

Asian elephants said at risk from Chinese demand for skin

April 24 2018, by Kaweewit Kaewjinda



In this Feb. 16, 2018, photo provided by conservation group Elephant Family, skin stripped off an elephant carcass lies in southern Ayerawady division, Myanmar. A report by the British-based conservation group says rising Chinese demand for products made from elephant skin is driving poaching and posing a threat to Asia's wild herds even greater than the ivory trade. (Klaus Reisinger/compass films via AP)

A report by a British-based conservation group says rising Chinese demand for products made from elephant skin is driving poaching and posing an even greater threat to Asia's wild herds than the ivory trade.

The group Elephant Family says the threat is currently greatest in Myanmar, but warns that the Asian elephant could become extinct in half of the areas where it now ranges in the region if the problem escalates. It says the threat exceeds that from the ivory [trade](#) because poachers are targeting any elephant, not just those with tusks, and threatens elephants that are scattered in poorly protected areas.

The report's authors say their research shows that the elephant's skin is ground into powder and sold in China as a cure for stomach ailments, as well as being fashioned into beads for necklaces, bracelets and pendants.

The products are sold in physical markets and increasingly over the internet, where the report says sellers post videos showing workers in backyards in Myanmar and Laos cutting up and carving elephant carcasses, to vouch for the authenticity of their wares.

Belinda Stewart-Cox, Elephant Family's director of conservation, told reporters at a news conference on Tuesday that from the time the group started monitoring in 2014, there has been "a major ramping up of the advertising, the promotional pitches and the apparent sales."



In this Feb. 16, 2018, photo provided by conservation group Elephant Family, Myanmar's Forest Department officials take notes at a skin stripped elephant carcass in southern Ayerawady division, Myanmar. A report by the British-based conservation group says rising Chinese demand for products made from elephant skin is driving poaching and posing a threat to Asia's wild herds even greater than the ivory trade. (Klaus Reisinger/compass films via AP)

She said it seems as if "there are marketers and profiteers behind this looking to ratchet up what has, I think, long been a very, very minor incidental or local market trade of no great scale, or no scale that was threatening, anyways."

Researchers identified 50 individual Chinese traders selling through social media forums. They said labels are printed in Chinese, prices are quoted in Chinese currency and sales online are conducted in Mandarin.

The report—"Skinned: the Growing Appetite for Asian Elephants"—also said that China's State Forestry Administration has apparently licensed some products that contain elephant skin.

"At a time when China has shown commitment to ending its domestic trade in [elephant ivory](#), it would be troubling and perverse to find that, at the same time, it is creating a new, legal demand for elephant skin products," it said.

Stewart-Cox said her organization has reached out to Chinese officials and has worked closely with Myanmar officials to address the issue.



In this Feb. 16, 2018, photo provided by conservation group Elephant Family, skin stripped elephant limb lies in southern Ayerawady division, Myanmar. A report by the British-based conservation group says rising Chinese demand for products made from elephant skin is driving poaching and posing a threat to Asia's wild herds even greater than the ivory trade. (Klaus Reisinger/compass films via AP)

"It is our intention to facilitate collaboration if possible," she said. "I think we should pull together on this, there is no time, Myanmar is losing too many elephants, too fast."

Elephant Family puts the current size of Myanmar's wild population at approximately 2,000. Quoting figures from Myanmar's Forest Department, the group says that wild elephant deaths there have risen significantly in recent years, from 26 in 2013 to at least 61 in 2016, most of them due to poaching. Many were found with the skin stripped from the carcasses. The timescale fits in with the appearance of elephant skin products online.

"You can get quite a lot of skin off a single elephant," said Stewart-Cox. "And if you get a single killing of 25 elephants, which is what happened one time in Myanmar, that's a lot of [skin](#)."

"The [ivory trade](#) doesn't threaten the Asian elephant as severely as it threatens the African elephant because only male Asian [elephants](#) have tusks and quite a lot of those do not have tusks anyway, or little tusks; we don't get the really big tusks as much anymore," she said. "This trade is targeting males, females, juveniles and are indiscriminate, and that means that no elephant is safe."

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