Talking Tigers: Part 6 of a 12-part series

For centuries, tigers have inspired awe, reverence and sometimes, terror, in the humans they’ve lived beside. They command the Asian landscape as the top predator—immense, magnificent, muscular animals armed with razored claws and massive canines. They can kill with one swipe of their dinner plate-sized paws or with a strangling bite to the throat of their victim. But they also shimmer with radiant, auburn beauty in the sunlight; sometimes they seem to materialize out of nowhere, hunting under a blanket of night or appearing suddenly from a stand of bamboo, silently stalking their prey at dawn or dusk, shrouded by ghostly mists or by failing light, the jungle’s apparition.

With this great power and mystery, tribal cultures worshipped tigers, bestowing them with powers that extend far beyond those of any worldly creature. Tigers became gods—and healers. For millennia, medicine men have ascribed magical powers and medicinal properties to them, and somehow, this cat became a universal apothecary. Many believe (and some still do) that by ingesting it, you absorb an animal’s life force, its vigor, strength, and attributes.

Nearly every part of this cat, from nose to tail (eyes, whiskers, brains, flesh, blood, organs and more) has been used to treat a lengthy list of maladies. Tiger parts are purported to heal the liver and kidneys, to cure everything from epilepsy, baldness, toothaches, joint pain and boils to ulcers, nightmares, fevers, and headaches. They’re also used to treat rat bites and laziness and are thought to prevent possession by evil demons. Tiger penis is said to have aphrodisiac powers.

The hu gu (Mandarin for bones) are the parts that are most highly prized in Oriental medicine, a favored treatment for rheumatism and arthritis—and for impotence and flagging libido. But the humerus is the
Once they’re stripped of flesh, the bones are ground into powder, then used in pills, plasters, and as part of remedies containing other ingredients. A standard oral dosage for rheumatic pain is three to six grams a day. Over a year, that’s somewhere between six and a half and 13 pounds of bone—which is also used in wine.

A tiger skeleton soaks in rice wine in Harbin, China. Photo courtesy International Tiger Coalition. There is a growing, clamoring demand for tiger bone wine, a tonic made by steeping a tiger carcass in rice wine to produce an extremely expensive elixir. It’s thought to impart the animal’s great strength, a status symbol product bought or gifted by the elite: government officials, military officers, and wealthy businessmen.

Although China banned the use of tiger bone in 1993 and removed it from the list of approved medicines, manufacture and sale of tiger bone wine never stopped. Labels may picture a tiger, bottles may be tiger-shaped, but the word “tiger” has disappeared from packaging, replaced by “lion” ingredients—or it’s called “bone-strengthening wine.” Without DNA tests on any bone bits that might have remained in the liquid, there’s no way to know what exactly it’s made from, but ongoing media reports coming out of China document dealers offering tiger bone wine to customers.

Some of these are ancient remedies prescribed for well over 1,000 years—some say traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) originated perhaps as long as 5,000 years ago. According to legend, as human civilization emerged, Heaven sent a number of “sage-kings” to teach the people how to survive in a hostile world. One of these sage kings, Shen Nong Shi (3000 B.C.), created medicine by ingesting plants and discovering which served as drugs. As Chinese medical practice evolved, circulation of qi—energy—became paramount, along with balance of yin and yang, the opposite principles in nature, and a focus on the function and the intricate relationships between five organs: kidneys, lungs, liver, heart, and spleen.

TCM ingredients include a wide range of plants, herbs, minerals, and parts from over 1,500 animals, including tigers and other endangered species—more than 6,000 substances in all. Demand for some of the most highly prized items, including rhino horn, pangolin scales, and tiger parts, has nearly hunted these creatures off the planet. The first reference in China to tiger bone medicine dates to 500 A.D., published in the Collection of Commentaries on the Classic of the Materia Medica.
The appetite for animal parts used in TCM skyrocketed in tandem with China’s expanding industrialization in the 1980s. As the country’s population approached 1.2 billion, newfound wealth and greater spending power fueled the demand as interest in traditional cures resurged: Their use garnered prestige.

Initially, tiger parts came from huge local stockpiles. In 1950, some 4,000 South China tigers roamed the country; but at the end of that decade, as part of the People’s Republic of China’s Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong declared the cats to be one of the four pests that threatened progress. He organized and championed eradication campaigns, and within a few years, just 1,000 remained. The remaining population dwindled and ultimately crashed. A South China tiger has not been spotted by biologists or government officials in the wild for over 35 years.

China’s stockpiles of tiger ingredients eventually ran low and beginning around 1986, the cats began to mysteriously disappear elsewhere. Professional poachers fanned out, shooting, snaring, and trapping their way across tiger range. India was a prime target, with close proximity to China—which is still, by far, the largest consumer of tiger parts and at the time, was the largest manufacturer and exporter of medicines containing tiger derivatives. In 1986, China’s People’s Daily newspaper reported that 116 factories were producing medicinal wine.

Poachers targeted locations where corruption was rife, enforcement weak, and where there were few other economic opportunities. They hired locals to hunt the cats or act as guides, then ran the parts and pelts over borders to Chinese TCM manufacturers and dealers. A huge pipeline was shipping wildlife to East Asia, especially China, the trade run by international crime syndicates—and driven by monstrous, staggering economics.
But it wasn’t until the early 1990s that field biologists and conservationists realized that TCM was responsible for what had become a precipitous decline in tiger numbers. It was a shocking seizure of tiger and leopard bones in Delhi, India in 1993 that revealed the severity of the threat and the mushrooming trade: 882 pounds of tiger and leopard bones (about 30 animals’ worth), eight tiger skins and 43 leopard skins. A Tibetan refugee arrested in the sting had agreed to supply an undercover agent with 2,200 pounds of bones—about 80 tigers.

Tigers were classified as globally endangered in 1986. The following year, a Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) treaty banned cross-border trade in tiger parts. From 1990 to 1992, China exported some 27 million units of tiger medicines and wine to 26 countries, according to TRAFFIC, a nonprofit that documents illegal wildlife trade. Tiger remedies were seen in pharmacies in Asian communities all over the world.
China formally banned domestic trade of tiger bone in 1993. The next year, some Chinese medical practitioners publicly repudiated the use and efficacy of tiger remedies; today, very few pharmacies still openly carry remedies containing tiger products. But the market slipped underground and shadowy networks still thrive. Though tiger hunting is illegal everywhere, the killing has continued, and in some places, it’s accelerated.

Prices for tigers, dead or alive, continue to soar as populations collapse. Poaching for their bones (and skins) has become a primary threat to their survival.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

A partial list of traditional medicine uses for tiger parts:

**Bile:** Used to treat convulsions in children

**Blood:** Used to strengthen the constitution and build willpower

**Bone:** Used as an anti-inflammatory to arthritis, rheumatism, back problems, general weakness, or headaches; also considered a powerful tonic

**Brain:** A treatment for laziness and pimples

**Claws:** A sedative for sleeplessness

**Eyeballs:** A treatment for malaria and epilepsy, nervousness or fevers in children, convulsions and cataracts

**Fat:** Prescribed for dog bites, vomiting, hemorrhoids

**Feces:** A cure for boils, hemorrhoids and alcoholism

**Flesh:** Used to treat nausea and malaria, to bring vitality and tone the stomach and spleen

**Feet:** Used to ward off evil spirits

**Fur:** Is burnt to drive away centipedes

**Nose leather:** Used to treat bites and other superficial wounds, for epilepsy and children’s convulsions

**Penis:** Used as an aphrodisiac or love potion

**Skin:** Used to cure fever caused by ghosts and mental illness

**Stomach:** Prescribed for stomach upsets
Teeth: Prescribed for rabies, asthma, and genital sores

Tail: Used to cure skin diseases

Whiskers: Used to treat toothaches

(Source: KILLED FOR A CURE: A Review of the Worldwide Trade in Tiger Bone.)

~~~~~~~~~~~~

Follow Sharon Guynup on Twitter: @sguynup

Next up: In part seven of the Talking Tigers series, I’ll report on the demand that’s feeding tiger poaching.
MEET THE AUTHOR

Sharon is a National Geographic Explorer. Her work focuses on environmental issues that impact wildlife, ecosystems, and human health--with a particular focus on wildlife trafficking and environmental crime. She has written widely on big cats, pangolins, rhinos and other endangered species and has written features, essays, blogs and commentary National Geographic, The New York Times, Smithsonian, Scientific American and other outlets. Her January 2016 story for National Geographic helped close down the Thai Tiger Temple--a combination monastery and tiger tourism operation that is now under investigation for black market wildlife trade. She’s worked with jaguar researchers in the Brazilian Panatanal, with park guards in India's Kaziranga National Park (the last outpost for Indian one-horned rhinos) and in tiger reserves across the subcontinent. Sharon has also written and photographed from the remote heart of Eastern Siberia (where grizzlies still thrive), Turkey’s Eastern Anatolian villages, has traveled by boat to isolated river towns along Myanmar’s Irrawaddy River, driven across Cuba, explored African savannas and Latin American jungles and has spent considerable time beneath the sea in various oceans. Her book, "Tigers Forever: Saving the World's Most Endangered Big Cat" is a collaboration with National Geographic photographer Steve Winter, published in 2013 by National Geographic Books. In 2006, she launched the "State of the Wild: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands and Oceans" book series for the Wildlife Conservation Society, published by Island Press. She has co-produced short videos for National Geographic, including "Special Investigation: Famous Tiger Temple Accused of Supplying Black Market" and "Battling India's Illegal Tiger Trade." Sharon lived in Turkey for a year on a Fulbright Fellowship, is a scuba diver, and worked as a photojournalist for some years before earning her Masters degree in Journalism from New York University’s Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program, where she has also taught as adjunct assistant professor. Sharon is currently a public policy fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC.
Bibi Jaenicke • 10 months ago
I view something really interesting about your blog so I saved to bookmarks.

http://www.HdkcF4rFty.com/H...

Tigah lovah24 • a year ago
tigas is so cool why do they do dis

Ciel • 2 years ago
Tyga must be sad about dem tigers

hobojo360666 • 2 years ago
bruh don kil da tigas

Manuel • 3 years ago
I believe that it is really wrong to kill an endangered species for human needs. If they actually need something to be treated for them, then they should go see a doctor and pay for the medicine that they need instead of killing poor animals that don't do anything to them. How would humans like it if tigers did the same and described what each thing in the human body was made for. I'm seriously against this.

vivek • 3 years ago
that is wrong that killing animals for human use they are endangered

Iann Smith • 4 years ago
Excellent work! I recommend additional reading on the tiger trade and other wildcat issues in the Journal of the WildCat Conservation Legal Aid Society! www.wcclas.org/publications

ALSO ON NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY BLOG

Australia and Pakistan: A Neglected Relationship?  Season 5 Field Report from Guerrero, Mexico: The Whales are Back to Calve

Researchers, conservationists, and others share stories, insights and ideas about Our Changing Planet, Wildlife & Wild Spaces, and The Human Journey. More than 50,000 comments have been added to 10,000 posts. Explore the list alongside to dive deeper into some of the most popular categories of the National Geographic Society’s conversation platform Voices.

Opinions are those of the blogger and/or the blogger’s organization, and not necessarily those of the National Geographic Society. Posters of blogs and comments are required to observe National