



# Trade in tigers and other wild cats in Mong La and Tachilek, Myanmar – A tale of two border towns



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## ABSTRACT

Trade in large cats (*Panthera* and *Neofelis* species), and indeed other wild cats, is a clear impediment to their conservation. Myanmar is an important country for cat conservation, both because of the presence of significant populations of threatened species but equally as it is positioned strategically between China, Thailand and India. Here we analyse data from large cat skins and other cat parts observed openly for sale at two border towns in Myanmar. Data from Tachilek on the Myanmar–Thailand border (19 surveys, 1991–2013) and Mong La on the Myanmar–China border (7 surveys, 2001–2014) show that the most common species in trade was the clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa* (482 individuals; observed in 22/24 surveys), followed by leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis* (458 individuals; 11/12 surveys), leopard *Panthera pardus* (344; 22/24 surveys), tiger *P. tigris* (207 individuals; 21/24 surveys) and Asiatic golden cat *Catopuma temmincki* (135 individuals; 10/12 surveys). Volumes of skins held no relationship with the number of other cat parts (e.g. skull, claws and canines) in trade. The number of small cat skins observed was positively related to the number of large cat skins. There were no indications that leopards or clouded leopards were used as replacement for tigers. While the number of shops selling cat parts increased in Mong La from 6 in 2006 to 21 in 2014 there was no associated temporal increase in trade, whereas the number of shops decreased from 35 in 2000 to 6 in 2013 in Tachilek and this coincided with a decrease in available cat parts. These data show that in the last decades the trade of cat parts from Myanmar into Thailand has diminished and reaffirms the role of China in the trade of cats out of Myanmar.

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## 1. Introduction

Most species of wild cats are threatened due to a combination of habitat loss, conflict with humans, poaching and illegal wildlife trade (MacDonald and Loveridge, 2010). In Asia the threat posed by the illegal wildlife trade is arguably greater than anywhere else and for selected species, such as the tiger *Panthera tigris*, this could be well the most significant threat the species faces (Nowell and Jackson, 1996; Nowell, 2000, 2010; MacDonald and Loveridge, 2010). At the end of the 19th century, an estimated 100,000 tigers were believed to have existed (Jackson, 1993), however, by the late 1990s, the numbers had plummeted to approximately 5000–7000 (Seidensticker et al., 1999), whereas current estimates of the global number of tigers remaining in the wild stands at 3000 (Chundawat et al., 2011). Other cat species in Asia are suffering a similar fate (Jackson et al., 2008; Mukherjee et al., 2010; Duckworth et al., 2014; Li and Lu, 2014).

More is known about the impact of poaching and trade on tigers than on any of the other Asian large cats (Asiatic lion *P. leo persica*, leopard *P. pardus*, snow leopard *P. uncia*, clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa*, Sunda clouded leopard *N. diardi*), but their conservation could equally be severely impeded by poaching and trade. The observations of for instance 56 leopard and 48 snow leopard skins in 5 towns in Afghanistan in 2006 (Manati, 2009) or the seizure of 27 snow leopard skins in Gansu, China in 2007 (Hearn, 2007) and 581 leopard skins and 31 tiger skins on the China–Nepal border in 2003 (Tsering, 2006) illustrate that commercial trade is a clear and urgent impediment to the conservation of all Asian cats. Recently, Li and Lu (2014) analysed seizure data from snow leopards in China over a 13 years period, and showed how it shifted from a traditional item used in rural areas to a luxury product traded in urban areas and how the trade affected wild populations of the species.

As tigers, perhaps the most sought-after species of cat, decline, other large fields may be used increasingly as replacements. The impact this potential shift has on the other cat species however

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is not well understood. As has been witnessed in the tiger bone trade (Nowell, 2000, 2010), as tiger parts and products offered for sale as trophies, aphrodisiacs or as talismans become more rare the relative contribution of other species in this trade increases, thereby shifting the burden. While it is likely that this will mostly impact the other large cats, in Asia and indeed elsewhere, the potential impact on smaller cats remains unknown.

Like their larger brethren, a number of smaller Asian cats (including Asiatic golden cat *Catopuma temminckii*, jungle cat *Felis chaus*, leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*, marbled cat *Pardofelis marmorata*) are directly affected wildlife trade (MacDonald and Loveridge, 2010; Table 1). Some of this trade is legal and can involve substantial numbers. For instance reported imports in 2005–2012 of wild-caught leopard cat skins from China comprises over 2500 whole skins and skin plates, 1000 skin pieces and over 3000 garments (Nijman, unpubl. data based on analysis of CITES trade data). This legal trade may already have a negative effect on wild populations, but this effect may be exacerbated by a large yet undefined illegal trade. Many of the small Asian cats are legally protected in one or more of their range countries, thus precluding them from being traded, but yet these are also illegally traded. This illegal trade has rarely been quantified.

Myanmar (also known as Burma), by virtue of its relatively large areas of remaining forest may harbour significant populations of wild cats (see species entries in MacDonald and Loveridge (2010)) (Table 1). Although very few quantitative surveys on the populations of any wildlife in Myanmar have been carried out, results from what studies there have been suggest serious population declines due to hunting and habitat loss (Rao et al., 2002; Lynam et al., 2006; Lynam, 2010). To what extent the commercial wildlife trade contributes to these declines have hitherto not been quantified. Illegal trade in wildlife in Myanmar is widespread, involves numerous species, and is often carried out openly (Martin and Redford, 2000; Shepherd, 2001; Shepherd and Nijman, 2007; Oswell, 2010; Nijman and Shepherd, 2014). In these wildlife markets few cat bones of any species are available, but claws, skulls, canine teeth and skins, all of which are sold for trophies or as talismans, are openly displayed for sale and, especially markets situated close to international borders, cater largely to a foreign market (Shepherd, 2001; Shepherd and Nijman, 2008a,b; Oswell, 2010).

We were able to survey the trade in wild cats in two border towns in Myanmar intermittently over a period of 16 years, allowing some insights into the trade of these species. Combined with data from others that surveyed the same two towns for cat skins we document the existence of a large and open trade in wild cats, with trade decreasing in Tachilek, on the border with Thailand, and trade remaining high and likely increasing in Mong La, on the border with China.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data acquisition

We surveyed the trade in wild cats in Tachilek in June 1998, July 1999, January 2000, February 2006, June 2011 and December 2013 and Mong La in February 2006, February 2009 and December 2013–January 2014 (Fig. 1). Surveys lasted from 1 to 3 days, with CSR being present during all surveys and VN in five of the nine surveys. Myanmar is, and as proven to be, a challenging country to work in, especially when documenting illicit activities, and we conducted the surveys if and when the opportunity to do so arose (Shepherd, 2001; Shepherd and Nijman 2007, 2008a,b; Nijman and Shepherd, 2014). As such the timing of the surveys can be best described as opportunistic, but the surveys themselves were highly structured. Trade in Tachilek was concentrated in the open market just across the border from Thailand, and in surrounding shops. In Mong La cats were traded at the central wildlife market, in specialised wildlife shops throughout town and in the wild meat restaurants. Tachilek caters largely, if not exclusively, for tourists entering the town from across the border in Thailand; the currency of daily use is the Thai Baht and both Burmese and Thai are widely spoken. Mong La caters almost entirely for the Chinese market, with Chinese frequenting the town to visit casinos, nightclubs and wild meat restaurants; Chinese is used widely and the Yuan is the currency of daily use.

In Mong La, and during the latter four visits to Tachilek, a full inventory of all species and all parts was made, i.e. whole individuals, alive or dead, skins, skulls, teeth, claws, etc. (during the first two visits to Tachilek only skins were counted). Fakes (teeth made of resin, paws made out of cow tendons and fake fur, goat skin painted to mimic tiger fur, etc.) were common at both markets but easily identifiable and were excluded. Dried penises were excluded all together because of the presence of large numbers of fakes tiger penises (in fact it is doubtful if any of the tiger penises were genuine). A small number of what appeared to be genuine leopard penises were observed but for consistency these were excluded as well. Products made out of wild cats (for instance tiger or leopard bone medicine, bottles of tiger wine) were excluded, but skeletons of tigers submerged in glass tanks of tiger wine were included.

In Tachilek it was possible to survey unaided but for Mong La we had to obtain special permits and we were not allowed to travel without an obligatory government-appointed guide. These guides did not impede on our market surveys. All guides spoke English, Burmese and Chinese, and with their help we held conversations with vendors about the origin of the cats, clientele, and trade routes, especially where it pertained to the smaller cat species (traders were less willing to discuss this in relation to the large

**Table 1**  
Cat species occurring in Myanmar, their IUCN Red List status, CITES Appendix listing, global population estimate, and protective status in Myanmar, and the main threats they face in Myanmar. Protective status is taken from State Law and Order Restoration Council Law No 583/94 from 1994 as detailed in Shepherd and Nijman (2008b) and for snow leopards following an official announcement of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment on 23 December 2005 (Oswell, 2010).

Species	Protective status	CITES	IUCN Red List	Population	Main threats	References
Tiger <i>Panthera tigris</i>	Totally protected	I	EN	~3000	1, 2, 3, 4	Chundawat et al. (2011)
Leopard <i>P. pardus</i>	Totally protected	I	LC	>100,000	1, 2, 3	Henschel et al. (2008)
Snow leopard <i>P. uncia</i>	Protected	I	EN	~4000–7000	2, 3, 4	Jackson et al. (2008)
Clouded leopard <i>Neofelis nebulosa</i>	Totally protected	I	VU	n.a.	1, 2	Sanderson et al. (2008a)
Marbled cat <i>Pardofelis marmorata</i>	Totally protected	I	VU	n.a.	1, 2	Grassman et al. (2008)
Asiatic golden cat <i>Catopuma temminckii</i>	Totally protected	I	NT	n.a.	1, 2, 3, 4	Sanderson et al. (2008b)
Fishing cat <i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i>	Not listed	I	EN	n.a.	1, 2, 3, 4	Mukherjee et al. (2010)
Leopard cat <i>P. bengalensis</i>	Not listed	I	VU	n.a.	2, 3	Sanderson et al. (2008c)
Jungle cat <i>Felis chaus</i>	Not listed	I	VU	n.a.	2, 3	Duckworth et al. (2008)

EN = endangered, LC = least concern, VU = vulnerable. Main threats in Myanmar: 1 = habitat loss, 2 = trade, 3 = human–wildlife conflict; 4 = diminishing prey base.

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