



TIGER TRAFFICKING AND ABUSE – A CASE OF TIGER TEMPLE OF THAILAND

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Received 20 <sup>th</sup> April, 2016 Received in revised form 19 <sup>th</sup> May, 2016 Accepted 15 <sup>th</sup> June, 2016 Published online 16 <sup>th</sup> July, 2016	The case discusses the wildlife trafficking and abuse carried on in parts of Southeast Asia with special reference to tigers. Dubbed as 'Walking Gold', almost every part of a tiger fetches large sums of fortune to poachers and the organized trafficking mafia involved. The case makes special mention of Kanchanaburi temple of Thailand aka Tiger temple where 40 dead tiger cubs were found in the sanctuary's freezer in May, 2016 thereby raising questions on how effective are the wildlife norms implemented worldwide and also the role of government, wildlife organizations, NGOs and environmentalists in protecting one of the critically endangered species in the world-Tiger.
<b>Keywords:</b> Tiger, Endangered Species, Trafficking, Southeast Asia, Kanchanaburi temple, Thailand, Sanctuary, Conservation, Protection.	
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INTRODUCTION

Panther Tigris, commonly known as Tiger is the largest of cat species, most recognisable for its pattern of dark vertical stripes of reddish-orange fur with a lighter underside. Tigers once ranged widely across Asia, from Turkey in the west to the eastern coast of Russia. Over the past 100 years, they have lost 93% of their historic range, and have been extirpated from southwest and central Asia, from the islands of Java and Bali, and from the large areas of South east and East Asia. At the start of 20th century, it was estimated that there were over 100,000 tigers in the wild, but the population has dwindled outside of captivity to only a few thousands. A 2016 global census estimated the population of wild tigers at approximately 3,890 individuals. Major reasons for population decline include habitat destruction, habitat fragmentation and the organized poaching gangs. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has declared tiger as an endangered species.

**Tiger trafficking and abuse** Of the 14 Tiger range countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, North Korea, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, Russia and India), six nations prove to be 'hotspots' for illegal tiger poaching syndicates which include, Cambodia, China, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Dubbed as Walking Gold, virtually every part of the cat is traded for large sums of fortune in the black market. Demand for tiger parts for use in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a major threat for the dwindling tiger populations. For millennia, these magnificent and muscular animals have

become apothecary. Beliefs that tiger bones cure rheumatism and enhance longevity, tiger skins (chuba) used as clothing, tiger's genitals as soup increases prowess, tiger's whiskers as potent poison, and the pills made from tiger's eyes calm convulsions (although there are no scientific evidence to support these beliefs) combined by illegal hunting and poaching, habitat loss, depletion of prey in habitats, not to forget the climate change prove to be the imminent threat for survival of wild beasts.

Tigers once commanded the Asian landscape as the top predators. As listed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the surviving Asian tiger subspecies include Sumatran tiger, Amur tiger, Bengal tiger, Indochinese tiger, South China tiger, and the Malayan tiger, while the extinct ones are Bali tiger, Caspian tiger, Javan tiger (due to excessive hunting).

**The horrible case of Kanchanaburi temple of Thailand**

Founded in 1994, as a forest temple and sanctuary for wild animals, predominantly Indochinese tigers, Theravada temple of Thailand's Kanchanaburi province (aka Tiger Temple) were a 90 million baht project started by Thailand's Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP). With an entrance fee ranging from 600 baht to 5,000 baht, per person, the Tiger temple was a staple tourist attraction till recently, where visitors were almost allowed to do anything to get an up close and personal photo with a tiger. One could commonly witness the excited tourists being around the tigers, caressing them, experiencing their energy, nursing and kissing the cubs. The assumption that it was possible to tame more than a 100 wild tigers and keep them in confined environment flocked by strangers, trying to pet and caress these wild creatures made

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many tourists dig deeper and unfold the barbarity and cruelty towards these amazing animals. Moreover, there were frequent accusations by the tourists, animal rights activists and NGOs about the mistreatment of animals in the sanctuary. Most of the tigers always appeared drowsy (sedated?). During the photo shoots, employees would scruff the tiger and splash a whole bottle of water or even urine in its face to wake them up and trigger the aggressiveness in them. It was a common sight to see many tigers chained so close to the ground to avoid them from properly standing and raw meat would be dangled from the top to tease the tigers so that the tourists can get a perfect picture of the majestic beasts. Along with these, the Tiger temple had also gone to the extent of removing the tiger claws and teeth, and even the tendons in their wrists clipped in order to ensure that tourists are not harmed when visiting.



Figure 1 Wikipedia: Tiger Tiger Temple

Source: WWF India

One could see adult tigers suffering from several physical and behavioural problems and tourists would return with an experience that Tiger temple was not a facility for tigers, rather money minting machines for human entertainment. It was 2 years ago, when an investigation by Care for the Wild International (CWI) revealed clandestine news about the temple's operations of for-profit breeding, selling and exploitation business with the tigers at the sanctuary. But in May 2016, the Thailand Wildlife Conservation office (WCO) raided the temple after many tourists complained of a slaughter house and the tiger-holding facility being used for suspected animal trafficking. The authorities made a grisly discovery of 40 dead cubs hidden in kitchen's freezer along with a body of Binturong (a protected species commonly known as bearcat)! In another building, 20 cubs were discovered preserved in jars of formaldehyde. The very next day, two monks were stopped after they were seen leaving in a truck with two tiger skins, more than 700 vials containing tiger skin and a suitcase with tiger teeth.

An onsite operation of three days by DNP removed 137 tigers from the monks' custody following the allegations of wildlife trafficking and animal abuse. Some of the tigers were relocated to the Khao Son and Khao Prathap Chang Wildlife breeding centres in Ratchaburi and the rest of them would be relocated to other sanctuaries at the earliest. The monks at the temple though were not available for comment, but the temple has been charged with illegally possessing wildlife carcasses. The charge carries a maximum penalty of four years in jail and a fine of 40,000 baht.

The robust operation though was long overdue has received praises from the UN's environment program which released a statement saying, "these cubs represented only a tiny proportion of the enormous extent of an illegal trade in wildlife." World Wildlife Fund – Thailand quickly reacted, that it strongly encourages the DNP to make the tiger removals permanent.

The People for the Ethical treatment of Animals (PETA) said the temple was "hell for animals" and called on tourists to stop visiting animal attractions at home and abroad.

#### The Road Ahead

As of now, the Tiger temple of Kanchanaburi is permanently closed, thanks to intense local and international rage and reaction. But the worst fears are not over yet. As international attention fades and the spotlight shifts to other incidents in the coming days, the outlook on the Tiger temple's raid will be lost somewhere in the sands of time. What the world will remember is that the raid was the best thing that happened to those tigers.

Wildlife crime, a low risk but high return business is definitely one among the most barbaric crimes, humans are committing on the flora and fauna since ages. One question that arises in this context is, "How much is too much?" The answer is there is no single, silver bullet that can stop this altogether. The world needs a broader approach, mechanisms, allies and a deeper understanding of an old Cree Indian wisdom, "Only after the last tree is cut down, only after the last river is poisoned, only after the last fish has been caught, only then we find that money cannot be eaten."

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