

Summary of Tiger Trade Investigation Findings Vietnam 2010



NOTE

This preliminary report is a brief summary of findings from a twelve-month investigation of tiger farming and trade in Vietnam carried out by Education for Nature - Vietnam (ENV) and law enforcement agencies. Due to the sensitive nature of the investigation and the fact that some cases are still currently under investigation or pending prosecution, this report reflects only the general conclusions drawn from the investigation. A complete report detailing the results of the investigation will be produced and distributed to key law enforcement agencies and decision-makers in early May 2010.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction



Photo by ENV

According to tiger experts, there may be fewer than 30 wild tigers remaining in Vietnam, surviving in a handful of parks and protected areas mostly along border areas in the central provinces.

Over the past 15 years, tiger populations in Vietnam, as well as across the tiger's native range have steadily declined as a result of poaching, shrinking habitat, and hunting and reduction of their prey base. The International Tiger Coalition (ITC), representing organizations worldwide working to protect tigers, estimates that about 3,500 tigers remain in the wild globally, most of these in India where efforts at some tiger reserves have been successful in curbing hunting, and protecting habitat and the animals that tigers prey on.

With the arrival of the "Year of the Tiger", Vietnam will need to take decisive action if we are to assure the future of our wild tigers, including more effective measures to protect our few remaining wild tigers, strengthening laws and imposing appropriate punishment on those that break them, and educating the public to establish broad support for preserving Vietnam's wild tigers - not on farms or in cages, but in nature.

In 2009, Education for Nature - Vietnam (ENV) initiated a 12 month investigation in Vietnam aimed at examining links between tiger farming and illegal trade. In addition, we sought to develop a better understanding of the illegal trade networks and the key individuals who are responsible for the bulk of the illegal tiger trade in Vietnam.

During the investigation, ENV worked closely with key partners in the National Environmental Police, provincial police agencies and Forest Protection Departments, as well as independent investigators.

This interim briefing is intended to highlight some of the key findings of the investigation to date. Later in 2010, a comprehensive, confidential report will be produced for law enforcement agencies and key government representatives detailing the findings thus far.

ENV Investigation

The investigation profiled six of seven known private businesses keeping tigers in Vietnam, in addition to two state zoos. Interviews were conducted with known subjects in smuggling and major trade cases, all 16 major tiger seizure cases since 2005 were documented with additional focus and investigation on ten of these cases.

Interviews were conducted with tiger bone operations and with Traditional Medicine (TM) shop owners at the consumer end of the trade. Investigation teams focused further attention on hotspot areas where major criminal enterprises responsible for most of the known illegal tiger trade operate.

Vietnam's tiger trade

The tiger trade is unique when compared to the illegal trade of other wildlife in Vietnam due to the relative rarity and high value of the commodity. This often results in traders taking extra measures to assure secrecy in their dealings. Vietnam's illicit tiger trade is carried out by elaborate criminal networks who avoid detection through use of disposable cell phones, have connections across international borders, and use friends in high places to facilitate a smooth and steady flow of their product to the consumer.

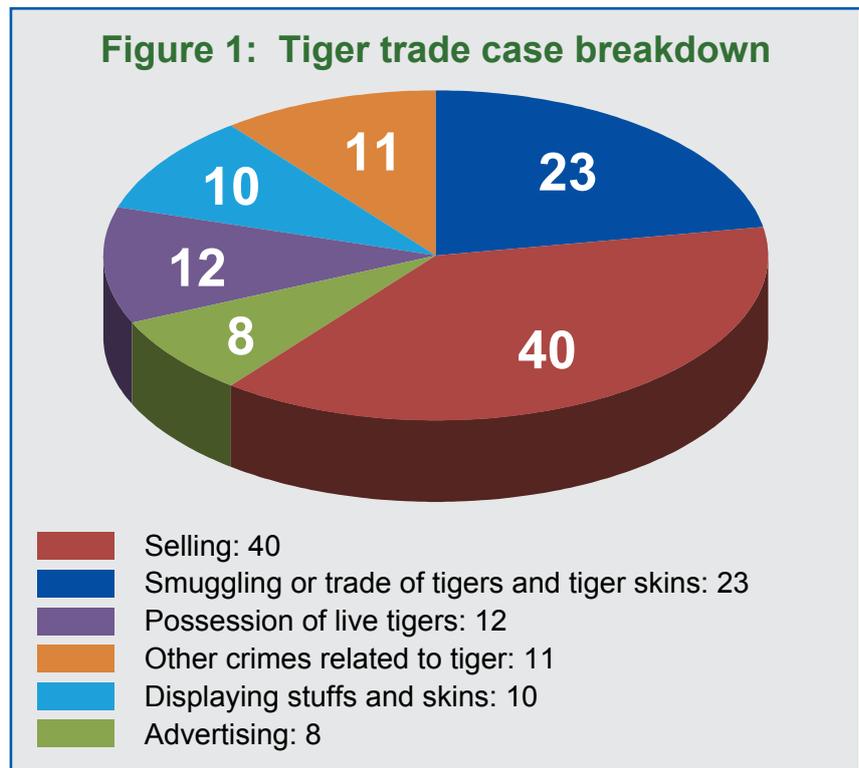
Since 2006, ENV's Wildlife Crime Unit has documented more than 104 crimes involving tigers. Sixteen of these cases have involved seizures of frozen or unfrozen remains of tigers or tiger bones. One incident involved live tigers.

Tiger seizures account for a total of 29 tigers (or remains of tigers) seized in trade since 2005, not including trophies or skins. In addition, a total of 12 cases have been documented by the crime unit involving possession of live tigers at private zoos or farms.

In at least 10 tiger seizures in Vietnam since 2005, the tigers were frozen. In addition to indicators such as wear on paw pads, the freezing of tigers indicates that it is likely the tigers came from farms or similar industrial premises as opposed to the wild.

Use of tiger products in Vietnam

The illegal trade network is oriented toward providing frozen tigers and tiger bone to brokers with glue-making operations. Customers are found in advance to witness the process before buying small quantities



Tiger Bone Glue

The most common use of tiger in Vietnam is in the form of bone glue. Tiger bone is boiled down until it forms a glue like substance (thus the term Tiger Bone Glue). The glue is then dried to form a fine powder which is mixed and consumed with wine.



A cut up tiger seized in September 2007 by Environmental Police in Hanoi

Photo by Thuc Quyen

bone glue. The cost of the dried powder, mixed with the bones of other wildlife ranges from 7 - 17 million VND/100 grams, depending on the quality (2009). Customers commonly consume the powder mixed with wine to strengthen bones, as well as remedy for a range of other ailments.

Consumer crimes range from the sale of tiger bone glue as traditional medicine, wine containing whole tiger cubs or parts of tigers, claws, skins, teeth, and mounted and stuffed tigers. Although

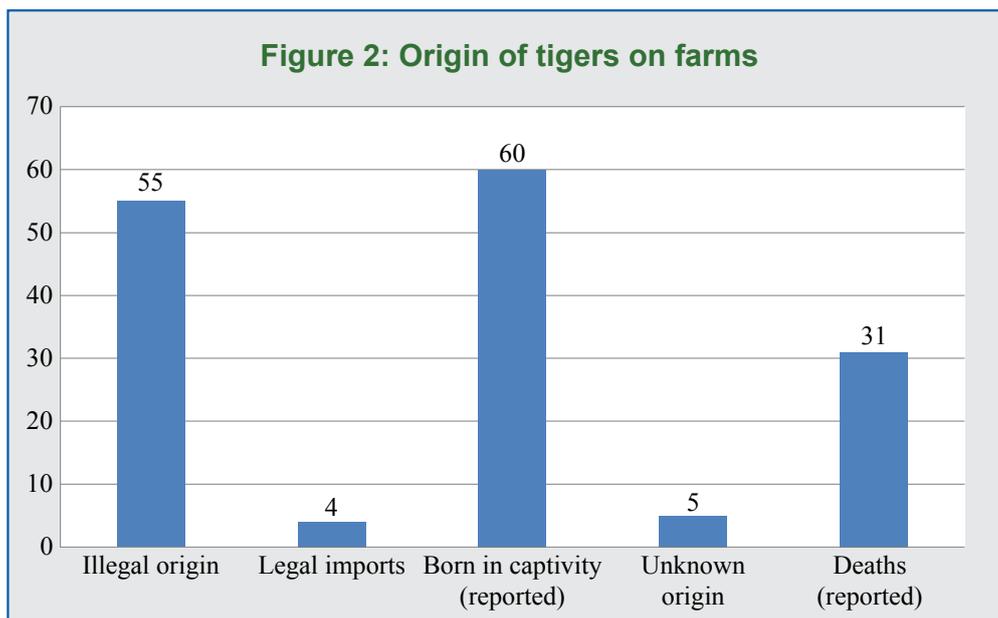
consumer sales of souvenirs such as tiger teeth and claws, and even skins, is of concern, the primary use of tigers in Vietnam is the production of tiger bone glue.

Investigations show that some traditional medicine shops may offer tiger bone glue, but are not usually the primary means through which consumers obtain the product. Consumers obtain tiger bone glue through personal contacts with the brokers, witnessing the event to assure authenticity of the product, and rarely purchasing products over the counter.

In the word's of one tiger bone glue maker, "It is easy to buy a frozen tiger in Vietnam" these days. Indeed a few phone calls and references, about 350 million VND in cash, or a trip to Tay Son town near the Cau Treo border crossing from Laos into Vietnam seems to be all that is required to pick up a 130 kg tiger.

Tiger farming in Vietnam

Tiger farming in Vietnam began to develop over the last five to ten years, most likely in response to rising demand for tiger bone TM and a steady decline in the availability of tigers sourced from the wild as native populations continued to decline in Vietnam and neighboring countries.



Vietnam's tiger farmers purchased or received most of their original founder tigers mainly from illegal sources, including animals smuggled into Vietnam from Cambodia or elsewhere, or possibly traded amongst some of the more successful early tiger breeders in the south.

Today, there are seven registered private establishments keeping a total of 84 live tigers in captivity. If state zoos and rescue centers are included, the number of captive tigers totals 101 individuals, including five Siberian or Bengal tigers. Four farms are located in the south, one in the central region, and two in the north.

Some of the tiger farmers suggest that their efforts are aimed at helping save Vietnam's tigers from extinction, but these claims are contradicted by our investigation. At least one tiger farm owner is directly involved in supplying tigers into the illegal trade, as evident by two recent cases that link seizures of tigers directly to him.

Tiger farm management and administration

Irregularities in tiger farmers' reports to provincial authorities and generally ineffective monitoring of farms leaves open the possibility that these farmers, many of which obtained their original tigers illegally, continue to engage in illegal trade of tigers. Indeed, the results of our review of six of seven registered farms implicated three establishments in direct crimes, and led investigators to suspect that some establishments may be involved in illegal activities based on irregularities in their accounting for births and deaths of tigers at their farms.

At one farm in the south, no births have been reported since 1999, yet investigators observed at least one tiger cub at the establishment during a May 2007 inspection.



A tiger cub observed in May 2007 by investigators at a tiger farm where no cubs or births were registered with authorities since 2000

Photo by Tim McCormack

Disposal of deceased tigers is not sufficiently enforced. This leaves open the opportunity for farmers to sell dead tigers rather than destroy the remains under witness of the authorities as required under the law. At one farm, 24 tiger deaths have been documented since 2006 however only ten of these deaths were accompanied by papers showing that the remains had been incinerated. At another establishment, FPD inspectors found two cubs in the freezer.

These findings only further strengthen the argument that tiger farming is not a conservation measure unless it is integrated with an effective government-backed strategic conservation breeding and preservation plan. Such a plan would effectively establish specific goals of preserving a genetically diverse group of native tigers under rigid management, and with realistic and practical strategic vision toward long-term conservation of the species. In contrast with the claims of some tiger farmers, the results of our investigation suggest that some tiger farming operations in Vietnam are actively engaged in commercial trade of tigers.

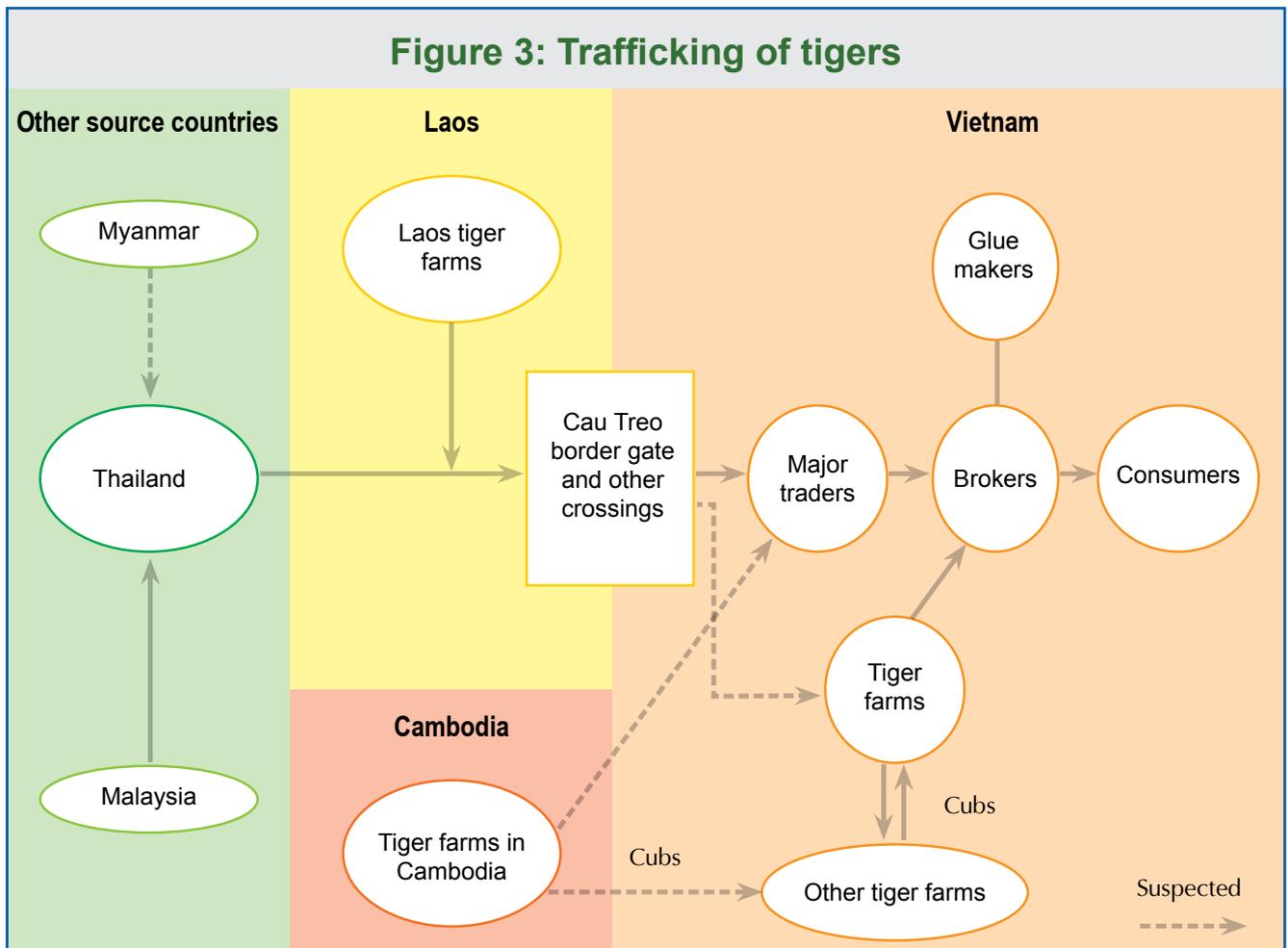
Sources and trafficking routes

Most tigers that are seized in trade appear to have been sourced from major tiger farming operations in Laos, according to a number of sources with knowledge of the trade. Cambodia was named as another source of tigers smuggled into Vietnam however none of the documented tiger seizures had specific confirmed links to Cambodia. Based on several seizures of frozen tigers in Thailand over the past few years that were reportedly destined for Vietnam, it is likely that tigers reaching Vietnamese markets may also be sourced in Thailand, Myanmar, and possibly Malaysia, as reported by some subjects of the investigation.

A recent article in the Malaysian press noted the presence of Vietnamese and other foreign hunters in Malaysia engaged in trapping of tigers and other wildlife.

Traders, glue-makers, and informants universally state that the Cau Treo border gate in Ha Tinh was the primary gateway for tiger smuggling into Vietnam. Tigers sourced from farms in Laos and elsewhere are typically frozen, often cut into two or more pieces, and smuggled into the country by major traders concentrated in Ha Tinh province, Nghe An, Ninh Binh, Thanh Hoa, and Hanoi. The tiger traders often sell the tigers on to brokers that organize the glue-making operations and sell the bone glue to consumers.

Of 16 seizures involving 29 tigers, none of the tigers were reportedly sourced from the wild in Vietnam. The absence of Vietnam-sourced wild tigers in the trade is probably reflective of their rarity in the wild, the trade presently comprised exclusively of farmed or foreign sourced animals.



Enforcement efforts

While tiger related arrests and seizures may indicate more emphasis on enforcement, it also suggests an increase in the volume of trade, as seizures often represent a fraction of the actual trade. This is supported by the findings of this investigation.

Since their establishment in 2006, the Environmental Police have clearly taken stronger measures to enforce laws prohibiting the trade of tigers in Vietnam, but it would appear that the efforts of law enforcement agencies are restricted to low-level criminals.



Tigers seized in October 2009 from a taxi in Hanoi were linked to a tiger farm owner

Photo by ENV

The investigation indicated that a relatively small number of people may be involved in supplying tigers into the trade, but enforcement operations appear to focus on low level criminals such as drivers and middlemen involved in specific incidents rather than the higher level bosses and their criminal networks that are believed to be responsible for a majority of the tigers reaching Hanoi and surrounding northern provinces.

Furthermore, enforcement is not supported by effective prosecutions and punishment upon convictions that would deter further criminal activity.

Out of 27 arrests for tiger trade crimes following seizures of tigers and skins, only four individuals were imprisoned, with sentences ranging from 16-24 months, according to figures compiled by ENV. Records show that most tiger traders that were arrested received suspended sentences (12 individuals) or probation (nine individuals). In two cases involving tigers seized from homes, the subjects received no punishment.



Authorities in Thanh Hoa burn the remains of two frozen tigers that died at a tiger farm

Photo by ENV

Following the discovery of tigers at six private establishments in 2007, owners were fined and allowed to keep their tigers, though in nearly all cases, owners could not provide documentation showing that the tigers they possessed were of legal origin, as required under the law.

There are however, sufficient provisions in law to ensure appropriate and effective punishment for offenders. The new amended criminal code (37/2009/Q812, effective January 1, 2010) allows for imprisonment of up to seven years and maximum fines of 500,000,000 VND for selling, trade or possession of fully protected species like tigers.

Recommendations

As a growing consumer of tigers, Vietnam has a critical role to play both to preserve the last of our own tigers, and to fulfill our responsibility to other tiger range states, by addressing the impact of Vietnam's trade and consumption of their tigers.

- Vietnam should actively engage counterparts in other Asian nations, notably Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, to develop cooperation between law enforcement agencies, and share information that would result in arrests and convictions across the region of key figures involved in the trade. ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (WEN) was established in part to provide a means for such coordination and sharing of information on cases, and Vietnam should strengthen its position and role within the network.
- Law enforcement agencies should focus beyond the middlemen and mules hired to transport tigers. It is essential to target resources against the most significant individuals within criminal networks including those that supply tigers into the trade, as well as those that organize the consumer end of the deal.
- Judicial bodies need to recognize the rippling effects of deterrence and utilize the full extent of the law to cripple major traders and their organizations, through greater use of custodial sentences, confiscation of property, vehicles, and instruments used during the commission of crimes, and seizure of the proceeds of crime, as allowed under the law.
- Tiger and other wildlife crimes involving protected species need to be recognized as serious crimes undermining the natural resources, culture, and biodiversity of our country, and like drugs, weapons, and human trafficking crimes, result in aggressive enforcement aimed at eradicating these crimes in society.
- Major efforts need to focus on strengthening border posts. Specific measures should be taken to resolve illegal activities and any complicity by local law enforcement personnel that may contribute to smuggling. While specific attention must focus on Cau Treo border crossing, our investigation revealed that other major border crossings were also identified as smuggling points through which tigers and other wildlife reach Vietnam.



Tigers on farms: For conservation or destined for the tiger bone glue pot?

Photo by ENV

- Immediate action should be taken to arrest the development of tiger farms in Vietnam (including a freeze on breeding), and assess the strategic importance of each farm in terms of its benefits to conservation. For establishments that are keeping tigers for non-commercial purposes such as public education, stringent measures should be put in place that assure compliance with the law, coupled with regular government and independent monitoring of these facilities. Penalties for violations of the law should result in withdrawal of licenses, confiscation of tigers, and stiff punishment, including imprisonment, for violators deemed negligent or complicit in criminal activity.



One of two live tigers confiscated in Hanoi during an attempt by the owner to sell the animals to a suspected tiger trader

Photo by ENV

- Scientific surveys must be carried out focused on assessing the status of tiger populations in at least 11 parks and protected areas where tigers may persist, including looking at habitat viability and the prey base.
- For areas where tigers are confirmed to remain, unprecedented measures must be undertaken to enhance critical law enforcement in these areas and permit local tiger populations to recover.
- Stemming the flow of tigers in trade requires us to address the issue of demand. Consumers must be made aware and become actively involved in the protection of tigers by avoiding the use of tiger products, actively reporting crimes to the authorities, and encouraging others in society to do their part.
- The government should facilitate awareness campaigns that focus on promoting modern medicines over the use of traditional medicines like tiger bone glue, working to undo entrenched traditional beliefs that are costly to society in the loss of majestic creatures such as the tiger.

The best way to save tigers is permit them to exist in nature, and ensure protection of their habitat. Tigers do not need cages and breeding farms to recover. They need to be left alone where they can recover on their own. It seems to be that leaving them alone is the hard part.

ABOUT EDUCATION FOR NATURE – VIETNAM

Our mission

Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV) was established in 2000 as Vietnam's first non-governmental organization focused on conservation of nature and the environment. Our mission is to foster greater understanding amongst the Vietnamese public about environmental issues of local, national and global significance, ranging from protection of wildlife and natural ecosystems to climate change. We employ creative and innovative strategies to influence attitudes and mobilize Vietnamese citizens to live in balance with the natural world and to take action to protect Vietnam's precious environment.

ENV's activities are divided into four program areas:

- Public Awareness;
- Wildlife Crime Unit and Investigations;
- Education, Training, and Network Support;
- Capitol Group's Policy and Legislative Support Program.

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Stop Wildlife Crime



If you observe wildlife being kept, sold, kept, transported, traded, consumed, or advertised, contact your local authorities or call the ENV Wildlife Crime Hotline

Hotline: **1800-1522** Email: **Hotline@fpt.vn**