

Paper 6

The Illicit Trade on Megavertebrates of Asia

Prasanna S. Yonzon

Abstract

The complexity of poaching of megavertebrates of Asia and burgeoning markets, reveal that south Asia is at peril. Status of wildlife trade in recent times in India, Nepal and China are explored, with considerations to assess poaching-related damages to the tigers and rhinos. Recent market studies suggest that the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, has become the centerfold for tiger skin and bones. The tigers in India, are persecuted for skin trades in China. Nepal is also under heavy duress both as transit point and also a source for poaching. The findings indicate a strong need for a regional cooperation through a tripartite agreement. Such will also, bolster the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Also, trade in these countries warrant special attention from the judicial and law enforcement agencies to arrest wildlife crimes within and outside the country through law enforcement, information-sharing and cooperation.

Keywords: China, India, illicit wildlife trade, Nepal, poaching, rhinos, skin trade, South Asia, Tibet, tigers

Introduction

In many Asian countries, wildlife species are widely trapped, poisoned, and hunted for body parts as medicine, meat, ornaments, pets and trophies. Wildlife exploitation varies across Asia, and the extent of illicit trade is difficult to estimate as activities are covert, though their markets thrive openly.

Asia's charismatic megavertebrates are best represented by the tiger, elephant and rhinoceros. Unfortunately, all three of these megavertebrates have succumbed to illicit trade and large scale habitat destruction. Now, their distribution and survival are limited to small, isolated protected areas in a few Asian countries, where poaching thrives. This paper is based on years of intelligence gathering, field operations by Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), Wildlife Conservation Nepal (WCN) and a published report of the Environment Investigation Agency (Banks & Newman2004).

Once, it was thought that south Asia had a low level of wildlife exploitation and illicit trade because of a long history of protection (Wikramnayake 2002). In contrast, most of Southeast Asia (Indochina) are defaunated often referred to as having "empty forest syndrome" (Redford 1992) because protection of forest has been recent and wildlife exploitation is far and wide. All that boundaries have changed now because of the growing economy, increased transport across open boundaries with free trade and open markets. As a result, illicit trade affects all of Asia, where south Asia has become the source and Southeast and East Asia are centers of markets for consumption of rhino and tiger body parts (Yonzon 2005). Huge seizures over the last five years suggest wildlife trade in India, Nepal and China, are a major threat to tigers and leopards in Asia (Table 1)(Fig.1).

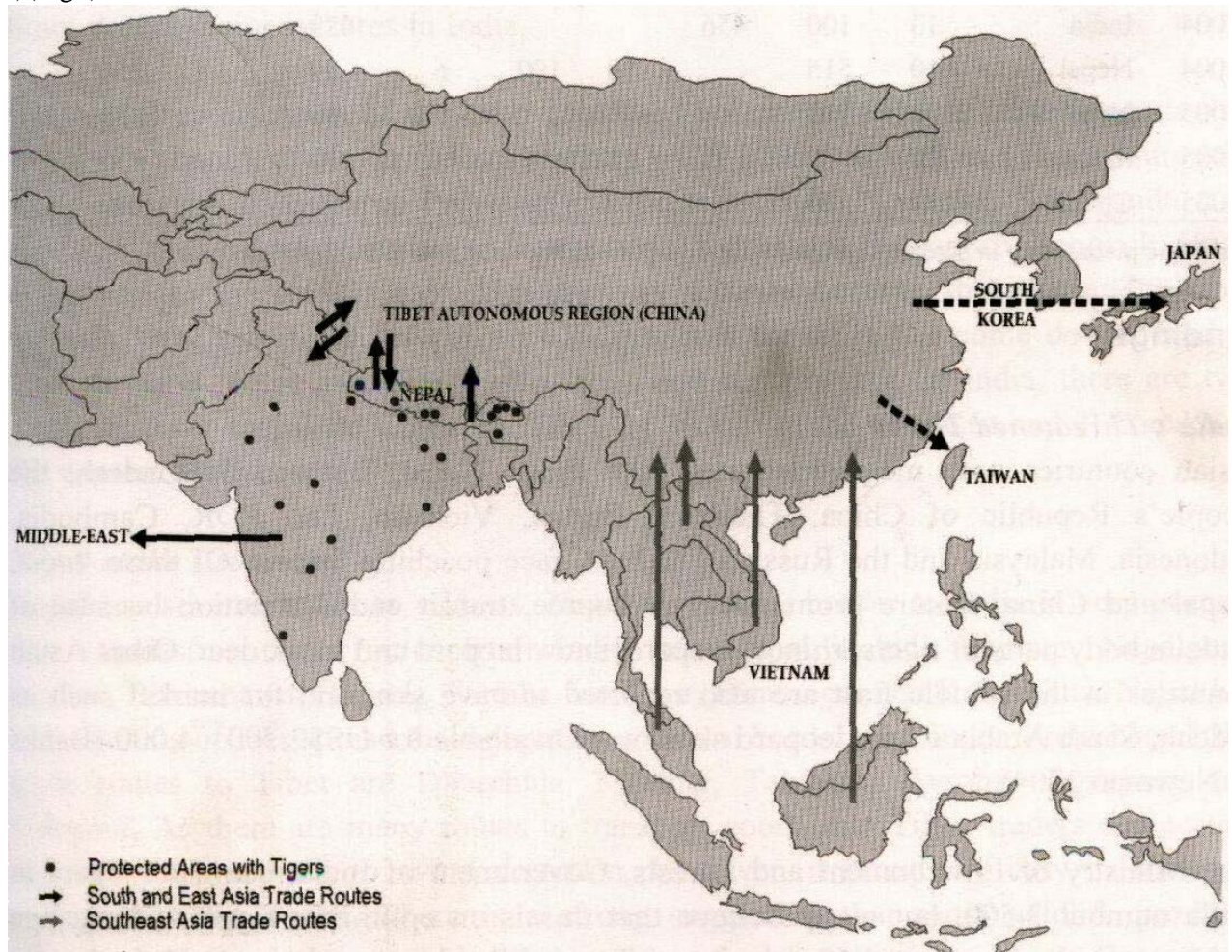


Figure 1. Illegal wildlife trade routes in Asia and protected areas where megavertebrates are poached.

Table 1. Significant wildlife seizures over last five years regarding wildlife trade (Banks & Newman 2004; WCN database 2005).

Year	Country	Tiger			Rhino			Leopard		Otter
		Skin	Bone*	Claws	Horn	Skin	Bones*	Skin	Claws	Skin
2000	India	4	300	132				150	18,080	221
2001	China	23						33		134
2001	India	6	5	20				94		3
2001	Nepal	359			14					
2002	Nepal				41					
2002	India	1								
2003	India	31			45			593		778
2003	Nepal	6			37			109		14
2003	China	32						581		778
2004	India	13	100	456				479		
2004	Nepal	10	515		10	190	6	39		256
2005	Nepal	5	113					36		238
2005	India	27			25			174		56
2005	China	112	70					60		20

*As bone pieces vary in size and weight, bone comparison between two seizures, is difficult.

Findings

Asian countries with megavertebrates, like India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, the People's Republic of China, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Russian Far East, face poaching threats. Of these, India, Nepal and China, feature prominently as source, transit and destination because of trade in body parts of tigers, rhinos, leopard, snow leopard and musk deer. Other Asian countries in the Middle East are also reported to have skin and fur market such as Jeddah, Saudi Arabia where leopard skins were available for US\$2,700 - 4,000 (Banks & Newman 2004).

The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, estimates tigers in India number 3,500, but many believe that this is an optimistic figure (Chengappa 2005). As India has around 50 per cent of the world's tiger population, and the largest population of the one-homed Asiatic rhino, it is not surprising that India's 27 protected areas where tigers occur are the principal source for the poachers and traders. The Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) states that between 1994 and 2003, there have been 784 cases documenting poaching and seizure of 684 tigers, 2,336 leopards and 698 otters in which over 1,400 individuals were allegedly involved. But, only 14 records of convictions and sentencing, resulted. In spite of

this legal protection, dramatic declines have occurred in tiger populations as demand for tiger body parts has increased. So much so, Sariska National Park in India lost all its tigers to poaching by the beginning of 2005 (Chengappa 2005). The high demand for tiger bone has spread into populations of Asian leopards and snow leopards

as traders reportedly target them as substitutes for tiger products.

Most wildlife poached in India and Nepal are smuggled into China for traditional medicine usages, and for the neo rich in China, Siberia, South East Asia and beyond (WPSI 2006a). There is a strong clandestine network between traders in Indian cities, who collect and process Indian tiger skins, and middlemen and traders in Nepal transport them into China through Tibet by land. Skin seizures in Indian cities have led to the arrest of Nepali and Tibetans in India and Nepal. Mobile phones seized from arrested individuals revealed telephone numbers in Nepal that were called several times during major seizures in India.

Occasional confiscation of the ever-increased volume of wildlife trade suggests that Nepal is a conduit to the far eastern market (WCN 2005a) as well as a target source for rhino and tiger body parts. Previously, airports in Delhi, Calcutta, Kathmandu, and Paro (Bhutan) were key outlets to international market via Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong and to the middle east. However, as security became stringent and custom officials were sensitized, use of air consignments for trade has come down. Traders now use land-routes as borders are porous and customs lax. In India, there are two direct routes to mainland China via Tibet: 1) Sikkim in the northeast and 2) Ladakh in the western Himalaya.

Nepal at the Crossroad

Nepal has several issues to address. Nepal's southern border to India is very porous. The clandestine trade routes from India into Nepal include Rajapur, Nepalgunj, Butwal, Bhairahawa, Birgunj, Sarlahi, Janakpur, Biratnagar and Kakarbhita. Nepal has 165 customs offices spread throughout its southern border with India. From Nepal, the trade routes to Tibet are Dharchula, Manang, Taklakot, Kyrong, Taplejung and Tatopani. As there are many routes to transport goods into Tibet, traders use porters and backpack animals to avoid detection. However, it is equally easy to transport consignment by trucks. There is a strong suggestion that most wildlife products brought to Kathmandu are sold and then dispatched to other destination. One reason could be that traffic volume entering Kathmandu is high and rarely checked by customs or police except for trucks without documents and road permits. Kathmandu has become a covert node of illegal wildlife trade and wildlife goods are delivered at Boudha, Swayambhu, Kalanki, Banepa and Balaju. All transactions are in cash and preferred money is US currency. Of confiscated items, skin consignments are well tanned, folded like clothes and many had "PAID" stamped on them, suggesting it would be hard for airport x-ray machines to detect them.

The major smugglers and traders based in Kathmandu are Tibetans. A few are Nepali. The database on confiscated wildlife goods in India and in Nepal suggests that Tibetans are the primary buyers (WCN, 2005b; Banks & Newman 2004) as more than 90 percent of traders are from Tibetan communities. Today, traders are better equipped and their field operations are well organized. They have hired full-time lawyers in the event if they are arrested for wildlife offences

Tibetan smugglers who trade in wildlife body parts and the Tibetan exile authorities of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, are not the same. These traders carry Indian, or often Nepali passports instead of the standard refugee documents. As per the report of EIA (Banks

& Newman 2004), many of them are implicated in the illegal trade in antiques and artifacts, supplying false Nepali and Indian travel documents, and likely to be involved in drugs trafficking within India and Nepal. They have evaded Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India and have 'red corner notice' issued by INTERPOL. They maintain excellent political connections in Nepal and Tibet, and are associated with syndicates such as Nagchu Import-Export Corporation of Tibet. For both the traders and the syndicates, smuggling tiger skins is one of the many interrelated criminal activities.

Recently, poachers from _____ and _____ communities who are alleged to have wiped out the tigers from Sariska National Park and other reserves of India, have moved into Nepal, fearing persecution by the Indian Government. WCN is monitoring their movements, with the support of enforcement agencies. As a result, a few with possession of tiger bones and leopard skins, have been arrested in Kathmandu. There are more than fifty _____ and _____ living in makeshift tents in Kathmandu and in Naryanghat, close to Chitwan National Park.

Tigers and rhinos are poached extensively in Nepal's protected areas. All body parts are transported directly to Kathmandu. Chitwan lost 252 rhinos in five years, mostly to poaching (DNPWC 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004 & 2005). From 1986 onwards, 87 rhinos were translocated to Bardia National Park and Suklaphanta from Chitwan. After nearly five years of conflict, a census reported three rhinos where 75 rhinos were translocated, indicating protected area management has been ineffective in protecting rhinos and tigers during the conflict (Yonzon 2002).

Destination China

Penalties in China for wildlife crime are severe, with possession of just one tiger skin carrying a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison, fine up to ten times the value of the seized items and confiscation of income derived from the trade. Despite such a strong deterrent with legal penalties, trade continues. In 1993, China enforced a ban on the domestic trade of tiger body parts, two years after it became a signatory of the CITES (Bartlett 2006). Despite these strong legal deterrents, trade continues. China is also criticized for illicit wildlife consignments it receives from Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam, Lao PDR, Thailand, Burma & Malaysia) through Ruili, Wanding, Mengia and Hekou in Yunan. Also, shatoosh, the wool of the Chiru, Tibetan antelope _____ is smuggled into India. The barter rate once set at two bags of chiru wool for one bag of tiger bones. With vibrant cash economy, this system of barter is less significant now. Shatoosh follows the same trade route that either passes via Nepal or Ladakh to reach the skilled Kashmir! weavers in the western Himalaya.

Lately, Tibet has become the key location for smuggling, distribution and use of tiger skins and bones. The Barkhor area of Lhasa, has several shops with traditional costumes trimmed with otter and leopard skin. 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. A leopard skin fetches US\$850 and a tiger skin brings US\$10,000. Dry bones from an adult tiger weigh about 12 to 15 kg which could sell for US\$ 500 - 1,000 per kilo (Bartlett 2006).

In Tibet the tiger is a symbol of physical, military or spiritual power rather than wealth or

social position. In 2005, Belinda Wright of WPSI observed 46 shops in Lhasa, with 54 leopard and 24 tiger skin traditional wrap-around garments worn by most Tibetans during festivals. In addition, seven fresh leopard skins and three fresh tiger skins were offered for sale. On one street in Linxia, China, 60 snow leopards and 160 leopard skins were openly on display. Tibet's thriving market may explain the increased poaching of tigers in India but in the absence of any official or unofficial figures, it is difficult to compare yearly trends (WPSI 2006b). With every festival in the Tibet Autonomous Region, it takes a toll on the remaining tigers, leopards and otters in India. WPSI and ELA's investigations suggest lack of awareness amongst Tibetans and their political leaders in China about the indisputable risk of extinction of the big cats in Asia.

The Dalai Lama in early 2006, during the ceremony held in south India, repeatedly addressed the issue in front of several thousands of Tibetans who had come from Tibet for the occasion. Tibetans have been very responsive to these appeals. The Barkhor area shops were virtually empty of endangered animal skins and people bum wildlife skins at public places. However, an effective campaign can only yield success in the long term. There is a clear consensus that the greatest threat to the tiger is the demand for tiger skins and body parts in China because of the organized criminal networks and in the usage of traditional Chinese medicine.

Remedial Issues

There has been a lack of political will in India, Nepal and China to develop a new mechanism to combat the trade. Parties of Asian origin to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) need to demonstrate that they are curbing wildlife crime. Key range, transit and destination countries have no specialized enforcement units to arrest the well-organized criminal networks. Non-governmental and professional enforcement agencies have not shown greater cross-border communication and coordination.

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 either insignificant or non-existent. Thus, the judicial system has virtually failed to deter poachers and smugglers. Legal penalties will not work in isolation. In India, offenders of wildlife crime get both freedom and bail easily, suggesting illicit wildlife trade is not hazardous and law enforcement is avoidable, provided one is careful.

Conclusion

East and Southeast Asia are known for consumption of wildlife resources. Of these, cities in mainland China have emerged as the key markets where wild animals from Vietnam, Lao PDR and Malaysia are sold as food and pets. For traditional medicine, and ornaments, China has found India along with other south Asian countries as its source for tiger and rhino body parts. In this covert trade, Nepal suffers more by being both transit and source point where Tibetans, Nepali and Indians traders and poachers all operate.

Often, poaching events are conveniently related to scarce funding or facilities. Inability to arrest poaching is a structural malfunction where poachers and smugglers become more organized and anti-poaching activities are weakened in the absence of political will and weak State machinery. Therefore, awareness in civil societies and government must be brought forth including heightened intelligence and information gathering on traders and their ground

workers. Alternatives must also be explored, while constant vigilance remains fundamental.

Due to the geopolitical realities of Nepal, wildlife trade can and is undermining biodiversity conservation. India, Nepal and China must form an alliance through tripartite agreements. Moreover, the on-going battle against illicit trade to protect tigers, rhinos and elephants, will be fought in the front yard of Asia.

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