



Illegal Trade in Tigers (SC53 Doc. 17)

53RD MEETING OF THE CITES STANDING COMMITTEE
27TH JUNE – 1ST JULY 2005
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

Summary

The Species Survival Network (SSN) echoes the concerns highlighted in SC53 Doc. 17 in relation to ongoing illegal trade in the skins of tigers and other Asian big cats and endorses the recommendations contained therein.

SSN would stress that professional law enforcement responses are required, particularly in India, to combat the serious criminal networks engaged in trafficking skins. This is consistent with the recommendations of the CITES Tiger Missions.

SSN would further recommend that targeted enforcement be undertaken as a matter of priority in the identified markets for skins in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China.

Skin Markets

As indicated in SC53 Doc. 17 the international illegal trade in the skins of tigers and other Asian big cats, particularly leopards and snow leopards, poses a significant threat to their survival. China appears to be the primary market and distribution point with skins being used as decoration on traditional costumes worn across the Tibetan plateau. Skins are openly sold in markets and openly worn at festival times. Anecdotal reports suggest that there has been an increase in the demand for skins for this purpose in recent years.

Traders in the TAR also indicate that whole tiger and leopard skins are sold to wealthy individuals as luxury decoration and are potentially being exported globally. Singapore, Korea and the Middle East have also been identified as markets for big cat skins, while traders in TAR indicated that Europeans are also buying whole leopard skins and traditional costumes trimmed with leopard skin.

Skin Traders

Seizure incidents indicate the most significant consignments of skins are trafficked from India, either directly to the TAR or via Nepal. The trade appears to be well-organized with buyers or their representatives selecting and marking particular skins, then avoiding taking any risks by having the skins couriered to them.

Many of the buyers or their representatives are of Tibetan origin, sometimes living in Nepal. Evidence from seizures also indicates the ongoing involvement of members of the Tibetan community living in India, in the trafficking of skins from India. Dealers in India have connections to poachers and sometimes to tanneries, where tiger, leopard and other skins are often tanned finely enough to fold easily.

Professional Enforcement

With the largest remaining population of wild tigers and leopards, India is a major target for traders. Enforcement authorities in India have produced volumes of data on the individuals and networks involved but there is no single agency assigned to gather, analyze and act upon that information to



target particular criminal networks and individuals. Two consecutive Prime Ministers have acknowledged that the wildlife trade is dominated by criminals in India, yet the Government of India has still not established a multi-agency enforcement unit to professionally address this serious threat. With the onset of monsoon these endangered species will be even more vulnerable and thus it is critical that swift action is taken.

The involvement of organized criminal groups in trafficking wildlife has been recognized by Member States at the 11th UN Crime Congress in April 2005. The resulting Bangkok Declaration called upon all Member States to take effective measures to strengthen international cooperation. The Management Authorities of the relevant CITES Parties should draw upon this declaration to secure greater engagement in combating wildlife crime from domestic professional law enforcement agencies.

Equally, at a regional and international level, there needs to be greater cooperation between professional law enforcement agencies to break transnational criminal networks engaged in trading tigers and other Asian big cats. SSN acknowledges that the recent meeting of the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force is a first step towards regional cooperation and is aware that the Task Force's objectives will not be met through a single meeting, but rather through sustained communication and more active engagement and proactive enforcement. It will be necessary to consider further meetings of this nature to ensure that progress is made.

SSN also acknowledges that the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force meeting was possible through the support of the UK and encourages other CITES Parties to be prepared to offer financial and technical assistance to facilitate enforcement initiatives. Similarly, SSN recognizes that the technical and practical expertise of the CITES Secretariat in enforcement matters contributes greatly to the direction and progress of CITES initiatives to combat wildlife crime, but that there are resource constraints that limit the availability of the CITES Secretariat to provide assistance and guidance.

Recommendations

SSN calls upon the CITES Standing Committee to:

- Endorse the recommended actions in SC53 Doc. 17;
- Urge India to act immediately to establish an effective and independent multi-agency enforcement unit with the authority to operate nationally and cooperate with regional counterparts and intergovernmental bodies;
- Urge China to launch appropriate enforcement actions to target the use of tiger, leopard and snow leopard skins in traditional costumes;
- Urge all Parties to alert enforcement authorities at ports of entry to be more vigilant with regard to the trade in tiger and other Asian big cat skins for use as luxury home decoration, particularly where travelers are returning from the primary market region;
- Urge all Parties to increase the engagement of professional enforcement officers in the fight against wildlife crime and encourage their participation in future meetings of the CITES Standing Committee and the Conference of the Parties to CITES; and
- Urge all Parties to consider increasing the budget for the CITES Secretariat to recruit additional qualified personnel in the Compliance and Enforcement Unit to assist the Senior Enforcement Officer.