

Report by Serene C.L. Chng

The Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil* has faced unprecedented levels of poaching in recent years to supply the illegal trade for ivory from its casque, resulting in a plunge in wild populations and the species being uplisted to Critically Endangered in 2015 (Collar, 2015; Beastall *et al.*, 2016; BirdLife International, 2016). Seizures data illustrate the sharp increase in poaching and illegal trade; EIA, TRAFFIC, Born Free Foundation and others compiled at least 59 separate seizure incidents involving a minimum of 2878 Helmeted Hornbill casques, skulls and products between 2010 and April 2017. Hotspots within Indonesia and China have been identified from these seizures (Map 1).

The main source of the seized casques is Indonesia, in particular Kalimantan and Sumatra—the only States in the species's range in the country; the casques then exit Indonesia either to mainland China or Hong Kong via Jakarta (Chng *et al.*, in prep.). In China, the main consumer country, notable entry points were at Shenzhen and Hong Kong (Chng *et al.*, in prep.; Beastall *et al.*, 2016), while the city of Putian in Fujian Province was identified as the centre of the casque



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## HELPING THE HORNBILL KEEP ITS HEAD

carving industry (EIA, 2016). Markets in Vientiane offering hornbill casques are also shown to target Chinese nationals, as divulged by sellers and reinforced by the observations of casque products advertised in Mandarin (EIA, 2016; Krishnasamy *et al.*, 2016). Evidence indicates that organized crime networks are behind this trade, with gangs of poachers operating in Indonesia supported by middlemen and traders (Martyr, 2014; Mongabay, 2014), and worked casques being smuggled into Lao PDR (EIA, 2015; Krishnasamy *et al.*, 2016).

In order to identify what action can be taken to tackle this problem, the first-ever workshop on Helmeted Hornbill Conservation and Action Planning was held in Sarawak, Malaysia, from 19–20 May 2017. This landmark event brought together 36 experts, implementers and decision-making authorities including governments from China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, non-governmental organizations, hornbill experts and researchers, conservationists and funders from 28 organizations who convened in Kubah National Park. The event, held on the back of the 7th International Hornbill Conference, aimed to develop jointly the Helmeted Hornbill Conservation Strategy and Action Plan in an effort to safeguard this species from extinction and to prioritize conservation action and interventions. This initiative was driven and supported by a number of organizations including the IUCN SSC Asian Species Action Partnership, the Hornbill Research Foundation, the Wildlife Conservation Society, BirdLife International and Wildlife Reserves Singapore; TRAFFIC was also a key contributor. ▶



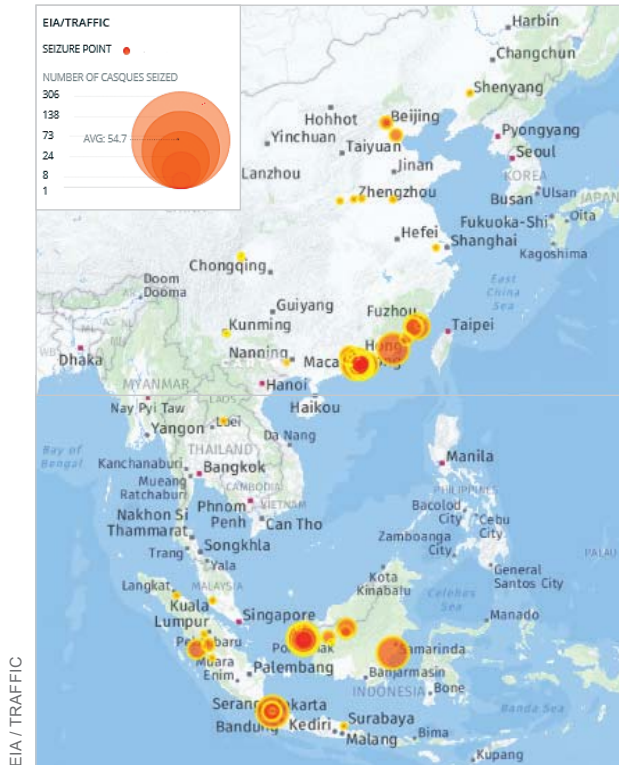
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△ **HELMETED HORNBILL** parts observed at a shop in Vientiane during market surveys carried out in Lao PDR between April and July 2016. The species—the largest of all the Asian hornbills—occurs in Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, and is scarce throughout its range. Unlike the casque of other hornbill species, that of the Helmeted Hornbill is made from solid keratin which makes it suitable for carving. The carvings are prized commodities, particularly among Chinese communities (Krishnasamy, 2016).



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Participants of the Helmeted Hornbill conservation planning workshop.



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**Map (left) showing locations of Helmeted Hornbill seizures between 2010 and April 2017. The size of the dot indicates the number of casques seized. Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil* (right).**

► The workshop agreed on a vision for the survival of Helmeted Hornbills, along with the identification of issues threatening the species and corresponding objectives to address these. Discussions were built around four main themes: 1) building knowledge of distribution, ecology and biology; 2) understanding and mitigating the impact of habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation; 3) trade: law enforcement and policy; and 4) trade: disrupting the trade chain from poacher to consumer.

It was also agreed that the Helmeted Hornbill Working Group would be formalized under the IUCN umbrella to co-ordinate, drive and enable the effective implementation of actions to safeguard the species, and provide advice and support to government agencies, NGOs and research institutions working to save the species. This process will be led by a small team of six individuals, comprising two co-ordinators, and a lead each for the Trade, Research, Habitat and Capacity Development sub-groups. Discussion from the workshop is being compiled to finalize the Conservation Strategy, which will also feed directly into the outcomes from the 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in relation to Resolution Conf. 17.11 on *Conservation of and trade in helmeted hornbill*.

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