

The World Can't Have Wild Tigers and Eat Them, Too

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In 1993 China banned all trade of tiger bones in response to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) directives and threats of international trade sanctions (Hemley & Mills 1999). This action closed down a significant legal industry in tiger parts in China, which exported 27 million units of tiger products to 26 countries between 1990 and 1992 (Mills & Jackson 1994). Since this ban was enacted, however, the Chinese CITES management authority has occasionally floated proposals to reopen limited trade in tiger parts from captive-bred tigers (Mills & Jackson 1994; Delegation of the People's Republic of China to the CITES Standing Committee 2006). In 2007 farmed tiger populations had grown to more than 5000, and investors in tiger farms began lobbying for international support to lift China's 14-year ban. This idea has encountered strong opposition from many tiger-range countries who drafted a decision at the 2007 CITES conference of the parties stating: "... tigers should not be bred for trade in their parts and derivatives." (CITES, 2007).

In June 2006 China's State Forestry Administration invited an international delegation to conduct an independent review of proposals from tiger farmers to reopen the trade in tiger parts and products from captive-bred animals (Nowell & Ling 2007). The delegation did not include recognized international experts in tiger management or conservation. Its members claimed that flooding the market with legally supplied, captive-bred tiger parts and products would undercut the illegal supply from tiger poachers and benefit wild tigers (Mitra 2006; Lapointe et al. 2007).

From a purely economic perspective, their claim is fraught with problems. A simple cost analysis of wild versus farmed tiger parts indicates that it would cost at least US\$4000 to raise a tiger to adulthood in captivity (Lapointe et al. 2007) and as little as \$15–\$20 to poach a wild tiger (Damania et al. 2003). Even allowing for the costs of transporting wild tiger products to end markets and occasional losses to enforcement action along the way, the cost of producing farmed tiger parts would clearly be far higher, perhaps even by a factor of 10. This gross discrepancy would offer substantial economic incentives for poachers and smugglers to undercut farmers in any legal market, despite the risks associated with being caught and penalized. Furthermore, consumers of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) prefer products made from wild individuals, believing they are more potent than farm-raised ones. These, therefore, can command a significantly higher price—as demonstrated in the bear-bile market (WSPA 2007).

The tiger-farming lobby suggests there are ways to certify captive-raised products but, as yet, distinguishing between farmed and wild tiger parts is impossible. Thus, opening a market of tiger parts from any source would offer a clear avenue to "launder" illegal parts and products from wild tigers and sell them as legal. This raises the question of how effective the ban has been at restricting supply of and reducing the demand for tiger bones, and we have evidence from a number of sources that shows there is a decline in use of tiger parts since the ban. The 1993 ban was very effective at reducing the supply of tiger bone in China (Nowell & Ling 2007). Fewer than

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3% of Chinese medicine shops ($n = 633$) claimed to stock tiger bone in 2005, compared with 18% in 1994 (Nowell & Ling 2007). In a separate survey of 300 practitioners of TCM, 3% of the practitioners believed tiger bone was a crucial medicine, whereas 70% believed the medicine was of minimal importance and that there were other excellent and plentiful substitutes, such as cow bone (Call 2006).

Tiger bone was officially removed from the TCM pharmacopeias in 1993 (Meng & Zhai 2000), and the use of tiger bone is increasingly viewed as a dying practice. Representatives of the TCM industries have acknowledged that prescribing endangered species hurts the reputation of TCM and reduces its ability to expand into global markets (Ho 2007). Any move to promote consumption of tiger bone among TCM's 1.4 billion global consumers (Ho 2007) could reignite this dying practice and would undermine over a decade of investments in conservation work to reduce demand.

Tiger farmers have no vested economic interest in securing a future for wild tigers. One could argue that if wild sources go extinct, these investors would be in an economically advantageous position—having exclusive control on supply of the global market in tiger parts. Given their potential to benefit financially from lifting the ban, investors in tiger farms are not, as they claim, a neutral party with the best interests of wild tiger conservation at heart. In fact, investors have strong economic incentives to divest themselves of their stockpiles because they are incurring huge costs from maintenance of stockpiled frozen tiger carcasses, in a gamble that the trade ban will one day be dropped (IFAW 2007; Lapointe et al. 2007). Although tiger farmers are acutely aware of the ban in trade in tiger bones, they are already supplying an illegal market for tiger products, leading to additional economic gains from these activities (CITES Secretariat 2007; IFAW 2007; Nowell & Ling 2007).

Efforts to conserve wild tigers have been successful in some protected areas and in landscapes where laws protecting tigers and their prey are strictly enforced, but only 23% of the priority landscapes for tiger conservation where wild tigers live are protected areas (Dinerstein et al. 2006). Improved enforcement of existing antitrafficking laws and upholding prohibitions on trade in tiger parts from all sources would help protect tigers inside and outside protected areas. Given that fewer than 2500 breeding adult tigers remain in the wild (IUCN 2006),

the risks posed to wild tigers from reopening trade of any kind is one we cannot afford to take. To do so would be gambling with the future of one of the world's most iconic species.

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