzstan in February 2002, one man was arrested for selling a snow leopard skin for US \$1500.⁹⁸ Reports in 2003 stated that snow leopard skins were being sold in Afghanistan to foreign aid workers for up to US\$1000 and were also being sold in the Middle East.⁹⁹



© EIA/WSPA

are kept in case of the opportunity to sell. As the illicit skins move up the commodity chain, from poacher to trader, the potential profits increase dramatically. Although the couriers and middlemen receive more than the poachers, the real money is made by the traders at the top of the chain, who direct the smuggling syndicates and have the links to the buyers. These criminals are adept at taking advantage of the high profit and low risk nature of the skin trade. The value of the Tibet seizure of 31 tigers, 581 leopards and 778 otters was US\$1.2 million.⁸⁷ In 1999 Nepalese police reported that tiger skins sold for between US\$266-1300, leopard skins for US\$66-266 and otter skins for US\$15-55.⁸⁸

In Tibet EIA was told that a tiger skin was worth US\$10 000, leopard skin was offered for \$850 and otter skin was valued at US\$250. Various articles on skin seizures in Chinese newspapers report the following market values US\$14 200 for 100 otter skins seized in Ruili, Yunnan; and US\$4500⁸⁹ for skin and bones of one tiger seized in Yunnan.

In Sumatra in August 2004, a poaching and skin trading gang of five people, believed to be responsible for the trading of the skins and bones of 60 tigers during the last ten years were sentenced to six years imprisonment and fined a total of US\$7750.⁹⁰

In late 2003 a series of raids by the Thai Royal Forest Police uncovered a gruesome trade in the meat of captive bred tigers. In one incident in Nonthaburi Province six live tigers, 22kg of tiger meat and 48kg of tiger bones were recovered from a house along with other specimens of wildlife. Reports suggest that the contraband was bound for restaurants in China, while others suggested the destination was Chinatown in Bangkok.⁹¹

The Middle East is also reportedly a skin and fur trade market. In 2000 there were reports of tiger skins openly for sale in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, for less than US\$250, though images associated with the reports suggest the skins were fakes.⁹² In July 2004 news from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, reported that leopard skins were available for US\$2700 - \$4000.⁹³

It appears that the Asian leopard is not the only target of the skin traders, but African leopards as well. In South Africa in July 2004, 58 leopard skins were seized from a Mozambican dealer. According to reports an officer from the South African Police said the skins were believed to have a value of over US\$7000.⁹⁴



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The Enforcement Imperative

The skin trade is characterised by the resilience of sophisticated networks of criminals whose operations appear to withstand the isolated seizures that punctuate their otherwise smooth business affairs. The syndicate leaders have money and influence and appear to be ruthless enough to ensure that none of their tanners or couriers talks freely when arrested. With the profits they stand to make, and in the absence of targeted enforcement, they can afford to risk moving large consignments of high value contraband.

Whilst India, Nepal and China should be commended for the seizures they have made, they, and the rest of the international community, cannot ignore the fact that the skin trade is spiralling out of control and that renewed efforts to cooperate on enforcement are essential.

EIA is aware that China made attempts to communicate with India and Nepal following the seizure in Tibet in October 2003. EIA is also aware that India attempted to communicate with China about the issue a number of months later. Yet there are major blockages to efficient intelligence flows between these key countries especially with regard to contextual information and active leads. While Indian enforcement officials have a hazy understanding of end markets for the skins, their Chinese counterparts are not fully informed of the methods of poaching and of tanning the skins of tigers and leopards. This means that the bigger picture is vague, and opportunities to break up smuggling operations are lost.

Despite the existence of channels for communication, including the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force, Interpol, and the World Customs Organisation, it is clear that new mechanisms are required. The individuals responsible for pursuing wildlife crime need centralised contacts in each country with whom they can communicate swiftly and with whom they can coordinate cross-border operations.

At a domestic level, it is essential for wildlife crime to be treated seriously enough to ensure



© CITES Secretariat

Above:
Over a thousand Asian leopard skins have been seized in the last five years.

Left:
The CITES Secretariat Senior Enforcement Officer observed leopard skin for sale in Lhasa in 2003.

that enforcement agencies have the authority, resources and skills to tackle wildlife crime effectively. This requires political support and acknowledgement of the gravity of wildlife crime.

Following a series of CITES Technical Missions to a number of tiger range and consumer states in 1999, including India, Nepal and China, the CITES Parties accepted that the creation of specialised enforcement units were an effective way of concentrating and dedicating enforcement efforts to combat wildlife crime.

After subsequent CITES Political Missions in 2000, India was singled out as the Party in most desperate need of a more coordinated enforcement approach, given that it is home to approximately 50 per cent of the world's remaining tigers and following the revelations surrounding the seizure in Khaga in January 2000.

India accepted the CITES Technical and Political Mission recommendations regarding enforcement and participated in the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force meetings, where India helped draft the guidelines for the

structure and operation of specialised enforcement units.

Among the key elements of these guidelines is the recommendation that specialised enforcement units are multi-agency units, thereby maximising access to different skills and resources, covering intelligence gathering and analysis, investigations, enforcement and prosecution. Through these units, coordinated activities could target known networks and routes and cooperate with international counterparts to tackle the cross-border trade.

Despite India's involvement in this process and the commitments they have made at successive intercessional CITES meetings India has still not established a unit that can combat wildlife crime effectively.

At the root of this is the fundamental failure of the government to treat wildlife crime seriously. Resource-constrained enforcement authorities are unable to dedicate proactive operations to tackling wildlife crime. Instead operations are reactive with seizures taking place by chance or when information has been provided by NGOs. When the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)

Below:
The Khaga seizure in India, January 2000, illustrated the need for a specialised enforcement unit in India.



© Forest Department

was asked to take on wildlife crime cases following the Khaga seizure there was a glimmer of hope. Unfortunately, whilst wildlife crime is still under the remit of one of the CBI's units, it is not a priority. As a result, only a fraction of the trade is curtailed and the enforcement activity is clearly insufficient to disrupt the criminal networks. Opportunities to break-up poaching and trading rings in any meaningful way have been squandered.

Out of the 748 cases in India where the skins of tigers, leopards or otters have been confiscated, there have been only 14 convictions. India's Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 was recently amended to increase the penalties faced by tiger and leopard skin traders from one to seven years imprisonment with a minimum fine of US\$108 to three to seven years imprisonment with a minimum US\$216 fine. For subsequent offences the fine rises to a minimum of US\$540. Property derived from illegal trade can also be confiscated.¹⁰⁰

In Nepal the government's attention is diverted to matters of civil unrest. Yet, as a Party to CITES, Nepal has a duty to meet its obligations and stop international illegal trade. The lack of cooperation between India and Nepal to crack down on known traders is a gaping hole in their strategy. In 1999, Nepal was in the process of preparing adequate legislation to implement CITES and its progress will be reviewed by the CITES Standing Committee immediately prior to the 13th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to CITES. Penalties for illegally killing tigers and snow leopards and trading in their "trophies", carries a fine of between US\$670 – 1350 and a prison term of five to fifteen years, or both.¹⁰¹ Killing or injuring other protected wildlife carries a fine ranging from US\$540 – 950 and a prison term of one to ten years, or both. Tiger, snow leopard, clouded leopard and leopard cat appear on Schedule I of Nepal's legislation; leopard and otter do not.

In China, coordinated operations, "Kekexili", "Southern No.2" and "Eagle" throughout the country have led to the confiscation of huge volumes of illegal wildlife in the south and the east, but the skin trade appears to continue undeterred. EIA is aware that in 2000, China was in the process of establishing a Central Enforcement Committee to bring together the CITES Management Authority officials, Customs and Public Security Bureau representatives from the Forest Administration, the Wildlife Protection Department and the Police.¹⁰² Having provided wildlife crime intelligence on the ivory trade to the CITES Management Authority for action, EIA can

testify that the system has the capacity to work.

The findings of EIA's visit to Tibet indicate that more pro-active enforcement is required at airports and border crossing areas as well as in the local shops. China has the capacity, and has shown the willingness, to cooperate with India and Nepal over the skin trade. Practical measures to facilitate improved cooperation and communication should be supported at the highest level.

Penalties in China for wildlife crime are severe, with possession of just one tiger skin carrying a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison, fines up to ten times the value of the seized items and confiscation of income derived from the trade.¹⁰³ Yet despite the value of such a strong deterrent the trade in skins continues. Greater efforts are needed to inform the public of the penalties associated with the possession of illegal skins and markets where skins are known to be sold need to be policed more effectively.

Below
India, Nepal and
China need to
improve
communication and
cross-border
cooperation to break
up the organised
criminal networks
controlling the trade
in skins.



© Robin Hamilton

Enforcement In The Himalayan Region

The regions where the skin smugglers ply their trade are some of the most inhospitable environments on Earth and pose a unique challenge to enforcement agencies. The India-Nepal border is notoriously porous, with all manner of contraband smuggled through isolated, lawless areas and thriving towns like Birganj. In 2000, EIA documented large amounts of illegal ozone-depleting chemicals crossing from Nepal into India. Yet a subsequent crackdown on this trade shows effective action is possible where the will exists.

The borders between India and Nepal with Tibet are even more challenging to control. Ancient trade routes criss-cross the region, often little more than pathways leading through isolated mountain passes. In such a difficult environment the use of intelligence and specialised equipment becomes all the more important.

There are indications that China and India are preparing to expand border trade at a number of locations, such as the Sikkim-Tibet area. It is vital that such trade agreements incorporate structures for better cooperation between the two countries' customs authorities and other enforcement agencies.

In 1995 China's Minister for Environment, Science and Technology and India's Minister of Environment and Forests signed the 1995 Sino-Indo Protocol on Tiger Conservation. Top of the list is the need for joint operations to combat tiger trade. The Protocol is automatically reviewed every five years unless terminated in writing. EIA is not aware of the agreement having been cancelled, unfortunately it also appears the agreement has not progressed beyond paper.

In 1996 India and China signed another agreement on the cooperation of combating the trafficking of narcotics and other crimes between

the two countries. It is not clear if wildlife trade is included in this. In June 2003 the governments of India and China signed a number of other agreements, including a Memorandum of Understanding on closer cooperation in the judiciary. It is to be hoped that similar high-level bilateral agreements between professional enforcement agencies can be formulated to combat the illegal wildlife trade between the two countries.

Despite these challenges, it is not clear why the existing mechanisms for communicating information and cooperating on enforcement between India, Nepal and China have failed. It could be that representatives from each country change and the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force contact details are not kept up to date. Perhaps there are diplomatic hurdles preventing officers in one country being able to simply pick up the phone to an officer in another.

At a domestic level it is necessary for the Parties to designate points of contact, which should ideally be the specialised enforcement units who are dedicated to wildlife crime. In the absence of permanent enforcement personnel working on the illegal trade it is difficult for Interpol representatives to know who to disseminate information to when they receive it.

The CITES Enforcement Expert Working Group raised similar issues at its meeting in February 2004. In a statement to the 50th Meeting of the CITES Standing Committee they drew attention to the increased involvement of organised crime in the international illegal trade in wildlife, noting that this must be dealt with by professional law enforcement officers. The experts also called upon CITES Parties to "recognize the seriousness of illegal trade" and that it should be treated as "a matter of higher priority for their national law enforcement agencies."¹⁰⁴

Below:
Illegal skins are smuggled along ancient trade routes between India Nepal and Tibet.



Conclusions

- Tiger and Asian leopard populations are under increasing threat across their range from the demand for skins.
- Huge seizures over last five years have warned of the emergence of the skin trade as a major threat to tigers and leopards.
- The largest ever haul of tiger and leopard skins, which occurred in Tibet in October 2003, revealed the true extent of this trade and the frightening proportions it has reached.
- The vast wealth of intelligence derived from these seizures indicates that there is a sophisticated network of criminal masterminds controlling the trade in urban and cross-border areas.
- The criminal networks have not been disrupted by the seizures that have taken place.
- There has been a failure by governments to meet this menace with the commensurate resources and determination required to break the networks and convict those in charge.
- Two markets for skins have been identified but not quantified: one is the use of skins to decorate traditional-style costumes available in Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang, the other is the purchase of skins for luxury ornamentation by wealthy Chinese and European customers.
- There has been a lack of cross-border cooperation between India, Nepal and China to coordinate enforcement operations.
- There has been a lack of political will in India, Nepal and China to treat wildlife crime seriously and to develop new mechanisms to combat the trade, despite CITES recommendations.
- Professional enforcement agencies are under represented at meetings of CITES.

EIA Recommends that:

- The 13th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to CITES adopt a Decision directing the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force to develop mechanisms for improving communication and cross-border cooperation to stop the illegal trade in Asian Big Cat skins.
- The Parties to CITES should provide financial assistance to facilitate a meeting of the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force to launch efforts to stop the skin trade.
- India, Nepal and China establish effective multi-agency enforcement units that have the authority, resources, skills, experience and dedication to gather and analyse intelligence, conduct investigations and implement meaningful enforcement against the criminal networks controlling the skin trade in urban and cross-border areas.
- India, Nepal and China explore the possibilities for using existing, or signing new, bilateral agreements to combat wildlife trade and work together to detect, arrest and prosecute the heads of the networks responsible for trafficking tiger and other Asian Big Cat skins between the three countries.
- China's Central Enforcement Committee, in cooperation with Ministry of Commerce officials, should organise a sweep of markets in Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang to confiscate all tiger, leopard and illegal otter skins and garments comprised of such skins.
- China should increase luggage inspections at major airports in Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang and place posters informing travellers of the illegality of buying tiger, leopard and illegal otter skins and stating the penalty for illegal possession.
- The international community should provide assistance in producing materials and generating greater awareness among the communities using tiger and leopard skins as trim on traditional costumes and among the wealthy elite using skins for luxury decor.
- The international community should provide technical and financial assistance to India, Nepal and China to facilitate the implementation of new enforcement mechanisms to combat the skin trade.

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