

New War in South East Asia

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with photos by Esmond Bradley Martin*

THE POLITICAL WARS ARE largely over in mainland South East Asia, except for a few hard core Khmer Rouge still battling it out for Marxism in Cambodia. Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia are rebuilding their war-torn economies and are rejoining the world community. Along with their neighbours China and Thailand, business is booming.

But business and growing economies have started a new war. This one is over wildlife. South East Asia is home to many rare and threatened animals such as the Javan and Sumatran rhinoceros, the tiger, clouded leopard, kouprey, the white-headed leaf-monkey and others. While wars and insurgencies were going on, organised wildlife trade almost came to a standstill. Now new money and rebuilt trade networks are putting more pressure on endangered wildlife than ever before.

Since the start of the Viet Nam war in the 1960s no one has been able to study wildlife trade in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia. Between 1990 and 1994 Esmond Bradley Martin carried out several wildlife trade surveys in South East Asia for the World Wide Fund for Nature and the World Conservation Union, both based in Switzerland. What he found is greatly disturbing for conservationists and for others who care about the future of the planet and its biodiversity. Local market places in these countries are burgeoning with live animals, and with the carcasses and body parts of dead ones that fetch surprisingly high prices for their reputed medicinal powers.

The prices for some of these products will explain why the trade is increasing, as poor rural people - and underpaid military personnel - comb the forested mountains in search of rare animals. Most of the remaining wildlife in mainland South East Asia is

found in the rugged mountain terrain in the border area running along eastern Laos and Cambodia with western Viet Nam, and in northern Laos.

In the O Russei market in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, a whole tiger carcass sells wholesale for \$1,500. The bones of this rare and beautiful animal are purchased by traders from poachers for \$65 a kilogramme, and even nails can fetch \$4 a piece. The bones are the most sought after

item because of their supposed medicinal powers according to traditional Chinese practices. A 16th century Chinese pharmacopeia states that the bones are good for

'curing bad ulcers, rheumatic pains in joints and muscles, typhoid fever and malaria'. Powdered tiger bone should be 'applied to burns and eruptions under the toenail', and tiger bones put on the roof of your house can 'keep devils away and so cure nightmares'. Sadly, even live tiger cubs are bought for about \$225, then sold to Vietnamese traders for \$350 each.

Retail prices for tiger bones are astronomical. People with rheumatism will pay \$350 a kilogramme in Vientiane and \$370 a kilogramme in Hanoi for small amounts. In China, where minuscule quantities are mixed into patent medicines, prices would work out much higher. With such profits to be made it is no wonder that people in countries with a per capita income of \$200 to \$400 a year have an incentive to poach.

The situation is just as bad or worse for the extremely rare Javan rhinoceros, of which there are only 65 left, and for the Sumatran rhinos which have declined in numbers to about 500. Less than 100 of these rhinos remain in the three countries covered here. Yet they are still being chased down and shot for their horn and skin. Most

people still think that rhino horn is used as an aphrodisiac, but in East Asia this is a fallacy. The last rhinoceroses in Asia are becoming extinct because the horn is used as a traditional aspirin. It is used primarily to reduce common fevers. The skin is used for skin diseases, the bones for bone disorders, and the blood as a tonic or to treat menstrual problems. The Chinese and other Asians obviously make close analogies between rhino body parts and treatment; thus it should come as no surprise that it is the penis which is used as an aphrodisiac, not the horn.

The recent wildlife trade surveys also reveal very disturbing trends that bode ill for the Asian elephant. After the international ivory trade ban in 1989, ivory prices and trade plummeted worldwide. Because of the opening up of Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia to foreigners and United Nations personnel, however, these countries since 1990 have been bucking the global trend. Wholesale ivory prices have doubled in Viet Nam and Laos to \$200 a kilogramme, and in Cambodia they have gone up 100 percent to \$400 a kilogramme over the past two years, prices higher than in Hong Kong or Tokyo. Cambodian ivory carvers are now making small Buddhas, flower buds and rings. Ivory trinkets are smuggled out of these countries mainly in personal luggage by foreign visitors.

The rise in ivory prices encourages poachers to increase their activities. Since Viet Nam has only about 1,500 wild elephants left, and Laos only 2,500, the situation is critical. No one knows how many wild elephants are left in Cambodia, but the number is very small. Laotian kings used to wear the red and gold sash of the Order of a Million Elephants. That order is now a serious misnomer, and it may soon cease to have any meaning in reality altogether.

Most of the tiger and rhino products find their way to Chinese markets. Taiwan

Tiger parts for retail sale in Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam in the early 1990s.

Product	Town/City	Use/Cure	Retail price in US\$
Skin	Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam	Decoration (well-tanned)	1,850 each
	Phnom Penh, Cambodia	Decoration (poor quality)	400 each
	Phnom Penh	Fever (with no hairs)	20 per kilogramme
	Poipet, Cambodia	Decoration (poor quality)	400 each
Bone	Hanoi, Viet Nam	Back ache	350 per kilogramme
	Vientiane, Laos	Rheumatism	370 per kilogramme
	Phnom Penh	Rheumatism	100 per kilogramme
	Poipet	Rheumatism, aches and pains	80 per kilogramme
Nail	Vung Tau, Viet Nam	Jewellery (with silver clasp)	10 each
	Vientiane	Souvenir	10 each
	Vientiane	Sedative, especially for madness	23 each
	Ho Chi Minh City	Souvenir	10 each
	Phnom Penh	Souvenir/decoration	4 each
Tooth	Vientiane	Souvenir	10 each
	Vientiane	Dog bites/fever	14 each
	Ho Chi Minh City	Souvenir	9 each
	Phnom Penh	Souvenir	5 to 84 each
Nose	Vientiane	Dog bites, sedative for madness	78 each
Skull	Poipet	Decoration	20 each
	Phnom Penh	Decoration	70 each

Source: Surveys carried out by Esmond Bradley Martin, 1990 - 1994.

is probably the main offender in this illegal trade, as the Taiwanese are rich, and the government does little to enforce its own wildlife trade laws. In Taipei's pharmacies Asian rhino horn will be sold retail for the equivalent of \$40,000 to \$50,000 a kilogramme. African horn, thought to be less

effective in reducing fevers, sells for 'only' about \$4,000 a kilogramme. Mainland China also pays only lip service to certain wildlife laws, as do Thailand and South Korea. Singapore used to be a major importer of wildlife products, but government officials now are more serious and effective in con-


trolling illegal imports. Singaporeans, however, are still active in buying the wildlife products in South East Asia and selling them at good profits.

One of the main problems is trying to change beliefs and attitudes about medicine and health problems that go back for more

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than 2000 years. The Chinese, and others who follow their practices, firmly believe that these animal products are effective in curing their ills. They are not so believing of animal product substitutes. Cracking down on poachers and business people will reduce the trade, to be sure, but it will not stop it. Products such as rhino horn, elephant ivory and tiger bones will continue to be supplied and sold as long as there is a demand for them - or as long as the supply lasts.

In Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam the supply of tigers, rhinoceroses and elephants is severely limited. Guns and poor people are everywhere, and the wildlife markets are flourishing. The only way to prevent local extinctions is to educate the local traders first, and try and change East Asian medicinal systems over the long term. If this last goal cannot be reached, we might as well say goodbye to several species of magnificent animals. ●



Top right; The Poipet market in north west Cambodia caters for Thai people who buy a large assortment of wildlife products for display or for medicinal purposes.

Centre right; Many products from rare and endangered animals are available in Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam. In this tourist shop, skins from the tiger (US \$1,850), clouded leopard (US \$300) and leopard (US \$1,000) are displayed, along with a great assortment of elephant ivory items.



Bottom right; Monkeys are caught for pets and occasionally for food throughout Cambodia, and are purchased by both local people and by Thais and Vietnamese.



Left; The kouprey or grey ox (Bos sauveli) is one of the rarest large mammals in the world. It is believed to exist only in Indochina, especially in Cambodia. An aerial survey to find the kouprey carried out in central Cambodia in March 1994 failed to find a single animal, however. In Poipet a trader obtained horns from two female koupreys. The skull, with attached horns from one of the females, is shown in this picture. It was priced at US \$400 in February 1994. This is very rare to see.

