

# Consumption of products derived from vulnerable wildlife species pervasive in Laos

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A new study of wildlife consumption in northern Laos by San Diego Zoo Global researchers found widespread use of products made from sun bears, Asiatic bears and serows—goat-like mammals found throughout

Asia—among other vulnerable species. The findings indicate that efforts are needed to reduce the unsustainable harvest of bears and serows, in particular, "before this demand becomes a significant conservation challenge," the authors wrote.

"Our results indicate the importance of identifying emerging trends in [wildlife](#) consumption, which can inform efforts to halt population declines before they become full-blown crises," said Elizabeth Oneita Davis, Ph.D., a postdoctoral associate in Community Engagement at San Diego Zoo Global. She co-authored the study, published in April in the journal *Animals*, with Jenny Glikman, Ph.D., an associate director in Community Engagement at San Diego Zoo Global.

"The research presented here represents a critical first step towards a conservation management solution in northern Laos that incorporates the emerging threat of consumption of serow, which may be excluded from management plans directed at conserving more 'charismatic' fauna," said Davis.

Unsustainable wildlife consumption is widespread in Southeast Asia. Exports to neighboring China and Vietnam have led to the extirpation of tigers and Javan rhinos in Laos, the authors said. Less is known, though, about the demand for wildlife products within Laos. To learn more about use patterns, Davis and Glikman interviewed 100 adults in 18 villages, in the Luang Prabang region of the country.

The most commonly used substances, consumed by about a quarter of those interviewed, were derived from the bile or gallbladder of sun bears and Asiatic bears. While use of bear products in the region had been documented, this study suggests consumption may be more common than previously thought. The second most-consumed items, used by 7% of respondents, were derived from serows. Products derived from serows and bears are similar in form and use, often being made into

topicals or consumables to treat bruises or fight fatigue. However, serow products are less expensive than comparable bear products.

Sun bears and Asiatic black bears are listed as Vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species. The Chinese serow is listed as Near Threatened, but the IUCN is in the process of changing its status to the more-urgent Vulnerable, the study authors said.

Overall, interviewees reported they had used or knew someone who had used a wide variety of products derived from animals ranging from elephants to tigers, snakes, porcupines, monkeys and bats.

Approximately half of respondents said they viewed wildlife products as a form of traditional medicine. A majority of the species consumed were listed as Vulnerable or Least Threatened on the Red List of Threatened Species.

"Our results of present and prevalent demand for wildlife in northern Laos indicate both that enforcement efforts are not working and that the Laos government's goals of reducing wildlife trade may be challenging to achieve," Davis said.

It isn't known if the current harvest of serows in Laos is sustainable. But it is possible that demand could increase sharply if those who consume bear products turn to less-pricey serow products instead. If that happens, the ungulates "may suffer a sudden, serious and rapid decline in the next decade," the authors wrote.

**More information:** Elizabeth Oneita Davis et al, An Assessment of Wildlife Use by Northern Laos Nationals, *Animals* (2020). [DOI: 10.3390/ani10040685](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10040685)

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