

WILDLIFE TRADE BOOMS IN LAOS

One of the poorest countries in the world, Laos has a population of four million people who depend on wildlife, mainly as a source of food but also for medicines and sometimes for use as ornaments. During World War II many guns entered the country, and during the Vietnam War, both the Americans and the French rewarded northern tribesmen with modern rifles. Today, there are nearly 1.2 guns per mile in a country about the size of the United Kingdom, and hunting pressure continues year round, making it increasingly difficult to find mammals and birds in a region once rich in wildlife.

The evening market in the capital, Vientiane, is the main place to buy wild game meat. In 1989 a law was passed to help protect wildlife, levying taxes on many types of game carcasses, so the trade has increasingly gone underground. Although fewer bear, muntjac, palm civet, pangolin, porcupine, sambar, and wild boar are seen in the markets, illegal trade in these species flourishes. Restaurants are provided with meat directly by the sellers.

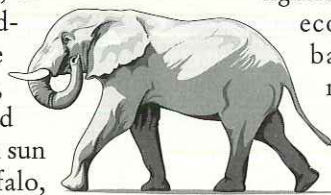
In early 1990, I surveyed markets and jewelry and souvenir shops in Vientiane and found, in addition to meat, products openly for sale from rhino, elephant, tiger, serow, clouded leopard, gaur, Malayan sun bear, wild water buffalo,



Wildlife market in Vientiane, Laos.

and Eld's deer. The salesmen seemed to be unaware that these products came from some of the rarest animals in the world. I counted 16 native species whose products were being sold as ornaments. Elephant ivory predominated.

The once-active ivory industry of Laos became quiescent after the communist takeover in 1975. Few foreigners were welcome and the economy was suffering badly. Since 1988, the number of visitors has increased, mainly Thai businessmen and Western tourists,



and the ivory-carving trade has picked up. Nearly all the ivory comes from local Asian elephants, of which there are about 4,000 wild and 850 domesticated. From 1988 to February 1990, the price for good tusks doubled in Vientiane to about \$90 a pound due to the increase in demand, which has no doubt encouraged poaching. About 10 ivory craftsmen work in Vientiane and a few in Luang Prabang. They use only hand tools and produce mostly small items of jewelry. This is probably because the tusks, which usually originate from southern Laos, are small. Buddha pendants, one and a half inches high, cost \$8.00 apiece and are the most common items for sale.

There are two Chinese-style medicine shops in Vientiane, one of which sells wildlife products, including elephant hide, tiger bones, bat skeletons, and saiga antelope horns. Cheaper wildlife-based remedies are sold in the markets. At least 60 percent of the people use some traditional Laotian medicine, which is quite similar to traditional Chinese medicine. Sea horses and geckos, for example, are popular aphrodisiacs in both cultures.

The most common source for the 30 varieties of wildlife medicines I saw during my 1990 survey was rhino horn. Eight horns, mostly from the Sumatran species, were openly displayed in four jewelry shops in the morning market. In early 1990, the

average retail price in Laos for Asian rhino horn was \$7,543 per pound. The age of these horns is a mystery. Wildlife traders claim many rhinos existed in Laos up until the 1970s. According to the former Director of Wildlife and Fisheries, Peng Keo Singsourya, there are a few rhinos still in Laos, perhaps of both the Sumatran and Javan species.

Other wildlife products with medicinal uses, especially tiger bones, are too expensive to be consumed locally, but are bought by traders for export. Traders in Laos will pay poachers about \$40 a pound for bones from tigers with carcass dried-bone-weight of 24 pounds and \$27 a pound for smaller tigers yielding 13 to 15 pounds of bone. At the border with China, however, a poacher can receive from \$77 to \$114 per pound, depending on the size of the cat. Local people may buy small pieces of tiger bone to cure rheumatism for \$168 per pound. Tiger teeth, claws, and noses are also used in medicines and sometimes as ornaments.

The government of Laos is aware of the need to control trade as one component of wildlife management; so far, however, no effective laws have been introduced. The Lao/Swedish Forest Resources Conservation Project, in 1990, made recommendations to the government for regulating wildlife resources, including joining CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). Laos has some special and very rare mammals, and to stop their decline from excessive hunting and trade, the government should adopt comprehensive wildlife laws and enforcement capabilities, train forestry and customs officials to recognize wildlife species and products and to implement laws prohibiting the killing and trading in rare species, and establish a system to monitor sales of wildlife products.

Esmond Bradley Martin

A Wetsuit for a Manatee

A 1,300-pound injured manatee, brought to Sea World of Florida's Manatee Rehabilitation Facility on August 5 by the Florida Department of Natural Resources (DNR), has been fitted with a specially designed wetsuit which may be the key to its recovery.

The 10-foot-long female, found listless in shallow water near Marco Island, was suspected to be suffering from a partially collapsed lung and broken ribs. The injuries were sustained in a collision with a boat and prevented her from surfacing properly to breathe and eat. (Manatees are marine mammals that need to poke their noses above water every few minutes for air.)

The neoprene wetsuit—possibly the largest ever made—was designed by Sea World's animal care staff and handmade by Fathom Dive Suits of Orlando. Hence the manatee's name: *Fathom*. The suit has a special pocket on the side that can be filled with varying amounts of high-density foam, allowing specialists to adjust the animal's buoyancy in the water. Veterinarians believe that when *Fathom* is floating properly, she will begin to breathe and eat normally, and hopefully, start to recover. Currently, she is in critical condition and under round-the-clock observation.

Due to powerboat accidents and destruction of coastal habitat, only about 1,200 of these docile mammals remain in Florida waters. Since 1976, the Sea World marine mammal rescue team has recovered more than 100 manatees from Florida waters and released 30 of those after rehabilitation. In 1990, 206 manatees were found dead; of those, 47 were killed by watercraft, according to the Florida DNR. During the first six months of 1991, almost 90 manatees have died. Because of these frightening statistics, some scientists estimate that manatees could become extinct in the next 10 years.

When not on tour, Sea World's blimp—*Airship Shamu*—is used by research biologists to study manatees and gather vital statistics about their populations. The blimp offers researchers quiet, vibration-free observation and the ability to hover or match the swimming speed of manatees and other marine life under study for long periods of time. Dr. Daniel Odell, the Sea World research biologist closest to this project, received the Presidential Point of Light Award for his work with manatees.

Source: Nick Gollatscheck, Sea World of Florida

Nancy Simmons



Sea World researchers adjust manatee's survival suit.

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