

# GUEST EDITORIAL

## **Economic Boom Leads to Wildlife Doom in Southeast Asia**

Cambodia recently held United Nations sponsored democratic elections, Vietnam can now freely trade with the United States as the embargo is lifted, and a bridge over the Mekong River opens up Laos to Thailand. These three countries in Southeast Asia, disturbed by Communist insurgencies and war for several decades, are now opening up to foreigners and international investment. Their economies are on the move, and new-found political stability and economic liberalization are attracting many business people.

Most of this is good news, but the influx of money and commerce has one very unwelcome result. Wild animal markets are burgeoning in the capitals and border towns of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The use of wildlife as food, as a source of medicines, decorations and ornaments, and as pets has a history going back thousands of years in East Asia. China, a country now with a population of more than 1.1 billion people, is an insatiable sump which sucks in everything it can get in the way of wildlife, dead or alive. Rare and magnificent animals such as the tiger, Javan and Sumatran rhinoceroses and Asian elephant are facing extinction in Southeast Asia because of an unreasonable demand for tiger bones and rhino horn in medicines and ivory as ornaments.

Just as chilling is the trade in live wild animals. You can visit the Cau Mong Market in Ho Chi Minh City, or the Evening Market in Vientiane, or the O Russei in Phnom Penh, and find caged monkeys, sun bears, clouded leopards, tortoises, pangolins, pythons, lorises, gibbons and a host of other wild creatures that have been tracked down and caught in the last remaining forests of the region. They are bought and consumed locally, or are traded through Vietnam into China or across borders into affluent Thailand. In exchange, consumer items such as bicycles, batteries, cigarettes, transistor radios and so on can be imported.

Professor Vo Quy of Hanoi University has expressed concern about the growing wildlife trade which is draining Indo-China of some of the rarest animals in the world. He noted recently that such endangered species as Malayan sun bears, clouded leopards, swamp turtles and several species of primate were being literally sold down the river to Thai, Taiwanese and Singaporean traders. A recent resident of Vientiane, Laurent Chazée, states that by far the largest number of wild animals in Laos are killed for food. In the north of the country most of the food, apart from rice, comes from the forest, and the mountain peoples earn 30% to 60% of their income from marketing wild forest products.

In the O Russei market in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which only reopened in 1982, one can find a vast array of live and dead animals. The major trader in tiger parts refused to give his name, even with a bribe,

but he admitted that the Cambodian military were shooting tigers in the north-east of the country. He had bought 30 to 40 complete tiger carcasses in 1993 for around \$1,500 each, which were eventually sold to Singaporeans and Thais for a hefty profit. Another shop owner said that he had purchased six live tiger cubs in 1993, all of which went to Vietnam. He also bought tiger bones from poachers for \$65 a kilogramme. These can be sold retail in Hanoi as medicine for \$350 a kilo, creating a great incentive for middlemen to support poachers.

At Poipet in western Cambodia, on the Thai border, elephant ivory and skin are sold, along with tiger parts, bear bile, leopard skins, deer antlers, tortoise shells, porcupine quills, snake skins, and live birds and monkeys. Almost every animal imaginable is used for something. The gecko is used as a sexual stimulant. Birds and monkeys are popular as pets. Porcupine stomachs are dried and sold for \$3 each to women who have recently given birth. A monkey's head for \$4, when eaten, will cure a person of a headache. A 14-inch elephant penis for \$200 can be chopped up and put in soup as an invigorator. Also in Poipet, which has ten shops selling wildlife products, you can buy a 10-inch length of elephant trunk for \$40, pangolin scales at \$12 a kilo, crocodile heads for \$20 each, bear skulls at \$44 a throw, and even python fat in a small vial for only \$2.

The new money pumping into the recently-opened Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, along with political stability that stimulates commerce, is resulting in a mass slaughter of the region's wildlife on an unprecedented scale. Laws have been enacted, including Vietnam's first environmental protection act passed in December 1993, but they are little heeded. After years of stifling communism, capitalism is now being encouraged, even in the late Ho Chi Minh's Hanoi. Most people are not aware of the threat that the booming trade poses to some wildlife species.

It will be interesting to see how Vietnam enforces its new environmental law. At the time of its announcement the official *Vietnam News* stated that 'Groups and individuals that utilize environment-related elements in production and business may be required, if need be, to contribute financially to protection activities.' The *Vietnam News* also said that 'They will have to pay damages if their activities result in adverse effects on the environment.'

Environmentally adverse effects are almost certainly the result of wildlife trade, but to quantify it, biodiversity surveys are urgently needed to estimate the numbers that remain of various species. In addition, the numbers of animals traded annually in the wildlife markets need to be assessed. For example, in Cambodia in 1993 a minimum of 50 tigers was taken from the wild. Cambodia has in effect no wildlife protection laws, and penalties in the Laotian 1989 penal code for hunting and trading violations are little enforced.

A great deal needs to be done to save endangered species from extinction in Southeast Asia. The most threatened species are the Javan and Sumatran rhinoceroses, the tiger, Asian elephant, clouded leopard, kouprey, gaur, banteng, Siamese crocodile, and the fewer than 100 white-headed leaf monkeys (*Trachypithecus francoisi poliocephalus*) found only on Cat Ba island in Halong Bay, Vietnam. Many other species are also in danger from hunting pressures and from the loss of forest habitats due to agricultural expansion and lumbering.

The governments of these countries need international assistance to train personnel, to strengthen enforcement of existing laws, and to create awareness amongst the populace and business community about the irreparable harm of the wildlife trade that is damaging their environments and economies. Since much of the pressure is coming from foreign traders, particularly in Thailand, Taiwan, Singapore and China, these countries also need to cooperate in controlling the illegal trade. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which all of these countries except Taiwan have signed, also needs to be enforced by them. China and Thailand have been particularly lax in implementing CITES regulations in their countries.

If many endangered species of wildlife are to be saved, Asian medicinal and culinary practices are going to have to be changed. This is a monumental task, and the Asian people will themselves have to be the ultimate movers in modifying over twenty centuries of tradition. As trying to change Eastern governments' trade policies and human rights practices have shown, confrontation is not a very effective strategy. Western conservationists will have to create and support allies in Eastern Asian countries to do the job. No other approach will have long-lasting results.

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