

A rapid assessment of the tiger trade in Viet Nam

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INTRODUCTION

Tiger seizures have been reported in Viet Nam since 2004 and TRAFFIC has been actively monitoring the tiger trade in that country since the early 1990s (Mainka, 1997; Verheij *et al.*, 2010; Stoner and Pervushina, 2013; Stoner *et al.*, 2016). Both the domestic and international trade in Tigers *Panthera tigris* for commercial purposes is prohibited in Viet Nam (Decree 160/2013/ND-CP and Decree 82/2006/ND-CP, respectively). TRAFFIC previously reported a total of 61 seizures involving tigers in Viet Nam between 2004 and 2015 (Stoner *et al.*, 2016). In 2016, a year not captured by Stoner *et al.*, 2016, there were seven recorded seizures involving tigers and/or tiger parts in Viet Nam (TRAFFIC, unpub. data). The use of online platforms, including social media, to sell wildlife and wildlife products is now well established in Asia (see e.g. IFAW, 2012; Stoner, 2014; Krishnasamy and Stoner, 2016; Nguyen and Willemsen, 2016; Sy, 2017; Indraswari *et al.*, in prep; Yu, in prep.) and this report confirms the existence of an online market for tiger products in Viet Nam. Beyond a cursory search in 2015 by researchers in Viet Nam on social media, this is the first full survey of the online tiger market in Viet Nam.

By 2016, the wild tiger population in Viet Nam had dropped to fewer than five individuals (WWF, 2016), leaving the species effectively extinct in this country. Meanwhile, the number of captive tigers housed in Viet Nam increased from 180 in May 2016 (EIA, 2016) to 253 in September 2016 (ENV, 2017), and the number of registered tiger farms has risen from five in 2007 (EIA, 2017) to 13 in 2017 (ENV, 2017). This paper provides an update on the illegal tiger trade in Viet Nam in 2017 combining seizure reports with a review of the online market. Seizure reports indicate that tiger products are still transiting Viet Nam, while online market research shows that tiger parts continue to make it to the point of sale.

METHODS

Information on seizures of tigers and tiger parts over 12 months (January to December 2017) was obtained through TRAFFIC's monitoring of Vietnamese and English-language news media. Where possible, this information was corroborated with the authorities.

Online market monitoring was undertaken over a period of 25 days between 27 March and 28 April 2017 on 18 Vietnamese-language platforms (social media platforms and e-commerce websites) that bore the country domain (".vn") or commercial domain (".com"). The platforms were pre-determined prior to the survey based on previous surveys and literature (WCS, 2013;



Fig. 1. Provinces in Viet Nam where tiger seizures were recorded during 2017.

Nguyen and Willemsen, 2016; VECOM, 2017). Twelve Vietnamese key search terms were used for monitoring purposes (Table 1) to identify advertisements for items purporting to contain tiger products. Although it is impossible to determine whether the products offered online were genuine, details such as the description, shape, and colour were used to eliminate likely fakes. Additionally, only advertisements with photos were considered.

The survey effort was fixed at one hour per day, allowing the researcher to survey between one and four of the 18 platforms each day. The research captured advertisements with date stamps (i.e. posting dates) from 1 January 2017 to 28 April 2017, effectively capturing four months of data. It is important to note that traders frequently delete posts once items have been sold and therefore it was not always possible to record data from some of the advertisements with earlier date stamps.

In order to avoid inflating the number of items present in each advertisement, care was taken to review and eliminate duplicate advertisements (i.e. exact image and text) from the analysis, including those that were

No.	English	Vietnamese
1	Tiger	Hồ
2	Tiger bone glue	Cao hồ/ Cao hồ cốt
3	Bone glue	Cao
4	Tiger teeth	Nanh hồ/ Răng hồ
5	Tiger claw	Móng hồ/ Vuốt hồ
6	Tiger skin	Da hồ
7	Sell tiger	Bán hồ
8	Sell tiger bone glue	Bán cao hồ/ Bán cao hồ cốt
9	Sell bone glue	Bán cao
10	Sell tiger teeth	Bán nanh hồ/ Bán răng hồ
11	Sell tiger claw	Bán móng hồ/ Bán vuốt hồ
12	Sell tiger skin	Bán da hồ

Table 1. List of Vietnamese key search terms used for online monitoring.

Description	No. of parts seized	Weight (kg) seized
Bone (raw)	-	47
Dead specimens*	12	-
Live specimens	2	-
Heads	1	-
Tails	1	-
Legs	2	-
TOTAL	18	47

Table 2. Tigers/tiger parts seized in Viet Nam, 2017.

Platform	No. of ads	No. of items	Weight (kg)
Website 1	1	1	-
Website 2	1	1	-
Website 3	2	2	-
Website 4	3	-	3
Social Media Website 1	178	980	5
Social Media Website 2	2	111	-
TOTAL	187	1,095	8

Table 3. Tiger products for sale online, by platform, January–April 2017.

Description	No. of products	Weight (kg)
Bone (glue)	-	8
Claw (pendant)	171	-
Claw (raw)	719	-
Meat	-	N/A*
Skin (piece)	39	-
Skin (purse)	36	-
Tooth (pendant)	16	-
Tooth (raw)	114	-
TOTAL	1,095	8

Table 4. Tiger products for sale online, January–April 2017.

*This refers to an unidentifiable amount of tiger meat offered for sale on Social Media Website 1.

posted on different dates within the timeframe covered by the survey. The number of items recorded for sale was determined based on the wording/photos accompanying the advertisement, excluding any wording/photos found in the comments section of the advertisement. In cases where the number of items was difficult to determine, the highest number reasonably apparent from the advertisement was recorded. The results published in this report represent minimum figures and may underestimate actual online tiger trade numbers.

RESULTS

Seizures

In 2017, 10 seizures involving tigers and/or tiger products took place in Viet Nam. Seizures were more frequent in the first half of the year: between January and May there was one or more seizure every month. In the second half of the year, the only three seizures recorded occurred in November. Tigers and tiger parts were seized either at private residences (six seizures) or in vehicles during transportation (four seizures).

All but one of the seizures took place in the northern provinces: Thanh Hoa (four seizures), Nghe An (two seizures), Hanoi (one seizure), Ninh Binh (one seizure), and Thai Nguyen (one seizure). The other seizure took place in the southern province of Dong Nai (Fig. 1). Of the seizures for which trade routes were known (seven), all were headed in a northerly direction towards Hanoi. This is consistent with TRAFFIC's previous findings which indicated a trend of concentrated tiger trade around Hanoi beginning in 2012 (Stoner *et al.*, 2016). Only one seizure, in Nghe An, indicated a tie to international trade and the consignment was reported to have been transiting from Lao PDR. The seizure, containing a dead tiger, bears out TRAFFIC's previous findings of a trade in whole tigers from Lao PDR to Viet Nam (Stoner *et al.*, 2016).

Dead tigers were the most common commodity type present in seizures in 2017 (Table 2), which supports the historical trends in Viet Nam previously reported by TRAFFIC (Stoner *et al.*, 2016). Two of the twelve dead specimens were frozen tiger cubs, while the other 10 ranged in weight from between 100 and 500 kg each. The two live tigers (seized separately) were likely fully grown adult males given their size (200 kg and 300 kg, respectively). One head and one tail were seized together, as were two tiger legs, although it is uncertain if they were sourced from the same animal. It is notable that one incident involved the seizure of a dead tiger from an ambulance. Using an ambulance to transport wildlife has been recorded in Viet Nam on at least three previous occasions, including to transport a dead tiger in 2012 (TRAFFIC, 2017).

Online market survey

The online market survey found 1,095 tiger products offered for sale in 187 advertisements from 85 unique sellers on four e-commerce websites and two social



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Tiger *Panthera tigris corbetti*

media websites (Table 3). The clear majority of the advertisements (95%) were found on Social Media Website 1. Social Media Website 1 also accounted for 89% of the individual items (excluding items measured by weight). As was the case in another online market survey conducted in 2016 by TRAFFIC (Nguyen *et al.*, in prep.), the trade was more prevalent on social media sites than on e-commerce websites. Over half of the advertisements (73% or 137) offered tiger claws.

Five types of tiger product were found for sale online: bone, claws, meat, skin and teeth (Table 4). Both raw claws and worked claws made into pendants were found for sale. However, raw claws were the most commonly advertised product, accounting for 98 advertisements (52%) and 719 products (65%).

DISCUSSION

Tiger seizure reports in Viet Nam were up from 2016 during which seven seizures were recorded (TRAFFIC, unpub. data). With 10 seizures, 2017 was the third-highest year on record for reported tiger seizures in Viet Nam, topped only by seizures in 2012 (12) and 2008 (13). In 2017, the seizures confirmed trends previously reported by TRAFFIC (Stoner *et al.*, 2016), mainly a concentration of seizures in the north in and around Hanoi and a tendency towards whole tigers (live, dead and frozen). Two seizures made in 2017 have resulted in criminal charges. One defendant received a 30-month suspended sentence pending a 60-month probation period and was fined USD440 (Anon., 2017). The other was sentenced to imprisonment for 13 months and fined USD440 (Anon., 2018).

Data from four months of online activity showed more than seven times as many tiger items for sale online in Viet Nam (1,095) than was found by TRAFFIC in China over three months in 2016 (150) (Yu, in prep.) and more than twice as many items as recorded in China over 11 months in 2012–2013 (438) (Stoner, 2014).

In 2016, TRAFFIC suspected that there was a growing domestic market for tiger bones and tiger bone products. From 2012–2015, at least 50% of the seizures were related to the production of tiger bone glue (known as *cao*)

(Stoner *et al.*, 2016). In 2017, this trend continued. Four of the 10 seizures (40%) took place while the suspects were in the process of cooking, or preparing to cook tiger bone glue. Meanwhile, four online advertisements were found selling a total of 8 g of tiger bone glue. Furthermore, a tiger consumer survey undertaken by TRAFFIC in 2017 in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City found that tiger bone glue was the most commonly purchased item by urban tiger consumers (TRAFFIC, unpubl.). The continued presence of tiger bone glue in seizures, combined with the presence of online advertisements for the finished product and consumption patterns of urban tiger consumers, confirm a domestic market for tiger bone in Viet Nam in 2017.

TRAFFIC previously noted tiger farms as one of two main threats to tigers in Viet Nam, indicating that many of the tigers seized in Viet Nam are likely sourced from captivity (Stoner *et al.*, 2016). The increase in captive tigers and facilities (ENV, 2017), combined with the fact that whole tigers continue to be the most common commodity type seized in 2017, feeds speculation about their source. As a country in which there are facilities keeping tigers, Viet Nam is required to submit a report to the CITES Secretariat reviewing and assessing the application of national management practices and controls intended to prevent tiger specimens from entering illegal trade (CITES, 2017); the report was due on 28 February 2018 (CITES, 2018). When made public, it may provide relevant updates on Viet Nam's management of tiger farms.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TRAFFIC's monitoring of seizures and online marketplaces during 2017 demonstrated that the trade and sale of live tigers and tiger parts continues to occur in Viet Nam. Whole tigers continued to be the most commonly available commodity, while the online trade was dominated by small items, mainly tiger claws. This analysis also confirmed the availability of tiger bone glue in Viet Nam's domestic market. Meanwhile, the simultaneous increase in tiger seizures and tiger farms continues to raise questions about whether tiger farms may be acting as sources for illegal trade. If submitted, the report for the CITES Secretariat on captive Asian big cats may shed some light on measures currently undertaken by the Vietnamese government to address this concern.

Although authorities in Viet Nam continue to seize tigers and tiger products in trade and in transit, the open sale of tiger products continues online in Viet Nam. At the time of going to press, only one of the seizures made in 2017 has resulted in legal action. To date there are no known ongoing investigations into the online sale of tiger products. On 1 January 2018, after the research for this report was conducted, Viet Nam's amended Penal Code, *Law No. 12/2017/QH14* entered into force. The penalty for trading three or more tigers or "inseparable" tiger parts is now imprisonment for between 5 and 15

years and a fine of up to USD88,000. The amended Penal Code is still pending advisory documents in which terms like “inseparable” will need to be clarified. It remains to be seen whether the increased penalties will deter trade. Meanwhile, violations involving fewer than three tigers or their inseparable parts are subject only to administrative penalties under *Decree 157/2013/ND-CP* by way of *Decree 32/2006/ND-CP*.

The Vietnamese government is urged to continue working towards intelligence-led law enforcement efforts that ensure thorough investigations into each seizure and to strengthen approaches to gathering evidence and intelligence from online marketplaces. The government is further encouraged to adapt existing regulations that will facilitate their application with regard to the illegal online trade in tiger products and other illegal trade in wildlife. In addition, Viet Nam is encouraged to report fully and comprehensively to the CITES Secretariat on the status and management of tiger farms in Viet Nam and to make those findings public. Online platforms are urged to employ self-policing mechanisms, standard operating procedures and clearly stated policies, as well as to work with appropriate government agencies to shut down businesses and individuals facilitating the illegal trade in tigers online. This rapid assessment underscores an active level of illegal trade in tigers that requires continued monitoring, investigation and law enforcement action.

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