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Wildlife traffickers. The illegal wildlife trade that threatens biodiversity (and us)

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Chapter 1

The last roar

In mid-November 2021, some footprints on the right bank of the Aldan River, in southeastern Sakha¹ – also known as Jacuzia, Eastern Siberia – attracted the attention of zoologists. Footprints belonging to an adult specimen of the Amur tiger (*Panthera tigris altaica*) that stood there motionless and yet marking a movement, the passage and especially the return to this region of one of the largest felines on the planet. In fact, according to local sources, the Siberian tiger had not made its presence known for at least fifty years. Half a century during which it was in danger of being lost forever. If in 1930 there were 20 to 30 specimens², by the end of 2005 the estimated mature specimens were around 415-476³. An increase certainly, but still too feeble to consider it a recovering species. In the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, in fact, the tiger (*Panthera tigris*) is considered an “endangered” species (En, Endangered), meaning its probability of extinction is estimated at more than 20 percent in the next two decades or five generations, and has fewer than 2,500 mature specimens. In fact, in the last assessment in April 2014, the number of specimens ranged between 2,154 and 3,159⁴, while in 1998 estimates, though less rigorous than today, it was told of 5-7 thousand specimens. In 2016, however, the Global tiger forum – an international group working for tiger conservation based in New Delhi – together with WWF estimated a slight recovery, with 3,890 adult individuals present in the wild. In under two decades, therefore, 45 percent of all tigers on the planet have been lost. Habitat fragmentation, deforestation, and increased anthropogenic pressure are among the major causes of the feline’s decline. But if one really wants to understand the causes of the steady loss of tigers in the wild, one cannot avoid talking about poaching and illegal trafficking of tiger parts and its by-products. A vibrant and profitable market that shows no signs of abating, despite the efforts of the international community committed to regulating the trade and conserving the species.

Not a month goes by that Asia, particularly India and Bangladesh, does not bring news of the capture of poachers accused of killing Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) to sell their body parts, whether fur, skull or bones. The most striking is certainly the arrest in June 2021 of “Tiger Habib,” born Habib Talukder: 50 years old, long graying beard, proud look. He was captured by Bengali police after 20 years of absconding and

¹ The Moscow Times, First Endangered Tiger Footprints in 50 Years Found in Northeast Siberia <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/12998439>.

² L.G. Kaplanov, Tiger in the Sikhote-Alin Bull. Mosc. Soc. Nat., 14 (29) (1948), pp. 18-19.

³ D.G. Miquelle, F.A. Stevens, J.M. Goodrich, E.N. Smirnov, O.Y. Zaumyslova, A.I. Myslenkov The tiger and the wolf in the Sikhote-Alin Biosphere Reserve: competition and the effects of two predators on prey populations. Tigers of Sikhote-Alin Reserve: ecology and conservation, CAP, Vladivostok, Russia (2005), pp. 146-155.

⁴ Goodrich, J., Lynam, A., Miquelle, D., Wibisono, H., Kawanishi, K., Pattanavibool, A., Htun, S., Tempa, T., Karki, J., Jhala, Y. & Karanth, U. 2015. *Panthera tigris*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015: e.T15955A50659951.

after killing about 70 wild tigers. Hence the name Tiger Habib⁵. The hunting grounds were the Sundarbans, or the world's largest and most important mangrove forest, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997. Perfect terrain both for the Bengal tiger, the only one able to hunt in the brackish waters of the area, and evidently for the poacher. A former hunter of wild honey, he soon decided to switch to a far more lucrative business: a dead tiger can in fact be worth up to 40 times the cost of a living one. Some acquaintances described him to the press as a “dangerous man” who could “fight alone” with tigers.

But why all this attention to the tiger? Mainly because of the dictates of traditional Chinese medicine. The bones for example are pulverized and boiled for days to make so-called “tiger bone glue,” which is later dissolved in wine and sold as a medicine to solve bone problems, pains and rheumatism⁶. The meat, on the other hand, is considered a delicacy and exotic dish, while teeth, claws and skins are mostly used as ornaments or amulets.

Traditionally, the tiger represents strength, courage, and charm. This aspect has been rooted for centuries in Asian and Chinese culture in particular, so much so that this animal is even part of one of the zodiac signs in the Chinese horoscope (2022 was the year of the tiger). In a survey conducted in 2019 by Traffic – an organization founded in 1976 by the WWF and IUCN as a wildlife trade monitoring network – among Vietnamese customers used to buy products and by-products derived from tigers, it was possible to draw a kind of identikit of the typical consumer. Males are in their 50s, are sociable, outgoing and want to be respected by their peers. They use tiger bone glue in traditional medicine or as an aphrodisiac, while they give away tiger-derived products (from wine to claws) to gain and confirm the respect of family members or their superiors. Female consumers, on the other hand, are younger, in their 40s, and tend to buy these products for older family members, whose well-being consider a top priority ⁷.

To get a snapshot of how customary and ingrained this practice is in popular tradition, just do a web: arm yourself with a translator and search for the key words “tiger,” “bones,” “meat,” and “wine.” Major social media outlets as well as online streaming platforms will immediately direct you to dozens of results, complete with online advice on how to employ the product and in what diseases. It is strange, almost surreal to say, but of the tiger nothing is thrown away: the bile is used to treat seizures in children, the blood is used to strengthen the constitution and improve willpower; the brain is considered a treatment for laziness and pimples while the claws, besides being powerful talismans, cure insomnia; the penis is used as an aphrodisiac while the paws are used to ward off evil spirits. And the list goes on.

This is a particularly thriving market in China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos, despite the fact that trade in products and by-products from wild and farmed tigers is banned. In fact, it is estimated that there are at least

⁵ The Guardian, Poacher suspected of killing 70 Bengal tigers captured after 20-year pursuit <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jun/01/poacher-suspected-of-killing-70-bengal-tigers-captured-after-20-year-pursuit>.

⁶ Iea, On The Butcher's Block: The Mekong Tiger Trade Trail March, 2020.

⁷ <https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/tiger-product-consumers-in-viet-nam/>.

8,000 tigers on Asian tiger farms: here, tigers are bred to entertain tourists and onlookers, anesthetized to be less dangerous, and kept in cages that do not ensure the slightest animal welfare. But there is more. Under the innocent veneer of a hospitality facility, there is often a profitable trade in products and by-products that therefore enter the illegal trade. Rather egregious is the case published by National Geographic in 2018, where undercover Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC) members collected numerous testimonies on how ramified and active this trade is. In some cases, they made direct contact with the breeder showing them the tiger still alive, to reassure the prospective buyer about the goodness of the “product.”⁸ . The potential buyer who usually arrives at the facility has the opportunity to choose the preferred animal that will later be killed and slaughtered on site. It happens that some buyers bring along their trusted butchers, so as not to spoil the “product.” It all takes place just as in a normal livestock farm, only on the other side is one of the largest felines on the planet.

In 2016, world public attention focused instead on the closure by Thai authorities of the Tiger Temple, a facility that attracted hundreds of tourists each year from all over the world. It will surely have happened to anyone who has visited Bangkok at least once in his or her life to be approached by a taxi driver or even to be offered a visit to a “tiger farm” in the hotel, so that they could take a few souvenir photos together with tiger cubs or adult specimens. A souvenir to take home and show to friends, but one that often hides a dark side, obviously for felines. Authorities involved in the seizure had found at least 40 cubs crammed into a freezer, as well as a Buddhist monk attempting to escape with 1,600 tiger parts⁹. Of the 147 tigers recovered and transported to suitable facilities, 86 died a few years later.

Instead, a group of investigative journalists recently published a thorough investigation¹⁰ where it is recounted how easily it was possible to get in touch with some of the major Vietnamese “traffickers” of tigers, dead or alive. The first contacts obviously take place on the web, from the sellers’ social profiles. Once the trust is gained and they are convinced that they are willing to shell out large sums of money (a claw can cost as much as 400 euros, while for a whole tiger the cost could reach about 8,000 euros), the sellers show themselves willing to provide any product the client wants, safely and from “certified” origins. What leaks from the dialogues is the presence of an extremely organized network that imports from Laos and Cambodia both live and dead animals: in Laos it seems that in so-called “tiger farms” the animals are left in semi-freedom because they would develop stronger claws and teeth. The proud and unscrupulous seller is willing to bring the live tiger into the country to slaughter it in front of the potential customers. It is like buying a large batch of illicit substances on the black market: the more you spend and the higher the quantity, the more the investment will have a cash return once the “product” ends up on the market.

⁸ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/wildlife-watch-news-captive-tiger-farms-trafficking-investigation-vietnam-laos>.

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2019/09/17/these-tigers-were-rescued-an-infamous-tourist-attraction-then-died-government-custody/>.

¹⁰ <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/vietnam-tiger-trafficking-network/>.

But the wild tiger has been covered by Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1973, which prohibits its trade and aims to ensure that the trade has no implications for the survival of the species. In fact, the tiger can only be bred and traded for conservation or scientific purposes. The resolution has had a variety of developments over the years, such as those in 1993 and 1994, when parties called for a ban on its domestic trade between countries, and the sale of tigers and their parts and derivatives, until 2007, when it was made clear that tigers should not be bred for the trade of their parts and derivatives ¹¹.

Of course, seeing a tiger takes your breath away, even if you are not a biologist or naturalist. It is one of those encounters that sticks in the memory. It may be the literary legacy of the “ferocious” animal recounted in the novels one reads since childhood, with Kipling’s Shere Khan leading the way; it may be because of its impressiveness, exuding boundless strength. It may be that it tells of distant, exotic countries described by 19th-century explorers. The fact is that it still triggers mixed emotions, so much so that in Chinese and Indian popular culture it is still considered a magical animal, with beneficial properties, while in the West it is a status symbol, a fetish to be carried around or even a pet, as happened with Kenya, the Bengal tiger that Mike Tyson kept with him for 15 years as a pet. Or like the most recent media case, the American “Tiger King,” which, thanks to a successful series, brought to light a whole world that had remained hitherto submerged, or at any rate relegated to particular circles made up of trainers, animal lovers and the curious.

But there is a point, a fundamental one, that may escape a first superficial observation. A connection that is not immediately grasped. What is the link between bred animals and the decline of the wild species in Asia? The answer is that captive-bred tigers fuel the illegal market. And in doing so, they feed the demand that, as it grows, puts the wild species at risk. Even more astonishing, is that Europe is one of the hot spots for the export of live animals or their products to Southeast Asia even though the tiger, within the European Union, is listed in Annex A of the Wildlife Trade Regulations, which generally prohibits commercial use of the species, applying some exemptions only for educational, research or breeding purposes, even for those specimens born and bred in captivity.

According to a recent analysis spread over a 19-year period (from 2000 to 2018) at least 2,359 tiger parts and by-products were confiscated in some 1,142 seizures, spread across 32 countries globally ¹². The data for Europe contained in EU-TWIX – a database developed to assist national law enforcement agencies, including the CITES Units, in their task of detecting, analyzing, and monitoring illegal activities related to the trade in fauna and flora governed by European wildlife trade regulations –, say that between 2013 and 2017 in Europe (UK included), there were 95 seizures. Of these, almost all were medicines containing (as advertised in the products) tiger derivatives ¹³. It is therefore plausible to think that

¹¹ <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/document/E-Res-12-05-R18.pdf>.

¹² Traffic, Skin and bones unresolved, Ramacandra Wong, Kanitha Krishnasamy, 2019, https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/12344/skin_and_bones_unresolved-web-1.pdf.

¹³ Traffic, Falling through the system, 2020 <https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/13230/falling-through-the-system.pdf>.

there is a black market where breeders are able to slip through the cracks of international legislation and registries, and able to feed Asian demand. The supply chain often consists of a breeder or owner of various animals, employed for recreational use (wildlife or zoological parks, trainers or traveling shows), who falsifies the documents—each tiger is officially registered with territorial Cites offices—so that the individual gets out of the official circuits. The felines or their parts and by-products are then processed by an expert (often a taxidermist) and are subsequently sold. On the other hand, there is a buyer, often based in the animal's country of origin, who acts as a liaison with interested parties. Rather emblematic is the case of the Czech Republic, which has set the standard in Europe. The Czech Environmental Inspectorate (CEI) in September 2018 provided a document (called SC70)¹⁴ where it detailed how the illegal tiger trade in the country is structured. “In recent years,” the document reads, “the involvement of the Vietnamese community in wildlife trafficking has increased considerably in the Czech Republic. A rather thriving and profitable black market involving not only tiger parts and their by-products, but also ivory from rhino horns”. The trafficking, according to the authorities “is highly developed, organized and involves not only individuals, but organized groups that have international ties and operate not only in the Czech Republic, but also in other countries.” And where do these products end up? They are sold mainly in Vietnam but also consumed by the community living in Europe.

A huge amount of work, lasting years, that led Czech law enforcement to seize a variety of products uncovered at airports, customs, stores in the capital, markets and squares. Work that led the IEC to do a fact-finding survey in 2015 to monitor the presence of tigers in the country and take a snapshot of the moment. A detailed analysis showed the presence of about 174 tigers in the Czech Republic, with a total of 404 tigers reported over the years, including births and deaths. An enormity. And one that also led to seizures that indicated the clear intent of the trade, such as freezers crammed with bodies, or tigers found shot to death, virtually executed. But what struck the inspectors was how easy it was to tamper with not only the documents issued by, but also the microchips, so much so that these are swapped, rendered non-functional, simply removed. Leading to the suspicion that this is done precisely to make different individuals difficult to identify: there have been no lack of cases where a male became a female, or of some animals simply disappearing. A shortcoming common to many other European countries, as shown by numerous reports carried out not only by Traffic, but also by other nongovernmental associations (*see* Second Class Tiger, Four Paws, 2020) and journalistic investigations.

Like the report I participated in at the turn of 2020-2021, which was created to try to understand the phenomenon and focused on France and especially on Italy. The work, which lasted about five months, led the team, for the first time, to divulge the number of tigers in Italy, at least as far as the official ones are concerned. And to discover that the various control bodies (the then Ministry of the Environment and the Carabinieri forestry grouping CITES) had data that did not match each other ¹⁵. According to the ministry, in fact, there would have been 75 tigers, of

¹⁴ <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/70/Inf/E-SC70-Inf-24.pdf>.

¹⁵ Lifegate, Until the Last Roar 2021 <https://www.lifegate.it/longform/tigri-traffico-illegale-europa#cap3>.

which 36 were present at licensed zoos, and 39 at zoos for which the issuance of a license was under consideration or in the final stages of investigation. Instead, after a 2020 reconnaissance by the Carabinieri's CITES Regrouping due to a seizure of 10 tigers on the border with Belarus in 2019, 93 tigers (2 of them hybrids between lion and tiger) were listed in zoological facilities, rehabilitation centers, and breeding farms, and 68 in circuses, for a total of 161 specimens. But, according to some NGOs, it would even add up to a total of 400 individuals. A discrepancy that shows all the gaps in the monitoring and control system. And a gap that opens up questions: how is it possible to monitor exchanges, whether legal or not, if one does not know exactly the individuals present in a given territory? And how is it possible to ensure that animals do not end up in submerged routes to feed the black market for live specimens or their parts and by-products? The investigation led to a parliamentary question in the Senate in April 2021, but to date the outcomes are unknown. In France, thanks in part to the work of another member of the team, Guillaume Pajot, who had brought to light the story of one of the country's most prominent tiger breeders¹⁶, the animals were seized and charged with mistreatment and illegal trafficking: the trial against him began in late September 2022¹⁷.

On the question of how much tiger farms affect the conservation of the wild species, the academic world has debated much over the years and is still debating. The oppositions are extreme, but there are questions about whether opening up to legalized trade is the best way to save *Panthera tigris*, which is otherwise in danger of disappearing within the lifetimes of those reading this book right now. According to Eric Dinerstein, a conservation biologist, opening up to legalized trade should be ruled out because it could permanently result in the extinction of the species in the wild. This is because raising a tiger to maturity would be 250 times more expensive than poaching a wild tiger in India. Therefore, wild tigers would be an economic adjunct to farms, in addition to the fact that the wild tiger is considered more "powerful" than one bred in captivity¹⁸. Moreover, the opening up any trade in tiger products would attract the interest of more than a billion potential Asian consumers, who enjoy some of the fastest economic growth in the world. If trade were opened up, wild tigers would likely not stand a chance. There are those, however, who argue the exact opposite, that opening the market for captive-bred tigers will suppress poaching and smuggling because legal parts will be available, tracked and controlled¹⁹. A trade, researchers explain, that would generate funds for conservation in the field, supporting both captive breeding and conservation costs. In some cases, they conclude, captive-bred tigers may be the only survivors of their subspecies.

Finally, there is another element to analyze, namely what is considered the "perfect storm": a series of events that converge together resulting in other, often catastrophic, circumstances. And in this case, it could lead

¹⁶ Tigers à la carte, <https://oxpeckers.org/2021/03/tigers-a-la-carte/>.

¹⁷ Un dresseur de fauves dans la gueule de la justice https://www.lemonde.fr/m-le-mag/article/2022/09/19/un-dresseur-de-fauves-dans-la-gueule-de-la-justice_6142286_4500055.html.

¹⁸ Dinerstein et al, The Fate of Wild Tigers, BioScience, Volume 57, Issue 6, June 2007, Pages 508-514.

¹⁹ Zhigang Jiang et al, Captive-bred Tigers and the Fate of Wild Tigers, ioScience, Volume 57, Issue 9, October 2007, Page 725.

to thwarting all efforts to protect and conserve the wild tiger. In fact, according to wild feline expert and IUCN member Kirsten Conrad, there are at least five elements²⁰ that make restrictions on trade dangerous to the survival of the species, particularly with regard to tigers, rhinos and elephants. According to Conrad, making the sale and purchase of live animals, products and their by-products illegal would lead to the creation of a monopoly in the hands of the black market, feeding a constant demand that would be unaffected by rising prices. On the one hand, sellers would find often violent and increasingly ingenious ways to circumvent bans, while on the other hand buyers would assume the risk of purchase.

Second, “prohibition” goes to undermine an old practice that is difficult to eradicate, and has inexorably increased the power of the black market, which is now entrenched in society. The expert also points out that thinking of tigers – but also of other endangered animals – as “public goods” can lead to the opposite effect of conservation: since they belong to no one, no one would take care of them. Supporting this argument are the cases in which poaching numbers appear to be declining where the various private reserves are active. Then there is the local issue, which is often overlooked, but nonetheless fundamental: the constant reduction of habitats puts wild species in competition with humans for resources, and this leads to a conflict in which tigers, elephants or rhinos are seen as potentially deadly species, and therefore to be opposed by all means. Finally, a lack of political will would undermine efforts to regulate this market: corruption, bureaucratic and legal red tape and uncertainty of punishment would make poaching safer and more profitable. “In this situation,” Conrad writes, “maintaining or implementing a trade ban can be the final nail in the coffin for the very species it is intended to protect.” In short, the issue is far from settled. Meanwhile, thousands of felines are being bred around the world. Some among them certainly not in suitable conditions and far from conservationist or recreational assumptions. And some of these simply disappear, turned into *commodities* to satisfy esoteric practices rooted in popular culture for millennia.

²⁰ Kirsten Conrad, Trade Bans: A Perfect Storm for Poaching?, September 1, 2012