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# Thailand's Role in Animal Trafficking

International wildlife trafficking is an estimated 20 billion dollar industry primarily orchestrated by well-funded and powerful international criminal syndicates according to Interpol. Despite the media attention given to Thailand for its role as a major transportation hub fueling this illicit trade, outdated legislation and a lack of political will continue to represent significant obstacles in combatting the status quo.

In 1983, Thailand became a signatory party to the United Nations Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which is implemented domestically by the Wild Animal Preservation and Protection Act BE 2535 (1992) (WAPPA). Under Section 23 of the WAPPA, no person shall import or export preserved and protected wild animals (or their carcasses) unless permission is obtained from the Director-General.

The Act lists over 1000 preserved and protected species, ranging from crab-eating macaques, to flying squirrels, to banded surilis, to giant clams. Even though a number of the listed species are openly advertised as being for sale in infamous markets like Chatuchak, this does not mean it is legal for you to purchase them. For example, despite their prevalence in marketplaces, it is against the law to purchase any type of turtle shell in Thailand. The purchase of products made from preserved and protected species can result in the same penalty as the purchase of the animal itself, which is up to 4 years imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of 40,000 baht.

Unfortunately, the risks associated with being caught pale compared to the staggering potential profits of a single successful trafficking operation. According to the Wildlife Conservation Society, a lone gibbon can easily fetch over 500,000 baht on the black market; although animals are not often trafficked alone. One high profile seizure in February 2011 at Suvarnabhumi Airport involved 259 species of exotic animals, packed into three suitcases, while baby leopards, bears, panthers, and other extremely rare animals have also been discovered. One problem that exists with the current legislation is that the exact species and sub-species of the animal being smuggled must be on the list of protected or preserved animals, and yet the list of preserved and protected animals has been very rarely updated since 1992.

Thailand has devoted substantial resources to combatting illegal animal trafficking through the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation as well as the Central



Rhino horn and elephant ivory seized in Thailand © Panjit Tansom

Investigation Bureau's Natural Resources and Environmental Crimes Division. An increase in the frequency of seizures is reported to have resulted in the capture of more than 46,000 animals in the last two years alone, doubling the total from the two years prior. Although numerous investigative reports have quoted top ranking enforcement officials as well as senators admitting that Thailand continues to be a hub of the illegal animal trafficking industry, allegedly because of complacent officials actively working against those trying to enforce the law.

Animals that are seized in raids and at airports are oftentimes released into wildlife sanctuaries where there is a lower risk that they will be illegally poached and captured again. But others, such as baby tigers, are still unable to survive on their own and must be cared for 24 hours a day by government agencies. The Department of National Parks has reportedly stated that it takes approximately 1.7 million baht per month to feed all the birds and beasts at government animal rehabilitation centers across the country. A catch-22 exists in that the more effective law enforcement is in stopping animal trafficking, the more it costs the government to care for those animals they recover but cannot release into the wild. The Department of National

Parks has established a fund to help cover some of the costs and also receives support from private donors.

The global demand for exotic animals as pets, décor, food, and even aphrodisiacs places these defenseless species at risk of poaching and trafficking. Although Thailand is currently at the center of this trade as a transport hub, it does not have to remain so. By updating the Wild Animal Preservation and Protection Act to encompass the species being trafficked along with much heavier penalties for those who are caught violating the law, combined with an internal rooting-out of systemic corruption within this illegal industry, Thailand can go a long way to ensure that wild animals remain where they belong, in the wild.

#### Authors:

Angus Mitchell ([angus.mitchell@dfdl.com](mailto:angus.mitchell@dfdl.com))  
Matthew Christensen ([matthew.c@dfdl.com](mailto:matthew.c@dfdl.com))  
Pavitra Sakulchaimongkol ([Pavitra@dfdl.com](mailto:Pavitra@dfdl.com))

