

New taste for Thai elephant meat

January 27 2012, By THANYARAT DOKSONE , Associated Press



In this Monday, Oct. 31, 2011 file photo, elephants are fed with fresh sugarcanes at the elephant camp in Ayutthaya province, central Thailand. Thailand's revered national symbol, the elephant, may face a new threat of extinction: being poached not just for their tusks, but for their meat. Two wild elephants were found slaughtered in December 2011 in a national park in western Thailand, alerting authorities to the new practice of consuming elephant meat. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong, File)

(AP) -- A new taste for eating elephant meat - everything from trunks to sex organs - has emerged in Thailand and could pose a new threat to the survival of the species.

Wildlife officials told The Associated Press that they were alerted to the practice after finding two elephants slaughtered last month in a national park in western Thailand.

"The poachers took away the elephants' [sex organs](#) and trunks ... for

[human consumption](#)," Damrong Phidet, director-general of Thailand's wildlife agency, said in a telephone interview. Some meat was to be consumed without cooking, like "elephant sashimi," he said.

Poachers typically just remove tusks, which are most commonly found on Asian male elephants and fetch thousands of dollars on the black market. A market for elephant meat, however, could lead to killing of the wider [elephant population](#), Damrong said.

"If you keep hunting elephants for this, then they'll become extinct," he said.

Consuming elephant meat is not common in Thailand, but some Asian cultures believe consuming animals' [reproductive organs](#) can boost sexual prowess.

Damrong said the elephant meat was ordered by restaurants in Phuket, a popular travel destination in the country's south. It wasn't clear if the diners were foreigners.

The accusation drew a quick rebuttal from Phuket Governor Tri Akraecha, who told Thai media that he had never heard of such restaurants but ordered officials to look into the matter.

Poaching elephants is banned, and trafficking or possessing poached animal parts also is illegal. Elephant tusks are sought in the illegal [ivory trade](#), and baby wild elephants are sometimes poached to be trained for talent shows.

"The situation has come to a crisis point. The longer we allow these cruel acts to happen, the sooner they will become extinct," Damrong said.

The quest for ivory remains the top reason poachers kill elephants in

Thailand, other environmentalists say.

Soraida Salwala, the founder of Friends of the Asian Elephant foundation, said a full grown pair of tusks could be sold from 1 million to 2 million baht (\$31,600 to \$63,300), while the estimated value of an elephant's penis is more than 30,000 baht (\$950).

"There's only a handful of people who like to eat elephant meat, but once there's demand, poachers will find it hard to resist the big money," she cautioned.

Thailand has fewer than 3,000 wild elephants and about 4,000 domesticated [elephants](#), according to the National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department.

The pachyderms were a mainstay of the logging industry in the northern and western parts of the country until logging contracts were revoked in the late 1980s.

Domesticated animals today are used mainly for heavy lifting and entertainment.

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Citation: New taste for Thai elephant meat (2012, January 27) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-thai-elephant-meat.html>

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