EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To skin a cat: how organised crime capitalises and exploits captive tiger facilities

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Executive summary

**Over the last century**, the wild tiger population has decreased to alarmingly low levels. While tigers are adversely affected by climate change, habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict and loss of prey, the illegal tiger trade is said to be the most imminent threat.\(^1\)

**Tigers are classified** as a CITES Appendix I species, yet despite this, the world’s biggest cat is being trafficked to meet an unrelenting demand, particularly in some parts of Asia, for traditional medicine, wine and tonics, jewellery, décor, and pets. No part is wasted; as a result of the butchering process, their bones are boiled down to a paste, their skin is treated and hung up to dry, and their teeth and claws are extracted and polished.

**For six years**, the Wildlife Justice Commission has been investigating tiger-related crime in the Greater Mekong Subregion under Operation Ambush. During this time, Operation Ambush has identified numerous organised crime networks that supply the entire spectrum of illegal tiger trade, ranging from canines and claws to skin, bones, and whole, live tigers. While poaching of wild tigers remains a significant concern, intelligence and evidence collected under Operation Ambush suggests that tiger farms in the Greater Mekong region, especially in Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, also present a significant threat to the survival of tigers across Southeast Asia. While some claim that captive tiger breeding facilities promote and encourage conservation, the Wildlife Justice Commission’s findings suggest the opposite; the safety and preservation they espouse to provide is merely a façade that perpetuates the supply and demand for the illegal tiger trade run by organised crime networks.

**Throughout Operation Ambush**, the Wildlife Justice Commission visited several tiger farms and interacted with multiple major traffickers. By all accounts, the tiger trafficking community is closely connected and operates cohesively, ensuring a steady supply of clients and product. Many traffickers also had access to ivory, rhino horn, pangolins, bears, primates and rosewood indicating that they are not specialised but deal in a variety of high-value wildlife commodities. As a result of collaborative efforts with law enforcement agencies located in Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, Operation Ambush has successfully dismantled well-established criminal networks, resulting in the arrests of 18 individuals and the seizure of a live tiger cub, which originated from farmed sources.

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\(^1\) [https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/tiger](https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/tiger)
Organised crime networks operating in Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam are central to supplying the demands of the illegal tiger trade throughout Southeast Asia; they appear to use Lao PDR as a hub to launder tigers and their parts. Analysis suggests that Lao PDR and Thailand are the primary source for live tiger cubs destined for the pet trade in Thailand. Farms in Lao PDR also appear to cater to Vietnamese and Chinese clients. Vietnamese organised crime networks, while maintaining their own farms, appear to regularly import live and dead tigers from counterparts in Lao PDR and Thailand. Clients of Vietnamese farms tend to be wealthy Vietnamese and Chinese businessmen who prefer to hand-pick tigers for slaughter prior to observing the butchering process. Intelligence suggests that organised crime groups have several slaughter and storage facilities in Ha Tinh and Hanoi, while using Mong Cai as an exit point for delivery to China. Corruption continues to facilitate all facets of the trade, including moving product through the supply chain, border control, and access to politically exposed persons (PEPs).

Overall, there is reason to be hopeful. Some countries that have been heavily affected by the illegal tiger trade have made great strides in their efforts to detect, disrupt and prevent crime through policy and enforcement improvements, thereby leading to increased seizures, arrests and charges. Several countries are also committing to forward-thinking strategies like the application of DNA testing to identify farmed tigers and prevent them from entering the illegal trade.

The threat from transnational organised crime in the region with respect to tiger trafficking has not yet been fully documented. Going forward, this needs to be further explored. For example, intelligence and open sources suggest that Myanmar appears to be an emerging threat to the illegal wildlife trade, including tigers.²

Lastly, the illegal tiger trade continues to be enabled by a lack of domestic policies on non-native species, such as ligers, and by a tolerance for captive breeding facilities and commercial trade. Moreover, Operation Ambush is simply one piece of the puzzle. Significant intelligence gaps remain that can only be closed by sharing intelligence, working collaboratively across jurisdictions, and maintaining a steadfast commitment to ending the illegal tiger trade.

For that reason, the Wildlife Justice Commission suggests the following recommendations for law enforcement and policy makers:

- **Align domestic policy and legal frameworks** with current CITES Resolutions and Decisions on Asian big cat species, including (but not limited to) regular and timely audits on all captive tiger facilities – especially those that are privately-owned – in order to limit the criminal diversion of captive tigers to the illegal trade;

- **In countries that operate on a licensing system** for captive tigers, establish a national database in which DNA samples are recorded for each captive tiger to assist in determining the origin of seized tigers and their parts;

- **Support the use of innovative tools** in identifying seized tigers and their parts, such as Environmental Investigation Agency’s stripe-pattern database;

- **Undertake stronger enforcement activities** such as significant fines or forced closures when captive tiger facilities are found to be non-compliant;

- **Deliver stricter penalties** for individuals who engage in the illegal tiger trade;

- **Consider the legal status** of ligers given the crossover with the illegal tiger trade as demonstrated in this report and that of other hybrid big cat species given that wildlife traffickers are known to diversify;

- **Consider the ramifications of the lion bone trade** on the global illegal tiger trade, given that transnational organised crime networks have exploited this as a conduit to do business between Africa and Southeast Asia;

- **Consider changes to domestic policy**, such as the use of labelling laws, to ensure protection for all CITES-listed species regardless of whether they are non-native to a jurisdiction;

- **Place more emphasis on combatting the illegal tiger trade** at the regional level by providing resources to the jurisdictions that need it most, such as law enforcement and border control, and financial crime and technological expertise;

- **Improved collaboration** for sharing of intelligence; and,

- **Create a comprehensive and viable plan** for captive tigers from current captive facilities in Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, that will cease operations. Among others, this plan would address the logistics of transferring captive tigers to appropriate sanctuaries that most emanate a tiger’s natural habitat and environment and could consider issues related to potential financial compensation to owners of captive facilities to offset lost income.

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Law enforcement and legal experts fighting transnational organised wildlife crime.