

June 2021

ILLEGAL
WILDLIFE
TRADE
IN THE

**LOWER
MEKONG**



OVERVIEW

The Greater Mekong is a unique sub-region bound together by the Mekong river, spanning Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and southern China, specifically Yunnan Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

The Lower Mekong, comprising the five Southeast Asian countries, has been a hotbed for illegal wildlife trade. Despite decades of evidence stacked against the open, illegal and unregulated markets selling wildlife, their operations continued in 2019 and 2020 as shown by TRAFFIC surveys.

Illicit markets are known to adapt easily to cater to both demand and supply. The circumstances that facilitate illegal trade have not just remained but in some cases, proliferated it. Among these are the Special Economic Zones.

These Special Economic Zones have been established in numerous locations throughout the Mekong region, to encourage increased trade and investment, jobs and an overall socio-economic improvement of countries. These very locations have expanded over the years to become key hotspots for the illegal wildlife trade.

Wildlife parts and products from many endangered and threatened species—both native to the region, as well as those that are not—are desired for use as jewellery, gifts or home décor, often considered as status symbols. Dating back to the 3rd century BC, wildlife use for traditional medicinal purposes is also very widespread in this region. This demand is tied closely to culture and tradition, despite little scientific evidence on its efficacy.





MARKET SURVEYS

took place in all countries in 2019. Surveys in 2020 took place only in Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam between June and December.

ALMOST 78,000

illegal wildlife parts and product recorded for sale during surveys in 2019 and 2020

OVER 1,000

outlets were recorded offering illegal wildlife parts and products for sale during surveys in 2019 and 2020

Helmeted hornbill figurine



HELMETED HORNBILL

Casques and carved products, such as this pendant, from the rare Helmeted Hornbill were openly sold in some markets in the Lower Mekong. This species occurs only in 5 Southeast Asian countries, and is considered to be Critically Endangered due to poaching for illegal trade.

Helmeted hornbill casque



Rhino horn pendant



RHINO HORNS

Rhinos continue to be poached for their horns, prized as decorative items or for purported medicinal use. These carved rhino horn pendant and shavings were recorded during TRAFFIC's market surveys in the Lower Mekong.

Rhino horn shavings



More than 70% of all individual items recorded in TRAFFIC's market surveys in 2019 and 2020 were derived from elephants, particularly ivory.

Ivory alone represented more than 84% of all elephant products recorded in every country except Thailand, which saw a greater variety of other elephant products such as skins, tail hair, molar, bones, and placenta.

Ivory trade is generally prohibited here, though the legal premise of this trade varies across all countries, ranging from a total ban to provisions to trade only in legally registered specimens of ivory.





Trade in most other species encountered in these markets is largely illegal too, against national legislation and international regulation under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which all Lower Mekong countries are Parties to.

Illegal, unregulated, and unsustainable trade is driving wild populations of hundreds of species into endangerment, not only in the Lower Mekong but around the world. A concerted effort is required to ensure that trade in wild animals and plants is not a threat to the conservation of nature.

Watch our video on this issue <https://vimeo.com/558429655>
and stay tuned for TRAFFIC's upcoming features from our work in the region.



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