

TIGERS: EXPLORING THE THREAT FROM ILLEGAL ONLINE TRADE

Online auction sites continue to post advertisements offering jewellery purportedly made from Tiger parts and Tiger-based medicines, but the trade shows signs of decline as awareness of illegality increases and internet companies pledge a zero-tolerance policy

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The Tiger *Panthera tigris* is under immense pressure from poaching for its body parts, which are in high demand, the bones largely for use in traditional medicine and as a tonic and the skins for decorative purposes. Efforts to address this threat are numerous and aim to tackle the issue from a variety of angles, but primarily centre upon: enhancing site-based enforcement, reducing illegal trade (locally and transnationally) and demand reduction. TRAFFIC has been actively involved in the exposé of a number of markets and outlets overtly displaying and selling illegal wildlife products; particularly those relating to Tigers (Nowell and Xu, 2007; Osswell, 2010; Shepherd and Magnus, 2004). While a zero-tolerance policy must be adopted and is likely to have reduced some elements of trade occurring, some will persist due to 1) the demand; 2) the monetary reward such trade continues to offer; and 3) weak enforcement and/or penalties failing to act as a deterrent. Improved law enforcement and the emergence of intelligence-led policing may have meant that some aspects of the illicit wildlife trade are being displaced to online markets. The draw for those wishing to sell are numerous and the internet offers people the opportunity to trade from their own homes, which is likely to attract those not usually moving in criminal circles. In contrast to this, organized crime has been quick to take advantage of these opportunities, particularly given the growth in electronic commerce, or e-commerce. Anticipating the potential threat from online trade, in 2007 the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) requested Parties to collect information on illegal wildlife trade on the internet in CITES-listed species for their respective jurisdictions (Notification No. 2007/026)¹. Only one range country (China) responded in Asia (as well as Singapore and the United Arab Emirates).

In August 2011, a workshop was held in Ha Noi, Viet Nam² to monitor progress in Tiger range countries towards implementation of the Global Tiger Recovery Programme (GTRP). The GTRP lays out a comprehensive set of actions to help Tigers recover from their main threats: poaching, illegal trade, human encroachment and destruction of Tiger habitats. Each Tiger range country committed to a set of National Tiger Recovery Priorities (NTRP) and invested efforts into implementing them. During the workshop, each country presented a set of One-Year Objectives and Self-Assessment Outcomes. One of China's Priority Activities was to: "Launch national movement against cyber-crime on tiger parts".

Proactive and progressive steps towards that particular objective have been observed and should be highlighted as examples of good practice. Consideration may be given by other range and consumer countries for implementing similar initiatives to address the likely occurrence of online trade in their respective areas.

¹<http://www.cites.org/common/docs/misc/E-Internet%20trade.pdf>. ²Workshop of Experts to Develop Criteria and Indicators for Monitoring Implementation of the GTRP; Ha Noi, Viet Nam, 2–4 August 2011

In a pledge of the first of its kind, in June 2012, 15 of the leading e-commerce sellers operating in China, including Alibaba, Taobao, and Tencent, issued a signed declaration adopting a zero-tolerance policy towards their services being used to conduct illegal wildlife trade.

TRAFFIC's continued support with online monitoring of the volume of products of flagship species (for example, Tiger bone, elephant ivory, rhinoceros horn and Hawksbill Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata* shell) that were identified as being traded on targeted e-commerce websites in China, showed that the trade had declined by 79.6% during June to December 2013.

A total of 25 496 illegal advertisements for products of flagship species have been deleted by the websites after they received TRAFFIC's monthly monitoring reports.

On 16 August 2013, facilitated by TRAFFIC in collaboration with Beijing's Provincial Inter-agency CITES Enforcement Coordination Group (PICE-CG), 13 e-commerce and logistics companies met to learn about the high priority being given to addressing illegal trade in wildlife by law enforcement agencies and what expectations this places on the companies for carrying out their commitment to protect endangered species. This training not only helped relevant departments regulate the online wildlife trade more strictly, but also supported individual e-commerce companies' self-management of their advertisements of wildlife products.

A joint exhibition stall of TRAFFIC and a website selling antiques (<http://www.htchi.com/>) were displayed at the 2nd and 3rd Chinese International Antique Culture Exhibitions which were held in China's National Convention Centre in September and December 2013, respectively. More than 3000 flyers bearing messages rejecting the consumption of illegal Tiger bone, ivory, rhinoceros horn and Hawksbill Turtle products were distributed and will have greatly increased conservation awareness among the more than 90 000 antique traders and buyers attending these events.

While this report discusses trade observed on Chinese-language sites, illegal wildlife trading online permeates other Tiger range countries and beyond. In May 2013, the *Harimau Kita* forum based in Sumatra announced that buyers from all over the world now had access to Sumatran Tiger parts as a result of the flourishing online trade. Many popular Indonesian e-commerce websites have been known to tolerate or overlook users buying and selling protected wildlife. It was reported that in 2011 and 2012, wildlife authorities in Indonesia seized from online traders Tiger pelts, claws, teeth, whiskers and whole stuffed animals believed to have come from at least 22 Tigers. Furthermore, as part of this research, advertisements found online in China offered Sumatran Tiger claws and teeth for sale as recently as April and May 2013, respectively. Additionally, research examining online trade in CITES-listed plant species concludes that the potentially large-scale nature of the global illegal wildlife trade raises concerns regarding the vulnerability of CITES species (Sajeva *et al.*, 2012). Ultimately the threat from online trading is real and relevant for the following reasons that exist globally:

AUTONOMY: sales online are largely unregulated and are rarely subject to review; there is therefore a minimal amount of monitoring and detection.

GLOBAL REACH: online auctions break down and remove the physical limitations of traditional auctions such as geography, attendance, time, space and a small target audience.

POPULARITY: the widespread level of trading on auction sites and their popularity is likely to be an attractive option for those wishing to trade.

OBSCURITY: locating where the seller is based may be problematic and time-consuming prior to establishing whose jurisdiction the investigation applies to.

NETWORKED: much online illegal trade (wildlife or otherwise) occurs within trust-based, enclosed networks. Trading is known to take place on social networking sites and forums, many of which are password-protected, limiting access and knowledge of the true level of trade.

CLANDESTINE: wording can be used to circumvent detection. For example, "ox bone" has become a recognized term to describe ivory on eBay (Anon., 2012; 2014). Guises are an effective way to evade detection and the internet provides more opportunities for this than traditional marketplaces.

SPEED: given the instant accessibility of the internet, changes can happen instantaneously; the internet provides a network that can adapt and facilitate these changes in a unique and fluid manner.

Analysis of the market in China

Since July 2012, TRAFFIC has been monitoring Chinese-language online auction sites in mainland China to identify Tiger parts or derivatives for sale. Between July 2012 to May 2013, the period of analysis for this report, a total of 25 e-commerce Chinese-language websites were surveyed on a monthly basis. The survey was enabled through a Keyword Research Engine on each website; the key words used for searching included Tiger bone and its 11 synonyms (Chinese characters: 虎骨、王骨、大猫骨、Hugu、虎爪、掌骨、血料、天然材料、高档材料、珍贵材料、重器), which claims that said products are made of Tiger bone. The results were collected, compiled and shared with focal points of both the government authorities and the websites themselves.

In total, 438 advertisements were found offering items *purporting* to contain Tiger bones or other Tiger body parts. It is impossible to determine whether these products are genuine. However, such advertisements allow some understanding of what might be in demand, what items are popular, and their attraction. More dedicated monitoring will likely provide a more accurate indication of the possible scale of this illegal trade. The following translation of a quote, taken from one of the advertisements, provides some insight into

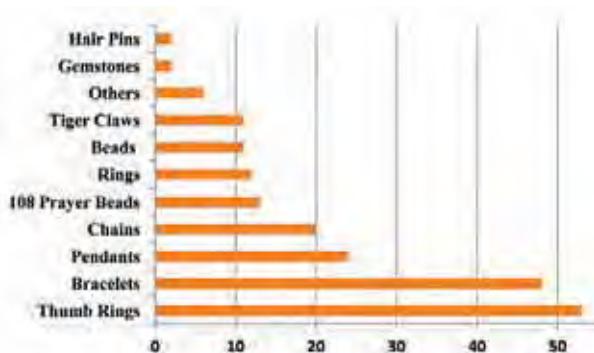


Fig. 1. Types of jewellery and other items for sale.



SARAH STONER / TRAFFIC

the perceptions surrounding the Tiger as a commercial product: “*Human being know the power and function of Tiger bone since ancient times, it stimulates blood circulation, eliminate moist-heat and wind inside human body, treat and ease the pain, wearing it will bring benefits to human body*” [sic].

Top products offered for sale

Products for sale were overwhelmingly either purporting to be made of Tiger bone (74% / 325) or were purportedly derived from Tiger bone (such as wine, pills, plasters and glue) (11% / 46). No Tiger skins (whole or part), rugs, hides or chubas³ made from Tiger skin were found to be advertised online. The diversity of Tiger parts as a desirable product can be observed and is broadly defined into the following categories: jewellery, Tiger bone, traditional medicine, curios and other Tiger products (Table 1).

Jewellery	Tiger bone	Traditional medicine	Curios	Other Tiger parts	Total
202	76	58	52	50	438
46%	17%	13%	12%	11%	100%

Table 1. Tiger parts for sale by product type.

Within the “other Tiger parts” category, Tiger claws represent 39/78% of the products for sale, followed by teeth (8/16%), tails (2/1%) and kidney stone (1/2%). Furthermore, advertisements offered “Sumatran Tiger” claws and teeth for sale as recently as April and May 2013, respectively.

Jewellery and other items

Almost half of all purported Tiger products found for sale were pieces of jewellery (202 / 46%), including bracelets, necklaces and pendants (Fig. 1). However, the most common items advertised were thumbs rings, representing 12% (53) of items for sale. Fifteen (28%) of these were specifically for “Archer” thumb rings. The Archer’s thumb ring (pictured above), traditionally for use with a bow and arrow, is now made for ornamental purposes and for possession as a status symbol. Archers’ thumb rings are made from a variety of materials such as precious and semi-precious stones, bone, horn, wood, metal, ceramics, and glass. Sale of Tibetan “108” prayer beads (Buddhist prayer beads, typically made up of 18, 27, 54 or 108 beads, are traditionally used to count the number of times a mantra is recited whilst meditating) were another unique item advertised for sale and indicate that these highly decorated pieces of cultural significance are desirable niche products. All these items claim to be made from Tiger bone, however, consideration needs to be given to these advertisements being false and therefore fraudulent.

Medicines and tonics

Thirteen per cent (58) of the advertisements were for products of traditional medicine purporting to contain or to be made from Tiger bone. Fig. 2 provides a breakdown of this category type and shows the frequency of Tiger bone wine on offer.

The notion that Tigers are synonymous with strength, energy and warding off evil spirits persists, as does the perception that the animal’s body parts hold medicinal properties, with many of the descriptions given in the advertisements referring to these claims. Plasters, glue and pills allegedly deriving from Tiger bone were found for sale but were not as common as advertisements for Tiger bone wine. Eighty five per cent of the advertisements for Tiger bone wine referred to the age of the product, all of which were dated on or before 1993. This may represent

³Chubas are traditional Tibetan costumes. The skin chubas are only worn twice a year, at local festivals and other special occasions such as Tibetan New Year.

a common misunderstanding surrounding the law, introduced by the State Council of China in 1993. The circular banned all trade of Tiger bone and rhinoceros horn, the manufacture of medicinal products that include Tiger bone or rhinoceros horn, and the transport of these products⁴. All products produced before the ban were required to be sealed and were banned from trade (DLA Piper, 2014). Some sellers possibly believe that products purchased or produced before the ban, may therefore be legally sold in 2013.

Although some advertisements highlighted the medicinal value of the wine, more emphasis was placed on the age and the brand of the wine. At least one bottle of wine originated from a named Tiger farm in China. Overall, Tiger bone wine was the most expensive Tiger product for sale. Clearer messaging on popular e-commerce sites about the illegality of any commercial trade of Tiger bone products, regardless of their age, may aid clarification for sellers and buyers alike.

Descriptions

The age of a product is a valuable selling point and many advertisements refer to the product as having “*good patina*”. Visible signs of blood are marketed as a positive factor, which may also allude to the product’s authenticity.

The term “*H-bone*” is commonly used and refers to *Hu* [Mandarin for Tiger] and was used in 14% (61) of advertisements. Similarly the terms “*big cat bone*” or “*king bone*” were frequently used, and while it can be surmised that these are tactics employed to evade detection, many advertisements also stated “*genuine Tiger*” in the wording. Numerous references to the product being “old” or “ancient” or “selling on behalf of a friend” are believed to be a deliberate ploy to persuade the buyer that such sales do not contravene the law and is an attempt to evade detection.

Efforts are being made to address this lack of clarity and to reinforce a zero-tolerance approach. At the end

of 2013, a website selling antiques and a significant contributor to the advertisements monitored online in the previous 12 months (34% / 147) subsequently deleted all such advertisements after becoming aware of their existence. This was followed up with advocacy on its own website, as well as working with TRAFFIC to conduct advocacy work in the International Antique Culture Exhibitions held in 2013.

Prices, from landscape to market

Given that much of the activity observed online occurs on auction sites, the final sale price was often not available. In order to give some indication of the mark-up of Tiger parts, prices were obtained from an anonymous source in Sumatra in 2013 for the value of a claw at the point of the animal’s capture, along each of the exchange points and the final market price, and the percentage increase between each point has been calculated overall (Fig. 3).

Geography

Although some references were made to Tiger products originating from Thailand and Viet Nam, and some products were advertised as “*Sumatran Tiger*”, it appears that most of the trading occurs within China. This is consistent with findings from INTERPOL’s investigation “Project Web”, which found that ivory is predominantly sold by individuals residing in the country where the sales take place (INTERPOL, 2013). Almost one third of advertisements examined gave their location (31% / 134), which enabled analysis to examine where sellers are based. The top six commonly recurring locations were determined and analysis of products for sale there indicated items of traditional medicine and tonics (predominantly Tiger bone wine) were more commonly offered for sale on the east coast, particularly in the provinces of Liaoning and Guangdong. Almost all Tiger products found for sale in Beijing were pieces of jewellery (Fig. 4).

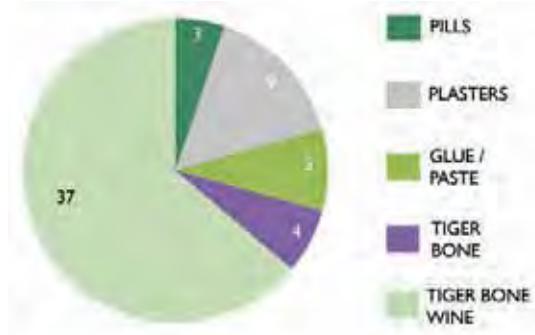


Fig. 2. Breakdown of products for sale categorized as traditional medicine and tonics.

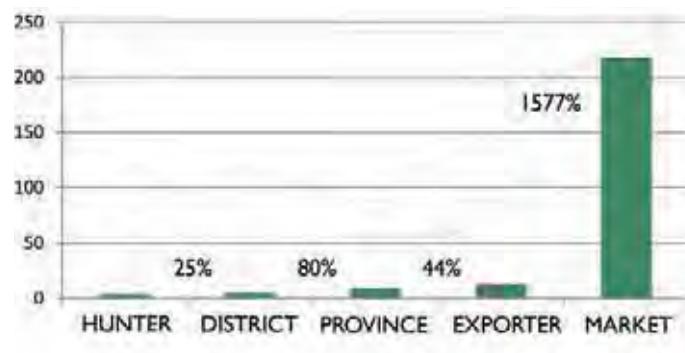


Fig. 3. Inflation in the value of Tiger claws along the trade chain. (2013 USD prices). Data from an anonymous source in Sumatra.

⁴Circular of the State Council on Banning the Trade of Rhinoceros Horn and Tiger Bone (29 May 1993)

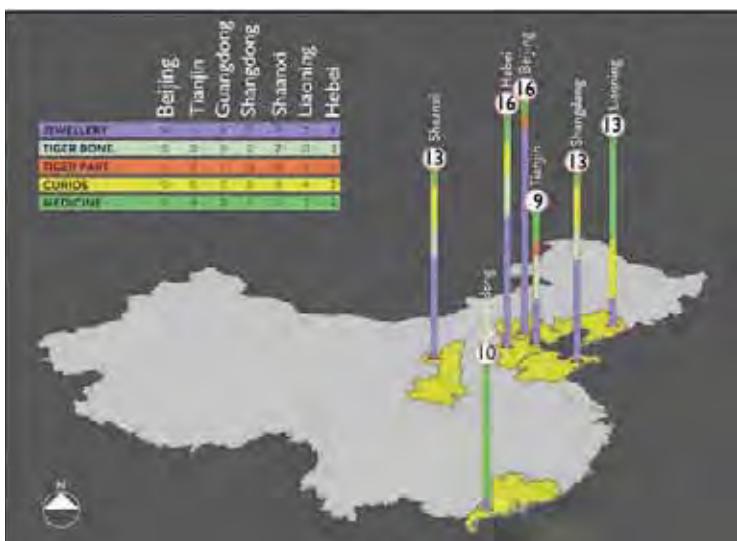


Fig. 4. Location of sellers of Tiger products in mainland China.

CONCLUSIONS

Overwhelmingly, the Tiger products offered for sale were either purported to be made of Tiger bone (74% / 325) or purported to have derived from Tiger bone (11% / 46) (such as wine, pills, plasters or glue). Many of the products offered for sale are in direct contravention of the law introduced by China in 1993 which banned the use, manufacture, sale, importation and export of medicines derived from Tiger bone and rhinoceros horn, and related products. Education and advocacy work with those sites hosting a greater number of advertisements has shown positive outcomes and a clear reduction in the prevalence of this type of trade.

It is impossible to measure the impact of this trade on wild Tigers. The method employed for this study does not provide the means to verify the authenticity of the products being offered for sale online and therefore consideration needs to be given to these advertisements being fake and/or fraudulent.

Based upon the findings presented here, all indications point to the existence of a market for “Tiger” products online, although it is not suspected to be widespread. However, if the desire for the Tiger as a commodity (fake or otherwise) is to be lessened, investment in demand reduction is necessary to effect behavioural change and to reduce such trade in the long term. Where trade continues, punitive measures should be taken against both individual sellers and the sites hosting the advertisements, and publication of these cases to illustrate a zero-tolerance approach may contribute to a deterrent effect in the short-term.

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