

Rhino and tiger trade in China : is the ban working?

In response to growing international pressure, China announced, in May 1993, a ban on the trading of rhino horn and tiger bone. The ban specified an immediate halt to the production of commercial medicines containing these animal derivatives, and an end to the sale of existing stocks of such medicines by 30 November 1993. In addition, it became illegal to trade or transport rhino horn and tiger bone.

The Chinese ban was announced within days of the USA government's decision to certify Taiwan and China under the Pelly Amendment to the Fishermen's Protective Act of 1967. Certification is the preliminary step to invoking the Pelly Amendment which permits the US to impose trade sanctions on the country concerned.

Two months earlier, the CITES Standing Committee had expressed concern that escalating demand for rhino horn and tiger bone for use in traditional Chinese medicine continued to fuel poaching of these endangered animals, driving them dangerously closer to extinction. Conservationists believed insufficient efforts were being made by the main consumer countries of such animal products - China, Taiwan and South Korea, in particular - to bring this illegal trade under control.

Jorgen Thomsen, director of TRAFFIC International said, "While the Chinese ban is a step in the right direction, continuous monitoring of the commerce will be needed over the next few years to ensure that it is having the desired effect."

Consequently, the TRAFFIC Network has started conducting in-depth investigations of the market in China. Thus far, it has investigated four of the eight principal known herbal medicine markets in China - wholesale outlets for "raw herbs" (animal and plant products) and over 380 pharmacies and department/gift shops in 13 major cities over a period of three months in 1993/94.



Animal market in Chengde, Sichuan, China

TRAFFIC concludes that, implementation of the ban does not seem to be uniform throughout the country, but it has been "substantive". The high degree of awareness of the illegality of such sales is testimony to government efforts to notify the community of the ban. Despite this, some merchants continue to sell rhino horn, tiger bone or medicines containing these ingredients, although many claimed they were trying to get rid of their stocks. There was evidence of some attempts to circumvent the ban by mislabelling commercial medicines, for example falsifying the list of contents. Inspections have led to confiscation of medicines containing rhino horn and tiger bone.

The TRAFFIC investigation reported, however, that a covert market will persist to the extent that continuing demand (both domestic and international), combined with opportunities for smuggling and clandestine sale, allow it to continue.

"The ongoing threat of sanctions in case of lax enforcement of the ban is likely to be an effective means of keeping the pressure on China," said Thomsen. "However, it is equally important that the international community offer China technical and financial assistance to assure the country's long-term and sustained implementation of CITES and improved management of its wildlife," he said.