

China demand for luxury furniture 'decimating rosewood'

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Chinese customers admire a luxury bed at a furniture fair in Beijing on June 23, 2010

Runaway Chinese demand for luxury furniture is spurring illegal logging across Southeast Asia, stripping the region of precious Siamese rosewood and driving a chain of cross-border corruption and violence, environmentalists said Monday.

Increasing wealth in China has seen a surge in sales of consumer status symbols such as reproductions of ornate high-end furniture from the Ming and Qing eras.

The demand for so-called "hongmu" furniture has seen stocks of Siamese rosewood decimated across the Mekong area—Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand—according to a report by the Environmental Investigation Agency, an independent campaign group.

Forests have been denuded by rampant illegal logging by gangs keen for a cut of the lucrative Chinese market, which since 2000 has imported an estimated \$2.4 billion worth of precious timber from the Mekong area.

Rosewood can fetch thousands of dollars per cubic metre and loggers can earn hundreds of dollars for their efforts, many times greater than the average salary in the poor village areas they are drawn from.

"The soaring value of Siamese rosewood has spurred a dramatic rise in [illegal logging](#) in an international criminal trade increasingly characterised by obscene profits, violence, fatal shootings and widespread corruption at every level," said EIA campaigner Faith Doherty.

"The consequences for Thailand—both environmental and social—are very serious. Unless swift and decisive action is taken to stem this bloody trade, we could well be looking at the extinction of Siamese rosewood in a matter of a very few years."

The EIA called for international rules to be tightened to ban international trade in Siamese rosewood logs, sawn timber and veneers.

Violence and corruption has proliferated along a criminal trail that spans several nations as loggers and agents exploit loopholes in local and

international conservation laws meant to protect the rare species.

In Thailand's forested eastern border area with Cambodia, villagers from across the frontier regularly clash with Thai security forces.

"When loggers are confronted by enforcement officers, violence often ensues," said an EIA report entitled "Route of Extinction", adding that since 2009 dozens of Thai forest rangers have been killed.

"The money on offer to impoverished rural communities from traders lures a stream of people willing to undertake potentially lethal work," it said.

In March Cambodia accused Thai troops of killing 15 villagers in two clashes, after they illegally crossed the border to log valuable timber.

Thai forces allegedly shot dead at least 69 Cambodian loggers in 2013.

The EIA urged China to do more to regulate the industry and curb demand.

"China has made some attempts to counter the appalling excess of the illegal trade in Siamese rosewood, but they are clearly nowhere near enough," said Doherty.

The report called on nations with remaining natural stocks of the trees to boost enforcement, crack down on official corruption which helps smugglers transport felled logs from forests, and ensure seized inventory is not repackaged and sold on into the legal market.

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