



**Cover:** World Animal Protection believes that wildlife should be left in the wild and not used for medicine.

## Executive summary

# Trading cruelty – how captive big cat farming fuels the traditional Asian medicine industry



## Introduction

Thousands of big cats, mostly lions and tigers, are being farmed in intensely cruel conditions and then traded both legally and illegally to fuel the highly lucrative global market for traditional Asian medicine products. These products, made from big cat bones, blood and other body parts, include wines, capsules, gels and balms believed to cure ailments ranging from arthritis to meningitis.

World Animal Protection researchers have uncovered an expanding, lucrative and largely hidden industry responsible for the appalling treatment of some of the world's most iconic wild animals. They found the trade inflicts severe cruelty on cubs and adult animals and involves an extensive chain linking countries including China, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam and Lao PDR.

## Distressing cruelty – hidden suffering

In China, researchers visited facilities housing over a thousand big cats. Lions and tigers were confined to rows of cramped, dismal, concrete enclosures and cages – harsh captive environments far removed from their wild, natural homes. Many were clearly emaciated with their ribs and back bones highly visible.

The cruel, restrictive conditions caused the animals such distress that many were pacing backwards and forwards along in their shockingly small enclosures for hours. Pacing and self-harming (usually the biting of limbs and tails) in big cats are abnormal behaviours. They are reactions to confinement and stress that do not happen in the wild where lions and tigers can roam freely in their territories that can range from 7-100km.

While in South Africa, our investigators linked activities including cub cuddling and lion walking to a sinister breeding and lion bone and part export business that routinely flouts the existing domestic legal quota system.

'Trading cruelty' paints a bleak picture of big cat suffering for the traditional Asian medicine trade, but it also gives clear paths to change. Our consumer research in China and Vietnam shows raising awareness of the cruelty involved and of readily available non-animal alternatives are key to reducing demand for big cat products.

Transforming the traditional medicine industry to make wild animal use in medicines socially unacceptable is central to our big cat protection work.

**Life-long captives:** This facility keeps around 280 big cats. Most are tigers with a few lions.

## Ending big cat farming

World Animal Protection is moving people, governments, corporates and international policy forums to stop the exploitation of, and trade in tigers and other big cats for traditional medicine use. We work with governments and the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to ensure full enforcement of the international trade ban on tigers and tiger products.

Robust domestic laws are critical to big cat protection and we are pressing national governments to strengthen legislation. We want them to ensure that breeding big cats and trading their body parts is clearly illegal and that any loopholes that currently allow this trade are closed.

Transforming the traditional medicine industry to make wild animal use in medicines socially unacceptable is central to our big cat protection work. Sustainable, non-animal based alternatives are readily available, affordable and acceptable. And so, we are mobilising traditional Asian medicine practitioners, consumers and retailers to join our campaign. We want them to promote and use the available alternatives and stop the pain and suffering big cat products cause. This report is just the beginning.

Together, we can make this generation of big cats held in captivity the last.



## Suffering in numbers

The world's main big cat breeders are China and South Africa. China holds between 5,000-6,000 tigers<sup>(1)</sup>; South Africa reportedly keeps 6,000-8,000 captive lions in 200 facilities<sup>(2)</sup> and 280 tigers in 44<sup>(3)</sup>.

On a smaller scale, Thailand holds around 1,500<sup>(4)</sup> tigers. Lao PDR and Vietnam also have facilities that keep tigers and lions captive, but in much lower numbers. However, our researchers identified Lao PDR as a receiving and processing hub for lion bones from South Africa. Once processed the bones then enter the traditional Asian medicine market.

Not all captive big cats are kept simply breeding for the traditional Asian medicine trade. In Thailand, many tiger breeding facilities also offer tourist experiences with the animals. These include cub feeding, petting and tiger shows which cause the animals enormous stress through forced interactions with hundreds of people daily. Young tigers are used mostly for tourist interactions and the fate of the adults is unclear. However, cases of illegal tiger product trade from Thailand suggest a link to the traditional medicine or luxury product trade<sup>(5)</sup>.

South African lion farms often offer lion cub handling and walking to tourists. But trophy hunting is their main business where they charge US\$12,000-15,000 per kill. As hunters are usually only interested in lion heads, the farms can make additional profits by selling the bodies to exporters.

## Forcing speedy breeding

Market pressure for traditional Asian medicine means large numbers of big cats must be bred, kept, killed and sold. This results in the speed breeding and inbreeding of the animals which can cause severe health and welfare problems. Inbred cubs can have painfully deformed feet, legs and faces. They often suffer with sight, hearing breathing and chewing problems too.

Early separations carried out by the speed breeders cause great distress to both mothers and cubs. In the wild, cubs would normally stay with their mothers for up to two years, but in breeding facilities the cubs are removed from their mothers within the first few days or weeks. The breeding cycle then starts again. Sriracha Zoo in Thailand proudly stated that they achieve birth rates up to 6-9 times higher than in the wild<sup>(6)</sup>.



## Contributing to wild declines

Captive and wild big cats are both suffering and dying for the trade. It is likely that wild lions are illegally trafficked by organised crime syndicates into South Africa from neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe and Botswana and added to lion farm populations. Also, snow leopards and jaguars poached from the wild have also been found in the traditional Asian medicine supply chain.

Shockingly, African lion populations in the wild declined by 43% between 1993 and 2014<sup>(7)</sup>, and tiger populations are on the brink of extinction with only 3,890 remaining in the wild globally<sup>(8)</sup>. Increased consumer demand for big cat body parts is exacerbating their decline.

Other big cat species are also affected by demand for traditional Asian medicine containing their body parts. A 2018 World Animal Protection investigation in Suriname uncovered the poaching of 25 jaguars for the Asian market<sup>(9)</sup>. And the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) reports that seizures of jaguar since 2014 both in China and in South America from shipments destined for China have notably consisted of teeth and bones<sup>(10)</sup>.

Since 2000 at least 5,559 Asiatic big cats have been intercepted in the illegal trade<sup>(11)</sup>. This includes the death of at least 1,031 tigers, 4,189 leopards, 152 snow leopards, 26 clouded leopards and 17 Asiatic lions<sup>(12)</sup>. INTERPOL presumes that contraband seized is about 10% of what is being trafficked.

As hunters are usually only interested in lion heads, the farms can make additional profits by selling the bodies to exporters.

**Early separation:** These lion cubs range in age from three months to a year. In the wild, lion cubs stay with their mothers until they are around two years old. At facilities in South Africa, cubs are often used to provide tourists with holding, stroking, bottle feeding, and walking experiences until they get too big. They may then be killed for the traditional Asian medicine trade. Credit: Blood Lions

# Protecting big cats and the law

International and domestic laws governing big cat protection are complicated and inadequate. Legal loopholes and lack of enforcement combine to support the exploitation of big cats for the traditional Asian medicine trade.

Internationally, big cats are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES regulates the international trade of 'listed' species of wildlife to ensure their trade does not threaten their survival in the wild. Species are listed as Appendix I, II or III. Each classification relates to the different regulations or restrictions regarding the commercial trade of these species or their products.

All big cat species other than lions are listed as Appendix I. This means they are threatened with extinction in the wild, and any international commercial trade in tiger body parts and derivatives, for example, is prohibited.

The African lion is the only big cat listed on CITES Appendix II. This means international commercial trade of lion products is legal under CITES, if there are appropriate export permits. This is also providing exports are not detrimental to the lion population.

## Masking the true trade

Between 2007 and 2016, South Africa was the biggest exporter of lion products – at least 70 metric tonnes of bone products were shipped between 2008-2016<sup>(13)</sup>. The government operates a quota system where the trade and export of lion bones is legal; the annual quota relates to the number of lion skeletons that can be exported.

However, a 2018 study highlighted discrepancies between the weight of exported lion carcasses and the declared number of skeletons. It indicated that two to three times as many lions, as allowed per the legal quota are being exported through false declaration of how many skeletons a shipment contains<sup>(14)</sup>.

## Failing to protect tigers

CITES regulations do not extend to domestic trade laws. Consequently, it is the responsibility of the central government in each country with breeding facilities to establish their own laws regarding production and domestic trade of tiger products. Ideally, these laws should comply with CITES regulations and decisions, such as Declaration 14.69 which restricts captive breeding of tigers.

National laws and enforcement in China, South Africa, Thailand and Lao PDR fail to protect tigers from captivity, breeding and the traditional Asian medicine trade.

**Unnatural confinement:** A small barren enclosure houses two breeding tigers. Tigers are not native to South Africa, and there are approximately 280 kept in 44 breeding facilities across the country.

## Country laws

### Thailand and Lao PDR

Although the Thai government introduced a registration system in 2016 and advised big cat venues to voluntarily restrict their captive breeding efforts, the breeding continues. This is because many facilities are marketed to tourists and rely on a steady supply of cubs to be profitable.

### China

China banned the use of tiger bone for medicinal use in 1993, but no breeding ban was introduced for tiger facilities and a legal trade in tiger skins from breeding facilities was encouraged. There is a lack of clarity over the use of and labelling of tiger bone products in the country. Tiger bone wine has been labelled as bear and lion wine for example<sup>(15)</sup> – a way of circumventing the law.

### South Africa

Tigers are obviously not native to South Africa but are bred there in 44 facilities. South African legislation allows the domestic trade in tiger parts, but there is inconsistency between provincial and national legislation and enforcement. South African legislation also allows some international trade in captive tiger parts and derivative<sup>(16)</sup>. The CITES database shows more than 200 live tigers have been exported from South Africa over the past five years. It cannot be assumed that claims of 'non-commercial' purposes of these trades are always correct.

Tiger populations are on the brink of extinction with only 3,890 remaining in the wild globally.



## Focus on China

Many big cat breeding facilities in China are also tourist attractions and so the conditions in which the animals are kept are relatively transparent. For this investigation, World Animal Protection researchers visited three facilities on mainland China to assess the ways big cats were kept and farmed; they found serious animal suffering. These facilities were all publicly accessible, relatively well-known, well-resourced and received large numbers of visitors.

The largest venue – identified for the research as Facility 3 – claimed to house more than 1,000 Siberian tigers, South China tigers, Bengal tigers and white tigers. It also housed 250 African lions and some additional leopards. Although marketing itself primarily as a tourist entertainment venue, Facility 3 was breeding big cats and using them to make traditional Asian medicine products and tiger bone wine.

At all facilities, the researchers noted clearly distressed tigers living in small, inadequate and poorly maintained enclosures. Some animals appeared malnourished to the extent of emaciation; their backbones were clearly visible; others were grossly overweight.

The spaces the animals were forced to live in were tiny compared to their natural wild territory range of 7 to 10 km<sup>2</sup>. Individual cats were confined to areas of around 4x7m less than 1/250<sup>th</sup> of a tiger or lion's natural range. To cope with their confinement, big cats often show their distress by pacing backwards and forwards endlessly – an abnormal behaviour that would never happen in the wild.

The living conditions of animals visible to tourists in all facilities, were quite different from those in which most of the big cats were kept. Only 10% of the cats appeared to live in larger areas of the site which included water features and some grass. The other 90% were kept in the cage blocks and had to live mostly on concrete floors. The areas were featureless, cramped, sometimes dirty and far too small for the number of animals who were denied nearly every possibility of behaving naturally.

## Selling big cat suffering

Two of the three venues visited were selling big cat products. Tiger bone wine, Hongmao medicinal liquor (containing leopard bone) and 'Strengthen-bone wine' containing African lion bones were on sale at Facility 3. The vendor claimed that Hongmao medicinal liquor is steeped with tiger bones during its production. He also explained that because of the law the bones could not be on show in the bottles of the final products. The facility sold the wine on WeChat and other online platforms Guilin Xion Sen Bear and Tiger Village.

A store next to Facility 1 sold different types of tiger bone wine, made for tiger body parts ranging from bones and tendons to penises. The seller claimed that the bones used in the liquors came from 'adult tigers that fight to the death'. The products were available to buy via WeChat.

Despite the tiger's endangered status, the demand for tiger products is growing.

## Driving demand for big cat products

Despite the tiger's endangered status, the demand for tiger products is growing. Alarming, as the wealth of the consuming nations (predominantly China and Vietnam) has increased, the desire for these products has risen as well. To meet this demand, an increasing trade in other big cat species, such as lions, jaguars and leopards, to supplement tiger products has been detected in recent years<sup>17,18,19,20</sup>.

China and Vietnam are widely understood to be two of the largest consumer nations of big cat traditional Asian medicine products. To understand their attitudes and consumption behaviour, to help efforts to shift product demand, World Animal Protection conducted several consumer attitude surveys in 2018. These focussed on attitudes and perceptions of Chinese and Vietnamese nationals.

### China

Our study of 1,200 people in eight Chinese cities found that more than 40% had used or purchased drugs and health products containing big cat ingredients.

Big cat product consumption varied by region. Out of the cities surveyed, people in Guilin had the highest rate (60.5%) of purchasing or using big cat medicines and health products. This was followed by people in Beijing (46%); those in Chengdu with a purchasing rate of 45.7%. Overall, Harbin had the lowest level of consumption at 36.4%.

### Vietnam

Our research found that Vietnamese big cat product consumers were likely to be older (55+), and had a higher average household income. Men and women also used different products. Tiger plasters were most likely to be used by retired women, whereas businessmen preferred tiger bone alcohol products. Vietnamese big cat product consumers were also wealthier than the general population and there was a strong gifting culture. Seventy one percent of Vietnamese participants said they bought traditional Asian medicine products for others.

The research found that TCM pharmacies and doctors were key influencers for buying big cat products. 38% of Chinese consumers used the product for the first time after their recommendation. Family and friends were very important sources too.

The study also showed that there was a clear preference for wild, rather than farmed big cat medicine, among consumers from both countries – 84% in Vietnam and 55.3% from China.

## Seeking alternatives – the answer

Survey participants in both countries said that big cat product consumption could be reduced in several ways. Fifty four percent of Vietnamese consumers said the most important way was to raise awareness of the cruelty involved. While 34.4% of Chinese consumers said there should be stricter laws and 21.3% were in favour of raising awareness of substitutes.

Vietnamese consumers also emphasised that raising awareness of cruelty would be more effective in protecting big cats than raising awareness that big cat products could be unsafe or ineffective. There was also a willingness to try herbal alternatives, but price was a factor. 67% of consumers were open to consume herbal or synthetic alternatives to big cat products. For 51% of consumers the price was a critical decision factor.

In addition, traditional Asian medicine contains only a few animal-based ingredients and there are a huge array of herbal alternatives for the animal ingredients that do exist. A review of several widely-used references on traditional Asian medicine (50/51) show 28 alternatives to hu gu – tiger bone.

Increasing consumer awareness of the wide range of alternatives available is critical in freeing big cats from their caged cruel confinement and to protect others from being poached for the trade in the wild.

**Unnatural confinement:** A small barren enclosure houses two breeding tigers. Tigers are not native to South Africa, and there are approximately 200 kept in breeding facilities across the country. Credit: Blood Lions



## Protecting big cats worldwide

Tigers, lions and other big cats are some of the world's most iconic wild animals, yet thousands are forced to endure appalling suffering in captive breeding facilities across Asia and Africa. Alarmingly their plight is tightly linked with the decrease of big cat populations in the wild. Big cat farming and the legal trade are sustaining the demand for wildlife products.

Concerted action from CITES and the key governments whose countries are involved in the trade is urgently needed to protect our world's majestic big cats. These countries are: China; South Africa; Thailand; Vietnam and Lao PDR.

We want their governments to:

- revise and close loopholes of relevant current laws and regulations to facilitate an end of captive breeding of big cats for commercial use of their body parts and derivatives
- adequately resource and train the relevant authorities who tackle the illegal wildlife trade
- combine a policy to prevent breeding in big cat facilities while encouraging facility owners to improve conditions for existing captive big cats to alleviate their unacceptable suffering
- implement policies restricting big cat breeding in facilities that do not make a direct and immediate benefit to big cat conservation by participating in internationally-recognised wild reintroduction programmes
- mobilise traditional Asian medicine practitioners to promote existing, sustainable non-animal based alternatives to big cat ingredients.

### CITES – tiger farming phase out

It is critical that CITES increases the protection of big cats.

We strongly support the proposals for phasing out commercial tiger farming. These tiger farms only serve to feed demand for wild tigers and increase the acceptability for traditional medicine products.

The welfare conditions for tigers on these farms are appalling, and they suffer daily at the hands of people who wish to exploit these majestic animals. We want CITES Parties to acknowledge that abolishing tiger farming is a crucial step towards sustained conservation of wild tiger populations.

We are concerned about the impact of the legal trade of lion bone from captive-bred lions in South Africa upon the illegal poaching of wild lions in South Africa and neighbouring range States. We fully support the draft CITES resolution that aims to prioritise enforcement of international restrictions on trade in lion products.

### The last generation

World Animal Protection is mobilising consumers, traditional Asian medicine practitioners, governments, businesses and CITES. We are moving them to stop the confinement and exploitation of tigers and other big cats for traditional medicine use.

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**Together, we can make this generation of big cats held in captivity the last.**

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**We are** World Animal Protection.

**We end** the needless suffering of animals.

**We influence** decision makers to put animals on the global agenda.

**We help** the world see how important animals are to all of us.

**We inspire** people to change animals' lives for the better.

**We move** the world to protect animals.

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