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Tigers and Wild Cats for Sale in Myanmar: A Tale of Two Border Towns

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December 23, 2014

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

WILD BENGAL TIGERS IN INDIA. (PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE WINTER/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC)

Talking Tigers: Part 9 of a 12-part series

A decades-long investigation found that the illicit trade in tigers and other wild cats has been nearly shut down in Tachilek—a frontier town in eastern Myanmar—most likely because of heightened security across the border in Thailand. But the situation in Mong La, a lawless Burmese city on the Chinese border, is radically different. Over the past eight years, the number of shops selling cat parts and products has more than tripled.

This new [report](#) from [TRAFFIC](#), an organization that monitors the global wildlife trade, confirms that Mong La is a major hub funneling wildlife products into China. Their findings illustrate the success of a boots-on-the-ground fight against trafficking—and show how lack of enforcement allows crime to flourish. The data was published in the journal [Biological Conservation](#).

This study began when Chris Shepherd, who now heads TRAFFIC's Southeast Asia office, first visited Tachilek in the 1990s. The streets were lined with shops selling a staggering array of wildlife products. Tiger pelts hung on the walls. Tiger and leopard skulls, claws, and teeth, along with the skins of many small and large felines lined glass cases and were displayed on tables beside the bones, horns and antlers of an astonishing number of species. Many of the animals being sold there, including all wild cats, are protected under an international treaty, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Tachilek has been a well-known center for buyers and smugglers for decades. Myanmar is a major opium producer—number two, behind



TIGER SKIN AND MOUNTED HEAD DISPLAYED FOR SALE IN TACHILEK, MYANMAR IN THE EARLY 2000'S. ACCORDING TO THE SHOP OWNER, THIS SKIN ORIGINATED IN INDIA. (PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS R. SHEPHERD/TRAFFIC)

Afghanistan—and Thai border towns have been key transit points since World War II. Tachilek, “the Capital of the Golden Triangle,” is home to drug lords who use the same routes to trade in heroin, guns, women—and illegal wildlife.

Shepherd and others returned periodically over the next 22 years, conducting 19 surveys from 1991 to 2013. They carefully tallied and photographed the cat products offered for sale. Over tea, they chatted with dealers who boasted about customers who poured in from Thailand, Taiwan, and all over Asia to buy their goods. They had nothing to fear. Enforcement was weak on the Thai side of the border, and virtually nonexistent in Tachilek.

By the turn of the millennium, tiger numbers had dwindled to somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000. With greater media scrutiny, sellers grew cagey. They no longer spoke openly or allowed pictures. Some hid their wares, only pulling them out for prospective buyers. Slowly, the wildlife market all but died. The 35 shops that sold cat merchandise in 2000 shrank to just six last year. “I think this speaks volumes for the power of raising awareness,” says Shepherd. “Putting issues like this in the spotlight is essential.”

A similar survey launched in Mong La in 2001. It’s a city that was carved from dense jungle in Myanmar’s remote northeastern Shan state to become the capital of Special Region No. 4. This semi-autonomous area is run by the rebel National Democratic Alliance Army, the military arm of the Kokang, a Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese ethnic group.

Mong La is a seedy, Burmese version of Las Vegas with little rule of law. It runs on gambling, prostitution, money laundering—and a thriving commerce in rare wildlife that caters to clients from China.

In 2006, six shops carried wild cat parts and derivatives. But since then, value and demand have spiked, driven by China’s legal trade in tiger skins and a clamor for tiger bone wine; though the sale of tiger bone is illegal in China, officials turn a blind eye. Earlier this year, 21 shops were trading in cats.

The study’s authors, Shepherd and Oxford anthropology professor Vincent Nijman, say that the increase in cat trade in Mong La correlates with the burgeoning buying power of China’s consumers—and the seeming ease of smuggling across this rather porous border. Traffickers have little fear of being stopped.

The city’s huge outdoor “wet market” sells animals brought in overnight, everything from cats and slow lorises to bear cubs, birds and deer, anything that local hunters can get their hands on. It’s a morning market where proprietors slaughter animals on the spot for customers who come for meat or fresh skins.

Then there are high-end shops scattered across the city that handle luxury goods: ivory and hippo teeth from Africa,



THE MORNING “WET MARKET” IN MONG LA. (PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS R. SHEPHERD/TRAFFIC)

helmeted
hornbills
from
Indonesia,
Tibetan
antelope
heads,
rhino horn
—and
extremely
expensive
tiger
pelts.
“Clearly
this
[boutique
trade] is
targeted
at some
serious
players,”

says Shepherd.

The bones are the priciest part of the tiger. They were rarely seen during surveys in Mong La, probably because they are in such high demand.

For those who wish to dine on wildlife after a visit to a casino or a brothel, there are numerous establishments filled with an almost unimaginable variety of caged animals. Many of these restaurants boast huge glass tanks of wine with whole tiger skeletons floating inside. Others advertise tiger bone wine by hanging tiger skins on the walls. If you wanted to order tiger meat, you could probably get it, Shepherd says grimly.

Serious quantities of wildlife are consumed in town, but a lot is also being smuggled out. Mong La is one of Asia’s largest open wildlife markets, says Shepherd, and “it’s clearly a major facilitator for cross-border tiger trade.” You can buy just about anything, at any time. But he notes that some dealers are quite guarded about selling tiger parts. “There’s no one there who doesn’t know that it’s illegal.”

Where the tigers are coming from is anyone's guess. Dealers have consistently claimed that most of their cat merchandise was hunted locally, though some tigers were being smuggled from India. Previous studies in Tachilek traced big cat skins and bones to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Smaller cats like clouded leopards and Asiatic golden cats still hang on in Myanmar, but very few tigers remain. They've been heavily hunted, originally as vermin, later as trophies. Whole swathes of their forest habitat have been leveled. The volume of wild pigs, muntjac deer, and other game species being traded in Mong La is alarming; without food, there are no tigers. What's even more disturbing is that many deer species in Southeast Asia have become so hard to find that they've completely disappeared from the markets. Stopping the tiger trade without stopping the trade in their prey is short-sighted, says Shepherd. "It's a whole package."



MUNTJAC DEER, PANGOLIN SCALES, AND OTHER WILDLIFE PARTS FOR SALE IN MONG LA'S OUTDOOR WILDLIFE MARKET. (PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS R. SHEPHERD/TRAFFIC)

Borders are often defined by rivers, mountains or natural bottlenecks, places where enforcement can have a real impact. But wildlife trafficking is low on the list of priorities for border officials. The Thai side of the Tachilek border is well-manned, and officials fill big containers with confiscated wildlife. It clearly shows that enforcement can be a deterrent.

Because Mong La is in a "non-government" region, a crackdown on the Myanmar side of the border is unlikely, so Chinese authorities need to be encouraged to act. "If people can't take wildlife across the border, it'll strangle this market,"

says Shepherd. “You can argue that they’ll just move somewhere else; so then you go shut it down there. Any crime is like that. You have to keep chasing it, crushing it wherever it pops up.”

The key to saving tigers and all wildlife, he says, is threefold. First off, reducing demand and proper enforcement of wildlife laws is crucial. Secondly, we need to make the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species work: [CITES](#) regulates that trade under a treaty signed by 180 nations. “If countries were held accountable for their commitments to the convention, and implemented and enforced CITES, we wouldn’t be in the situation we’re in now,” says Shepherd.

Currently, that’s not happening. Most countries in Southeast Asia—including major wildlife trading countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia—don’t have adequate wildlife protection laws on the books, despite the fact that all parties are obliged to have a legal structure in place that makes CITES enforceable.

Lastly, Shepherd says that in order to save wildlife, society as a whole must care. It requires a populace that frowns on those who use threatened species as meat or trophies, that understands conservation issues, that doesn’t want to witness a mass extinction.

Without public support, there won’t be adequate pressure to pass necessary legislation or to increase enforcement efforts. In China and elsewhere, [celebrities](#) and [athletes](#) are raising awareness, which Shepherd calls a step in the right direction. “Societies aren’t going to care about something they don’t understand,” he says. “People don’t know. That’s our biggest enemy: this global ignorance of how urgent the situation is.”

Wildlife trade and looming extinctions have probably never been in the spotlight as much as they are now, with global leaders calling for action and committing funds. “What we need now is for that high level attention and those funds to trickle down to the front lines where they’re needed, in places like Mong La and Jakarta, where there are big wildlife markets, in places along the Malaysia-Thai border, the hotspots, the trade hubs,” he says.

“I’ll be surprised if we have 3,000 tigers left. So clearly, enforcement efforts across the board in all tiger range states and consumer states are still not enough. We’re still losing tigers,” says Shepherd, adding, “There is absolutely no excuse for not saving wild tigers. It just takes commitment and effort.”

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Next up: In part 10 of the [Talking Tigers series](#), I’ll look at tigers in India.



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.



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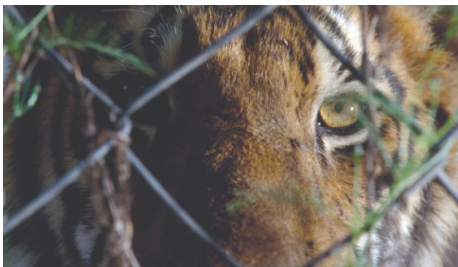


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warm regards

Taufik Rahman , Sitepu

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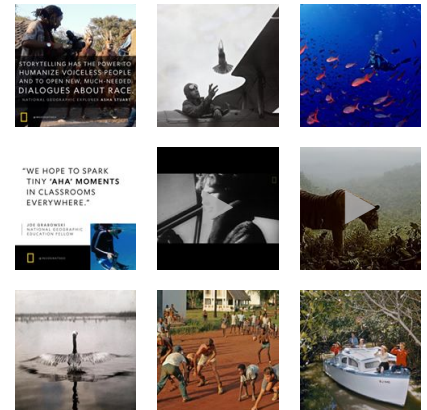
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