

Laos failing to curb illegal wildlife trade: monitor

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Wildlife trade monitoring group TRAFFIC says that endangered species such as pangolins (pictured) and helmeted hornbills are being openly sold in Laos

The illegal trade in pangolins, helmeted hornbills and other wildlife products is thriving in Laos, a monitoring group said Friday, urging the Southeast Asian nation to crack down on a lucrative commerce largely fuelled by demand in neighbouring China.

The authoritarian country has long been top transit hub for the smuggling of wildlife products, with widespread corruption and weak law enforcement allowing the criminal activity to flourish.

Wildlife trade monitoring group TRAFFIC said Friday that endangered species such as pangolins and helmeted hornbills were being openly sold in Laos and that [law enforcement](#) against the [illegal trade](#) remained threadbare.

"Lao PDR clearly needs to address these issues as a matter of urgency or risk becoming dubbed the wildlife smuggling capital of Asia," TRAFFIC's Southeast Asia senior programme officer Kanitha Krishnasamy said in a statement.

Elusive and scaly ant-eating pangolins are critically endangered and ranked as the most trafficked mammal on Earth with more than a million traded in the past decade, according to conservation groups.

They are sought after in China and other parts of Asia for their meat, skin and scales.

The meat is considered a delicacy while the skin and scales are used in traditional medicine and to make fashion items like boots and shoes.

TRAFFIC researchers said they found thousands of scales for sale in northern Laos during a survey earlier this year and that more than 5,600 pangolins linked to Laos have been seized between 2010 and 2015.

Many of those animals were smuggled in from Thailand and taken into China or Vietnam.

Products from the critically endangered helmeted hornbill are also widely available in Laos, according to TRAFFIC.

Many shops selling the precious animal parts were operated or staffed by ethnic Chinese employees and prices were often listed in yuan or dollars, the group said.

The statement comes after a mission by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to Laos in July which also raised alarm bells about illegal trade in rhinoceros horn, elephant ivory and other wildlife products.

It said no arrests or prosecutions over wildlife products have occurred since 2012, adding that there are "significant loopholes" in national laws.

The reports come ahead of a 12-day CITES meeting that opens Saturday in South Africa aimed at curbing the rampant wildlife trafficking threatening to drive some species to extinction.

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