

# Lifting China's Tiger Trade Ban Would Be a Catastrophe for Conservation

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**C**hina was formerly the world's leading consumer of tiger products, primarily tiger bone medicines. In the early 1990s, over 200 companies were manufacturing some type of tiger bone product, and it is likely that the primary source of supply was wild tigers poached in other range states. Around this time, the Government of China invested in the world's first "tiger farm" – a breeding center in Heilongjiang which aimed to raise tigers commercially for their parts (Martin *et al.* 1991). However, as international alarm grew over the decline of the tiger, in 1993 China banned domestic trade in tiger parts and products, and did not allow the tiger farm to use its tigers for commercial purposes (other than tourism).

In 2005-2007, Chinese TRAFFIC researchers carried out extensive market surveys to determine the effectiveness of China's domestic trade ban. The surveys indicate that the ban has been successful at its primary aim of eliminating domestic trade in tiger bone medicines. Less than 3% of 663 medicine shops and dealers in 26 cities claimed to stock it. There was high awareness that tiger is protected and that trade is illegal (without being asked, 64% of retail pharmacies mentioned this to the survey team).

Notwithstanding the effectiveness of China's ban in reducing bone trade, new markets for tiger and leopard skins have risen within the past five years, particularly in areas of China that are traditionally Tibetan. About 3% of Tibetans surveyed in major towns, such as Lhasa and Nagchu, claimed to own cloaks, or *chubas*, made from tiger or leopard skin, even though most people know this is illegal. In 2005, China's government and other concerned organizations publicized the environmental concerns – and illegal nature

– of this skin trade (Jackson 2006). TRAFFIC's time-lapse surveys of retail outlets in the Lhasa area suggest there has been a decline in the sale and use of tiger skin clothing after these awareness efforts.

Despite the domestic trade ban, tigers are being bred in captivity in large numbers in China, reportedly numbering over 5,000 (Govt. of China, 2007), and there are worrying indications that the breeding centers are engaging in illegal tiger trade. The most prominent breeding center is Zhou Weisen's Tiger and Bear Mountain Village in the southern province of Guilin. Journalists and NGO investigators have reported illegal sale of tiger bone wine here since the late 1990s. In 2005, the center's subsidiary wine company was given government permission to produce 400,000 bottles of "Bone Strengthening Wine", or BuGu Jiu. The name rhymes with tiger bone wine (HuGu Jiu), the product is sold in a fancy tiger replica bottle (for USD\$120), and Zhou Weisen's staff have repeatedly said that it is made from steeping tiger carcasses in a vat of rice wine. However, the officially approved ingredient is African lion (the breeding center reportedly has 200, although only a few were seen by investigators). Genetic analysis of the wine was carried out, but the DNA found was too fragmentary to identify the species. Production of this wine is of concern for three reasons. First is that it is being marketed as tiger bone wine and stimulates demand. Second is that the use of African lion to substitute for tiger bone is not encouraged as it could result in poaching pressure on lion populations. Third is that it raises the spectre of laundering international trade in tiger bone, since the African lion is on CITES Appendix II which allows commercial trade with an export permit.

Zhou Weisen is at the forefront of a new push to legalize captive-bred tiger products in China. His farm has

played host recently to several international delegations (Conrad 2006, Anon. 2007a), and has announced a May 2007 international workshop to develop a "new tiger conservation strategy" based on satisfying Chinese demand for tiger bone with tigers of captive origin. The Government of China takes the proposition seriously, as is evident from their January 2007 report to CITES:

*Though China and the international community have made great efforts in conserving the wild tiger, the results of these efforts are not so satisfied. The wild population of tiger as well as its habitats are remaining a concern. Many organizations, experts and famous persons have made their strategic study from the view of more beneficial to the wild tiger conservation and satisfying the need of illness treatment. They are questioning on the present tiger conservation and management policy and calling on adjusting, innovating and perfecting the tiger conservation strategy. Based on above questioning and calling, the Chinese Government is assessing its policy with a primary principal that it should be more beneficial to the global conservation and population resumption of the wild tiger (Govt. of China 2007).*

The evidence is against legalization proponents' primary argument that trade bans have failed to conserve tigers. Rather, the best data sets indicate that trade bans have indeed helped reduce commercial poaching pressure on wild tiger populations. The first global assessment of tiger range estimated that 89% of populations were suffering from medium to high poaching pressure in the mid-1990s (Dinerstein *et al.*, 1997). The recent update of this effort, the Tiger Conservation Landscape database, indicates that poaching pressure has since decreased (Sanderson *et al.* 2006: 14). Hunting of prey was considered more significant by most biologists than poaching of tigers, and

accidental hunting of tigers was a more prevalent threat than direct hunting of tigers. Export of tiger parts to other areas ranked in the middle of a list of 15 threats, and domestic markets of tiger parts was one of the lowest ranking threats.

Illegal wild tiger trade would likely persist even if an alternative source of supply (e.g., captive-bred tigers) were available. In the past, fake tiger bone, virtually indistinguishable from the genuine item, has satisfied a major portion of consumer demand and constituted an alternative source of supply, yet poaching of wild tigers persisted. The current ban does not harm public health, as there are numerous, approved substitutes to tiger bone within China's official pharmacopoeia. The discussion of lifting China's trade ban is, in substance, an argument about economic benefit to a small number of wealthy tiger breeders; the intensive breeding of tigers in China has little, if any, relation to tiger conservation, particularly since China's tiger breeding centers have no feasible plans for tiger re-introductions.

Moreover, to overturn the ban would call into question the Government of China's many years of excellent effort implementing and enforcing its trade ban, which have ranged from public education campaigns and support for effective substitutes for tiger medicines to severe punishment for law breakers. China has made a sacrifice, both economic and cultural, in giving up tiger medicines. But undertaking this sacrifice demonstrates laudable international leadership and responsibility, given how the demands of its market in previous decades brought the tiger to the verge of extinction both inside China and in neighboring countries.

In January 2007, a spokesperson for the State Forest Administration told the Xinhua national press agency that the government had no intention of easing its 1993 trade ban, but that China "welcomed well-researched advice or comments from experts and anyone who cares about the fate of wild tigers" (Anon. 2007b). For many years, China's appetite for tiger bone medicines was considered the leading threat to the tiger (Mills and Jackson 1994; Nowell

2000); unleashing demand again in the new powerful Chinese economy would certainly be a catastrophe for conservation. Cat specialists are encouraged to make their voice heard.

Nowell K. and Xu Ling. 2007. Taming the Tiger Trade: China's Markets for Wild and Captive Tiger Products Since the 1993 Domestic Trade Ban. TRAFFIC East Asia, Hong Kong, China. 64 pps. ISBN 978 1 85850 228 4. <http://www.traffic.org/content/842.pdf>

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Drink Bei Da Cang Tiger Bone Wine, contribute to wildlife conservation - the income from tiger bone wine sale will be used for wildlife conservation. Photo captions:

- 1st line: Anatomized tiger bones for the purpose of scientific research and sound usage.
- 2nd line on the right: Tiger bones marinating workshop.
- 3rd line in the center: Workers are checking quality of the products which processed through marinating, filtration and bottling by special facilities.
- 4th line in the center: Those tigers died of fighting or biting with each other stored in the ice tank.
- 5th line on the right: Workers are picking out qualified tiger bones for making wine. Those bones marinated in Bei Da Cang Chenping original liquid after special treatment.

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