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Industrial-Scale Tiger Farms: Feeding China's Thirst for Luxury Tiger Products

[In Changing Planet](#)Tags [Cat Watch](#)

October 21, 2014

[28 Comments](#)[Sharon Guynup](#)

Talking Tigers: Part 7 of a 12-part series

Young, healthy tigers jump through rings of fire, sit upright on cue, **clawing at the air**, and perform other well-choreographed circus tricks. Enthusiastic crowds cheer. After the show, some pay extra to hold small, cuddly cubs.

But those who visit these tiger attractions in China have no idea of the suffering behind the scenes or the dark commerce that keeps them afloat.

If they were to slip behind the scenes, they'd see concentration-camp level suffering. Huge numbers of tigers are crammed into barred, concrete quarters or packed into dusty, treeless compounds behind chain link fences. Most of the cats are gaunt, wasted to striped skin and bone. Some are grossly deformed by inbreeding or poor nutrition. Some are blind.

Tiger Farms

Many of these operations are run as tourist destinations—and may masquerade as conservation initiatives—but these facilities are essentially factories that breed tigers for the commercial sale of their parts.

The country's 200 or so "tiger farms" are working overtime to meet a new, growing market: Tiger products have become coveted status symbols among China's elite, much like sporting a Rolex watch or serving a bottle of Dom Pérignon.

Tiger farms are supplying a shadowy underground trade, which "serves only to stimulate consumer demand, creating a massive enforcement challenge and wholly undermining the efforts of the international community to protect tigers," says Shruti Suresh, a wildlife campaigner with the London-based [Environmental Investigation Agency](#).

A tiger carcass is now worth a small fortune. With just 3,000 tigers (from six different subspecies) left in the wild, this luxury market could be the death knell for wild tigers.

Buying or gifting expensive tiger products has become a fashionable way to gain favor or flaunt wealth and power among China's most influential people, a group that reportedly includes wealthy businessmen, government officials and military officers. China is, by far, the largest consumer of tiger and many other endangered species parts.

It's created a growing clamor for tiger pelts that are used in high-end décor and for tiger bone wine, made by marinating a tiger skeleton in rice wine—which can sell for \$500 a bottle. Tiger meat is sometimes served at fashionable dinner parties where guests may have been treated to a “visual feast” before eating: watching their entrée killed and butchered before them.



ADVERTISEMENT FOR CHINA'S XIONGSEN BEAR AND TIGER MOUNTAIN VILLAGE IN CHINA—ALSO ADVERTISING TIGER BONE WINE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SAVE THE TIGER FUND.

For decades, tiger derivatives used in traditional Chinese medicine drove the black market trade. Today, tiger parts are “consumed less as medicine and more as exotic luxury products,” according to a recent report. “‘Wealth’ [is] replacing ‘health’ as a primary form of consumer motivation,” it says. With tigers and other Asian big cats rapidly disappearing, the secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) commissioned the report for review at a Standing Committee meeting in Geneva last July.

This current enterprise isn't about upholding sacred cultural tradition. Nor is it providing necessary medical treatment, says Lixin Huang, president of the [American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine](#).

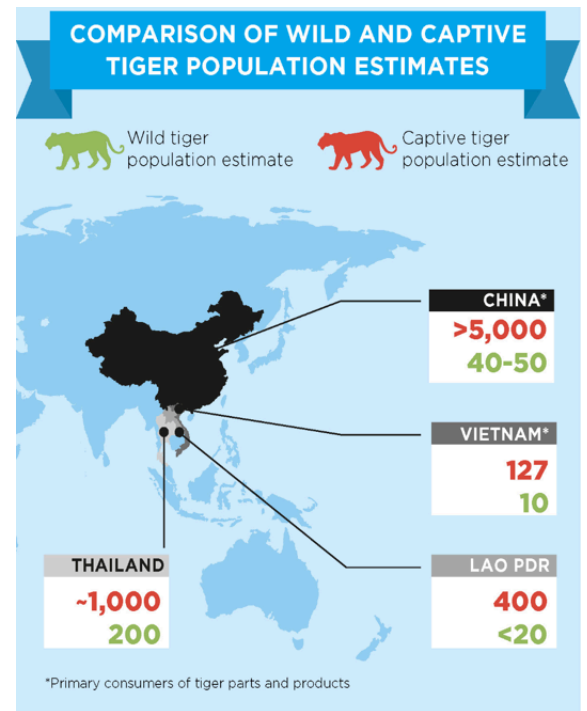
It's simply about money, influence and speculation.

Industrial-scale tiger farming makes millions of dollars for a handful of people. Some speculators are collecting tiger skin rugs and cases of tiger bone wine (vintage brewed from wild tigers is most valuable), watching their investment grow as the numbers of wild tigers dwindle. They're banking on extinction.



BOTH GRAPHICS COURTESY BORN FREE FOUNDATION / THE ENVIRONMENTAL INVESTIGATION AGENCY.

Meanwhile, tiger farming is a booming business. About twice as many tigers are living miserable, caged lives in China as all of the world's remaining



wild tigers put together. The country's captive tiger population has skyrocketed from about 20 in 1986 to between 5,000 and 6,000 today. (Three other countries also farm tigers, but on a radically smaller scale. Vietnam

is thought to hold 127, Lao PDR, 400, and Thailand, 1,000. They, too, trade illegally in tigers.)

Captive tigers are not insurance against extinction: they in no way help wild populations. They're badly interbred and a tiger raised by humans has never been successfully reintroduced to the wild.

"A lot of biologists view farmed tigers as already dead because they have nothing to do with conservation," says Judy Mills, author of the forthcoming book ["Blood of the Tiger: A Story of Conspiracy, Greed, and the Battle to Save a Magnificent Species."](#)

Industrial breeding facilities, "speed-breed" to boost production: mothers usually birth two to three cubs; if they're promptly taken from her, she can bear another litter in as little as five months. Just one

breeding center, the Heilongjiang Siberian Tiger Garden in northeast Heilongjiang Province, is expecting 100 cubs to be born over the coming year.

The largest of these, the Xiongshen Tiger and Bear Mountain Village in Guilin, held about 1,500 tigers at last count in 2010. Seed financing came from China's State Forestry Administration (SFA) when it launched in 1993. Ironically, this agency both enforces wildlife protection—and promotes farming of endangered species.

Tiger farming is legitimate business, sanctioned under a 1989 law that encourages breeding and utilization of wildlife. Sales of tiger bone and other tiger parts were, in theory, banned in 1993. However, it seems that commercial tiger breeding facilities are essentially skin and bone farms.

At July's CITES Standing Committee meeting, Chinese officials finally admitted what the world has known for some time: they are licensing sales of tiger pelts. In 2013, EIA revealed that legally-issued permits are regularly reused, making it disturbingly easy to launder skins from tigers killed in India and elsewhere. In addition to selling pelts, many tiger farms stockpile frozen carcasses—and brew tiger bone wine from their skeleton supply.



TIGER CARCASSES IN COLD STORAGE AT XIONGSEN TIGER AND BEAR PARK, GUILIN, CHINA. PHOTOGRAPH BY BELINDA WRIGHT /WILDLIFE PROTECTION SOCIETY OF INDIA.

But it's even worse than that. A factory in Changsha appears to be cranking out tiger bone wine. EIA investigators discovered that the Hunan Sanhong Biotechnology Company in Changsha is apparently manufacturing "Real Tiger Wine" on a commercial scale. Evidence suggests that the State Forestry Administration and other agencies secretly authorized the venture—and sales are not public: regional agents distribute directly to elite clients, including restaurants and guesthouses catering to high-ranking government officials.

The recent CITES report corroborates this. "Internal trading privileges" are allowed for companies dealing in tiger skins and body parts "produced mainly but not exclusively from captive breeding," it says.

Exactly how many tigers it takes to supply a wine factory—and China's luxury market—is anyone's guess. But this illegal enterprise could not be thriving if government officials were not involved, invested, benefitting—or turning a blind eye. It's become a national embarrassment for China, flying in the face of efforts by President Xi Jinping to root out corruption.

Despite claims that they have completely curbed international trafficking, the country has done little to disrupt the crime networks that control the illegal transnational trade in tiger parts—or to eliminate the nation's voracious appetite for tiger parts and products, says Belinda Wright, executive director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India.

Wildlife trafficking, now valued at about \$19 billion a year, has traditionally ranked low on most governments' list of priorities. But the ongoing massacre of elephants and rhinos has grabbed headlines and sparked action. (Though fewer tigers are being killed, there are far less left to kill—and they hover closer to extinction.)

An international summit in London in January brought together ministers and heads of state from 50 nations to galvanize a global fight against wildlife crime. They signed a declaration stating that, "Poaching and trafficking undermines the rule of law and good governance, and encourages corruption. It is an organised and widespread criminal activity, involving transnational networks."

In 2013, Achim Steiner, who heads the United Nations Environment Program, called for a global crackdown, and the U.N. Security Council, General Assembly and other U.N. bodies have taken notice. Interpol is now leading global enforcement operations.

Large conservation organizations claim to be saving tigers, but the fact is that numbers continue to plummet—and the Chinese demand for tiger products is wiping them out faster than any other threat.

Tiger experts agree that without urgent action to phase out tiger farms and end *all* commerce in tigers from *all* sources, wild tigers will disappear—and soon.

WildAid, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that combats illegal wildlife trade, says it very succinctly, with film stars Jackie Chan and Jiang Wen speaking up for tigers. Their message is broadcast in public service announcements, posted on billboards and Tweeted across social media: “When the buying stops, the killing can, too.”



CAPTIVE TIGER CUB. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DEBBIE BANKS/THE ENVIRONMENTAL INVESTIGATION AGENCY.

For more information: Check out the July 2014 report,
Assets: Tiger Farming and Trade.

“Caged

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Follow Sharon Guynup on Twitter: [@sguynup](#)

**Next up:** In part eight of the [Talking Tigers series](#), I'll share new information on a threat to one of the most endangered tiger subspecies—the Siberian tiger.







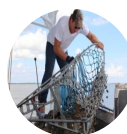
## MEET THE AUTHOR

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 Pantanal, 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.

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National Geographic Society Blog

Sharon Guynup

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Cathleen Hothersall • 2 years ago

Hi, I'd like to help captive tigers on Chinese farms. Is there any organization looking out for them? Thank you for your consideration of my question.

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Cathleen Hothersall • 2 years ago

Hi. I'd like to help to save captive tigers on Chinese farms. Are there any organizations looking





any chance to help to save captive tigers on Chinese farms? Are there any organizations looking out for them that could use support? Thank you for your consideration of my question.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**cengiz** • 2 years ago

Chine has very nice biological environment with their biological assets.. but on the other hand the worst country and community to threaten animals.. really pity.. stop it before it is too late..or inevitable that it is going to smother itself in the world of its own creation..

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Silvia** • 3 years ago

The only way to stop this bloody ORGY of wealth is to BOYCOT CHINA GOODS.

Buying Chinese goods FEEDS their thirsty for blood, and there is nothing that can be done to stop IGNORANCE, but CUTTING OFF their INCOME.

WE, the buyers, are responsible for this new Chinese wealth.

Let's cut their umbilical cord, LET'S BOYCOT CHINA NOW!!!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Mirjana Mcdonald** • 3 years ago

All who make comment regarding this disgraceful act would like to join me in action in any way possible to help these beautiful creatures. Suggestions / thoughts?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**John trevlac** • 3 years ago

If you look from a slanted angle on all this, a cow is a magnificent beast, a sheep is a curious animal, a pig is a disgusting beast. But all serve one purpose. They are food.

So why is it so vile that the Chinese eat tiger, why is it vile that they farm this animal. We farm just as in humanely. I am not a vegetarian I love my bacon buttie just like the next man. It's just unfortunate that we the human race need a meat source to survive.

Kangaroo, wild boar, bison, ostrich, snake and many many more animals get eaten on a daily basis.....

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Sameer Karkal** • 3 years ago

China .. Biggest threat for wildlife and environment .. If they continue this way , China itself will see the end .. I would say to government to show mercy for wildlife and start protecting them..

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Maureen McGill** • 3 years ago

Abuse China, the worst place in the world to live in, protect



Always China, the worst place in the world to be an animal.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Maria Michalik** • 3 years ago

stop torturen & killing Animals

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**ute christner** • 3 years ago

das darf nicht passieren das diese wundervollen und edlen Tiere so hingerichtet werden. Sie gehören in Freiheit oder ein Riesengehege wo der Auslauf gesichert ist!!! Satt dessen werden sie unter starken Medikamenten gesetzt das sie sich ruhig verhalten, das ist Misshandlung und Tierquälerei!!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Debbie Gardo** • 3 years ago

Stop the abuse!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Allison de fer** • 3 years ago

Disgraceful needs to STOP NOW

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**dori saari** • 3 years ago

We must stop all abuse animal...and human....there is no reason to any of it.....we need to evolve or parish....the earth needs healing

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Paul Weinert** • 3 years ago

poor innocent animals

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**LETICIA EUSTACIA MEDEL GONZ#1** • 3 years ago

POR QUE AMO A LOS ANIMALES EN ESPECIAL A LOS TIGRES!!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Lynda Gedge** • 3 years ago

disgusting cruel practice

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Carole Baskin** • 3 years ago





[Carole Buckin](#) • 3 years ago

The U.S. has no legitimacy on the world stage to be denouncing China's tiger trade when we don't even know how many tigers are languishing in backyards, basements and garages in America. We need to pass the Big Cats & Public Safety Act HR 1998 S 1381 to ban the private possession of big cats in time to save the wild tiger because private possession is a smoke screen for the illegal trade.

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[LAURA](#) • 3 years ago

CADÊ O GOVERNO QUE NÃO FAZ NADA? DEIXEM A NATUREZA VIVER. É POR ISSO QUE EU E MUITOS NÃO COMPRAMOS NADA DA CHINA. OS PAÍSES DEVEM PROIBIR QUE ELES VENDAM PARA OS NOSSOS PAÍSES.,ENQUANTO ELES NÃO ACABAREM COM ISSO. CADÊ AS ONGS? CADÊ AS AUTORIDADES GOVERNAMENTAIS. NÃO AGUENTO MAIS TANTA MALDADE DESSES CHINESES. NÃO COMO EM LANCHONETES DELES.

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[Sally Dyer](#) • 3 years ago

These people are sick in the head. Egotistical idiots!

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[Sylvie Payet](#) • 3 years ago

It has to stop immediately!!!!!!

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[Alexander Vasolla](#) • 3 years ago

This is unacceptable, horrific! 200 tiger farms !?! 20! This MUST be stopped, for all humanity, for all life.

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[Samantha hern](#) • 3 years ago

Why do Chinese people have no sense of what is right or wrong! They have no compassion & will eat ANYTHING!!

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[Anne Warner](#) • 3 years ago

The people of China should understand surely that there are other things to use now that communication is open. we have with fur.

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[Philippa Scott](#) • 3 years ago



The Chinese have no sense of what is right or wrong! They will eat anything. We should stop trade with China, until they sort out this barbaric trade and the breeding of these magnificent animals just to be killed for peoples enjoyment.

They are beyond belief. They do not deserve to be called a civilised nation!!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Val McClean** • 3 years ago

THIS HAS TO BE STOPPED. IT IS UTTERLY DISGRACEFUL THAT THESE PEOPLE CONTINUE WITH THIS CRUELTY TOWARDS OUR BEAUTIFUL ANIMALS!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Paula Ilona** • 3 years ago

Stop this horrible animals cruelty !!! Shame people !!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Patricia A Gough** • 3 years ago

This nasty cruel horrific treatment HAS to be stopped.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Hailey Martin** • 3 years ago

STOP!!!Tigers are going to go extinct

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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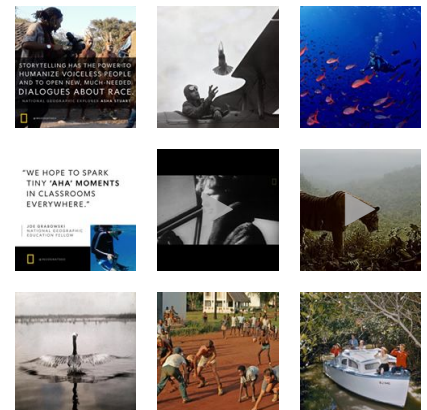
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@NatGeoExplorers · 7h

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Voices director: David Braun ([dbraun@ngs.org](mailto:dbraun@ngs.org))

spoke to her about the importance of telling these stories.

↩️ ↻ 2 ❤️ 17

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@NatGeoExplorers · 9 Feb

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<https://t.co/1Cd5gXDeZd>

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