

Sale of donkey skins linked to trade in illegal wildlife products

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A working donkey pulling a farmer's cart. Credit: Katja/Pixabay

Research published in *Conservation Science and Practice* has revealed novel links between the global trade in donkey skins and the wildlife trade. The study by an interdisciplinary team from the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School and Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) and supported by The Donkey Sanctuary suggests that these trades operate in parallel, creating new avenues and transportation pathways for wildlife trade.

The trade of donkey skins is largely driven by demand for E-Jiao, a traditional Chinese medicine, which uses gelatine from donkey skins. As increasing demand has outstripped the Chinese domestic supply of donkeys, E-Jiao producers have looked to [international markets](#) for skins.

Using network analysis of online markets, the research team examined seven large international b2b eCommerce platforms, which all hosted vendors selling donkey skins. Nearly one-fifth of the vendors selling donkey skins also offered some other form of wildlife product—in some cases even species protected by CITES, the international treaty on the trade of endangered species.

Dr. Ewan Macdonald, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford and co-lead author of the study said: "This reveals how customers shopping for one product (in this case donkey skins) can easily stumble across other products for sale alongside these skins—potentially contributing to the ever-worsening biodiversity crisis. Unsustainable and under-regulated trade in wildlife is a major driver of wildlife decline."

Having established a link between the online sale of donkey skins and other wildlife products, the researchers used public customs seizure records to look for evidence of wildlife traffickers using the legally complex donkey skin trade as a cover for smuggling illegal wildlife products.

Analysis of the records showed that donkey skins were often seized by customs officials together with contraband from [protected species](#) including Asian Arowana, elephant tusks, pangolin scales, rhino horn and tiger skin—indicating that the products were not only co-offered by merchants but also moved together in the market.

Many of the species that the researchers found being sold on the

eCommerce platforms alongside donkey skins were not recorded in the seizure database—suggesting the seizure records could be showing just the "tip of the iceberg."

Dr. Shan Su, Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford and co-lead author said: "The illegal [wildlife trade](#) is a lucrative business, but many aspects of this trade remain obscure. We investigated the alleged links between the wildlife trade and the trade in donkey skins. Our findings provide important insights into the dynamics of the wildlife trade and suggest that better regulation of the donkey skin trade could benefit wildlife conservation."

"The Link Between Wildlife Trade and the Global Donkey Skin Product Network" is published in *Conservation Science and Practice*.

More information: Shan Su et al, The link between wildlife trade and the global donkey skin product network, *Conservation Science and Practice* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/csp2.12676](https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.12676)

Provided by University of Oxford

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