

World Bank wants tiger farms shut

January 28 2010, By MICHAEL CASEY , AP Environmental Writer



In this photo taken Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2010, two adult male tigers play in a pool, at a temple that offers care for tigers in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. China and other Asian nations should shut privately run tiger farms as they are inhumane and fuel demand for the endangered big cat's bones and skin, the World Bank said Thursday, Jan. 28, 2010. (AP Photo/David Longstreath)

(AP) -- China and other Asian nations should shut privately run tiger farms as they are inhumane and fuel demand for the endangered big cat's bones and skin, the World Bank said Thursday.

The call came as governments from 13 countries where tigers exist in the wild met in Thailand to discuss their conservation and how to boost tiger numbers.

Tiger farms are found principally in China, as well as Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Owners claim rearing the cats in captivity will help reduce the illegal trade in tiger parts which are used in traditional medicine, but

environmentalists say it only stimulates further smuggling.

"Our position is that tiger farms as an animal practice are cruel. They fan the potential use of tiger parts. That is extremely dangerous because that would continue to spur demand," said the World Bank's Keshav Varma, who is the program director for the Global Tiger Initiative, a coalition formed in 2008 with the Smithsonian Institute and nearly 40 conservation groups. It aims to double tiger numbers by 2022.

"The Global Tiger Initiative as well as the World Bank are in favor of shutting down these farms," he said by phone from the sidelines of the conference in the beach resort of Hua Hin.

Wild tiger numbers have plummeted because of human encroachment, the loss of more than nine-tenths of their habitat and poaching. From an estimated 100,000 at the beginning of the 20th century, the number today is less than 3,600.

China alone is believed to be home to 5,000 domestic tigers, and farms thrive despite the government banning the trade in tiger parts in 1993. It has imposed stiff sentences on offenders and ordered pharmacies to empty their shelves of tiger medications purported to cure ailments from convulsions to skin disease and to increase sexual potency.

The first tiger farms started before the ban, but others sprang up afterward because speculators thought the ban would be temporary. The government says the farms have been developed to attract tourists but critics say they are used to harvest tiger parts.

Despite lobbying from influential businessmen for the ban to be lifted, China last month announced it would take stronger law enforcement action on the trade in tiger parts and products. It also promised stricter regulation of captive breeding.

Conservationists like the group TRAFFIC welcomed the new measures but continue to call for tiger farms to be shut down. They say allowing trade in tiger parts would fuel poaching because it is cheaper to kill a wild animal than to raise a tiger on a farm. The parts are indistinguishable.

However, some conservationists were wary of raising the matter in Hua Hin, preferring instead to focus on encouraging China to invest more in wild tiger ranges, particularly on its southern border with Laos.

"They have wild tigers in the north and wild tigers in Yunnan (Province). Can we for once focus on that instead of pointing our fingers at them all the time," said David Smith, a tiger expert at the University of Minnesota. "We know in every political realm, the Chinese don't want to be pushed."

TRAFFIC's James Compton acknowledged that shutting the farms was a complex undertaking and that the short-term goal should be on stopping their expansion.

"The process of shutting down the farms is more complex than doing a simple blanket decision to close all the farms," he said. "What do you do with all the tigers? What do you do with all the investment from the tiger community?"

Varma said [tiger](#) farms had yet to be discussed at the three-day ministerial meeting that began Wednesday, attended by Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, Thailand and Vietnam.

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