

Tigers ending their days in high-pressure cookers

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More tigers now live in illegal captivity, on so-called "tiger farms," than in the wild. The prominence of these farms is highest in Vietnam, China and Thailand. On the farms, tigers are raised as livestock for the sole

purpose of using their skeletons and body parts to produce illegal traditional medicines that are perceived as being able to treat rheumatic diseases and other ailments. In 2017, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), an international NGO, identified more than 200 tiger farms in China, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. Combined, these farms house between 7000 and 8000 tigers—more than twice the number of tigers remaining in the wild.

"Tiger bone [glue](#)," as it is known, is a brown sap-like substance produced by dissolving [tiger](#) skeletons in a high-pressure cooker for two to three days. Tiger glue's extreme popularity is a major reason why these animals end up being boiled down in Vietnamese basements, like those of Nghe An, where facilities are operated by numerous smaller producers. Tiger glue producers buy tigers from farms as cubs. Once large enough, the animals are slaughtered for their skeletons.

Due to the illegal nature of this trade, the details of who buyers are, their preferences and what motivates them to pay upwards of \$15,000 per kilo for tiger bone glue had never been studied. After a considerable amount of time networking, Dang Vu Hoai Nam, a Ph.D. Fellow at the University of Copenhagen's Department of Food and Resource Economics, managed to get close to buyers, whose preferences were analyzed in the new study.

"Among other things, we gained access to the tennis and golf clubs where many of these buyers spend time. These people are from Vietnam's most affluent class, typically senior citizens who earn about 15 times as much as the average Vietnamese person," explains Dang Vu Hoai Nam.

Together with a team of research assistants, he tracked down and gained the confidence of 228 Vietnamese buyers and tiger bone glue users. It is an achievement that in and of itself has never been seen in the academic

world.

Wild tigers preferred widely over farmed ones

The "raw materials" of tiger glue don't just come from tiger farms, but from poached wild tigers too. In the manufacturing of this product, antelope bones, turtle shells, deer antler velvet, herbs—and in some cases opium—are also incorporated. The study reveals that buyers typically mix the finished "glue" into wine and vodka, which is then consumed daily.

As with fish and other more familiar foods, the study shows that the provenance of the raw materials and manufacturing processes also matter to Vietnamese buyers of these illegal products.

"Most of the buyers we interviewed prefer tiger bone glue from wild tigers over farmed ones because they believe wild bones are more potent, and thus provide better treatment for a host of musculoskeletal diseases. At the same time, buyers seek the highest possible tiger bone content in their mixture," explains Dang Vu Hoai Nam.

Forty percent of the buyers interviewed reported that they use tiger bone glue for musculoskeletal ailments. Thirty-two percent use it for their overall health, 6 percent use it to prevent diseases and 5 percent to enhance their sexual performance.

Legalization won't help

To tackle the poaching problem, politicians and authorities in Vietnam and other parts of Asia are now considering whether to legalize the breeding and use of tigers for tiger bone glue, among other things. But according to Dang Vu Hoai Nam, the study and buyer preferences

demonstrate that legalizing tiger farming is unlikely to solve the problem of poaching.

"Even with legalization, demand for wild tigers will remain strong. A third of our respondents are still willing to buy tigers poached in the wild, which will simply sustain the black market," suggests Dang Vu Hoai Nam.

According to him, solving the problem is more about improving tiger conservation measures and equipping consumers with better information about the illegal product.

"Rather than legalization, vulnerable countries should increase their investments in natural tiger habitats, the strengthening of police and park ranger forces, and information campaigns aimed at consumers that point them towards treatment alternatives which are more sustainable than tiger bones," concludes Dang Vu Hoai Nam.

Facts:

- According to the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), an international NGO, there were roughly 200 tiger farms in China, Lao DPR, Thailand and Vietnam in 2017.
- Tiger farms housed between 7000 and 8000 individual animals, about twice the size of the wild tiger population worldwide.
- Over centuries, tiger bones have been used for traditional medicine in several Asian countries.
- China and Vietnam are particularly significant buyers of tiger bones and tiger [bone](#) glue.
- The tiger is considered endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

The research was published in the *Journal for Nature Conservation*.

More information: Hoai Nam Dang Vu et al, The impact of a legal trade in farmed tigers on consumer preferences for tiger bone glue – Evidence from a choice experiment in Vietnam, *Journal for Nature Conservation* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jnc.2021.126088](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2021.126088)

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