THE IRRAWADDY
Covering Burma and Southeast Asia

COVER STORY

On the Trail of the Wildlife Traffickers

By BEN DAVIES, PHOTOS BY PATRICK BROWN

APRIL, 2005 - VOLUME 13 NO.4

The gruesome trade in endangered species

Extracts from *'Black Market—Inside the Endangered Species Trade in Asia'* by Ben Davies, photos by Patrick Brown. Produced by Adam Oswell. Published by Earth Aware Editions, a division of Palace Press International.

Inside Scotland Yard's animal protection unit, an officer displays a tiger's head seized during a raid in London.

On a cliff overlooking the southwest plains of Cambodia, there is a bullet-ridden casino. Built in the 1920s, the French hill resort at Bokor was once a popular summer retreat for wealthy colonials. For almost two decades it became the scene of ferocious battles between the Khmer Rouge and government forces. But these days, a different war is raging around its dank, crumbling walls.

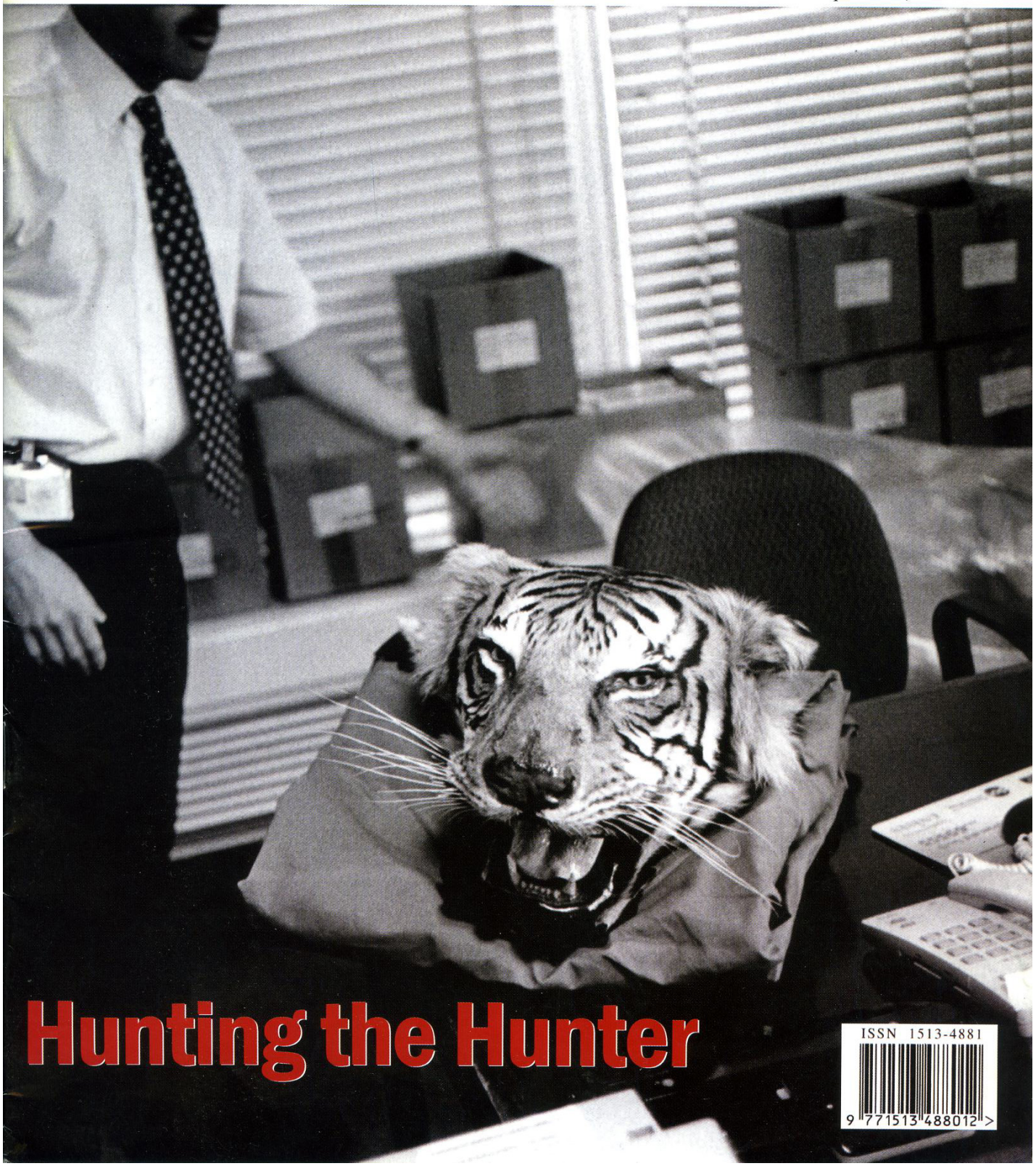
It's night time and six heavily armed men make their way through the nearby forest using only the light of the moon. Carrying automatic weapons, they tread carefully, stopping to check for animal tracks or to listen for sounds of human activity. Up ahead they see a movement. One man raises his hand to signal and the others melt on either side of the track, guns at the ready. Ek Phirun, the 29-year-old head of the unit shouts a command. A spotlight blazes out, freezing the figure of a poacher.

Surrounded and outgunned, the man drops the sack that he is carrying and surrenders without a struggle, his eyes bulging with fear.

Today the catch is small. A hog badger that will sell for less than US $20 in the local markets. But like so many species in Cambodia it is endangered, with a price tag that could increase manyfold by the time it is transported further afield. The poacher is taken away for questioning and later released with a warning. An off-duty soldier, he was simply foraging for wild animals to feed his family.

Months earlier, two elephants—one male and one female—were machine-gunned to death not

THE IRRAWADDY
COVERING BURMA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA
www.irrawaddy.org
April 2005, Vol. 13 No. 4



Hunting the Hunter

ISSN 1513-4881

far from Bokor in the remote Cardamom Mountains. The poachers hacked off the tusks, trunks and bull's penis with machetes. They then placed snares around the carcasses, which are used as bait for catching tigers. Normally the poachers return at weekly intervals to check the traps in the hope of catching a tiger—an animal that is worth more dead than alive. This time, they stayed away, probably tipped off by local forestry officials who had been sent to arrest them.

A group of Nepal Royal Forestry Department officers display seized tiger and snow leopard skins, valued at US $750,000.

When the killing is over, the most valuable wildlife is transported under the cover of darkness to a cluster of nearby towns and villages. There, local dealers temporarily warehouse it before they sell it to regional traders in the capital Phnom Penh. It will eventually be smuggled over Cambodia's poorly policed borders into neighboring countries concealed in trucks, hidden in boats or hauled over narrow trails by local porters. The bones and parts will be used for traditional Chinese medicine, a practice that dates back three thousand years and is popular throughout East and Southeast Asia. The meat will be eaten as a tonic, an aphrodisiac or an expensive local delicacy, while the skins will be sent as trophies to wealthy collectors in Asia and the West.

Like the illegal trade in drugs, it is demand from buyers around the world that fuels this grisly trade. As neighboring countries have exhausted their own valuable natural resources, the price for Cambodia's last populations of tigers, elephants, and bears has soared to levels undreamed of even a decade ago. Killing a tiger can earn a poacher up to US $500 if he is lucky. When the average annual salary is less than half that amount, it's not hard to see why poor local people become killers. For them, it's a question of survival. But the real money is made exporting and trafficking the wild animals. Sold in dingy back-street alleyways in China or anonymous hotel rooms in the West, the value of a dead tiger including its skin, bones and penis could be US $50,000, netting huge profits for the gangs who increasingly control the black market trade in endangered species.

"We can't stop the illegal wildlife trade, but we can make it more difficult," says Mark Bowman, an Australian military advisor for WildAid, one of several international conservation organizations that are helping to fund and train local rangers in a last ditch attempt to save Southeast Asia's rapidly vanishing wildlife.

As demand for wild animals has grown in far off places, new supply routes have opened up in Asia. Favored now are countries like Burma, India and Indonesia, where the inhabitants are poor and valuable wildlife still easy to come by. All it takes is a few local contacts, a friend in the import/export business and the liberal dispensation of cash and almost anything is possible. "Smugglers identify the loose links of the chain," says Steve Galster, a wildlife investigator who has worked undercover in many of the world's toughest locations. "In this business, it's all about moving shipments with the minimum cost and the lowest risk."

Locals in Mong La, Shan State, offer animal parts for sale. The man on the right is holding a tiger's penis and a bear's gall bladder.

And despite the best efforts of Galster and his colleagues, the supply routes are growing bigger and more sophisticated by the day. In late 2003, Chinese police manning a checkpoint in southwest Tibet stopped a vehicle suspected of transporting illegal wildlife from India. Inside, they discovered 1,393 animal skins, including 581 leopard skins and 31 Bengali tiger skins. It was the single biggest haul since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, with a total street value in excess of US $1.2 million. Three Tibetans were arrested. The Indian handlers, organizers and poachers managed to escape.

Had they not been stopped, the skins would have doubtless ended up in the sprawling mansions of wealthy buyers in China and the West—the same ones who are contributing to the extinction of some of the world's rarest species. "What we are discovering is just the tip of the iceberg," says Julian Newman, a wildlife investigator at the Environmental Investigation Agency in London. "With high prices and low risks, the skin trade is spiraling out of control."

In late 2004, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature published the findings of its own survey into wildlife populations. The results show that no fewer than 4,388 species of mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian are under threat due to unsustainable hunting, loss of animal habitat and relentless growth of the human population. Some, like the South China Tiger (estimated population 50) or the Javanese rhino (estimated population 60) are so rare that it would take almost nothing to push them over the edge.

But as populations of large mammals disappear, so poachers turn to smaller and smaller species to make their money. When these are gone, they search for common birds and reptiles. Without stricter laws and better enforcement, the forests will eventually be emptied of all living creatures. "It's like the canary in a coal mine," says Hunter Wieler, a former big game hunter turned conservationist who works in Cambodia. "Each species extinction is a warning. If the warning is continuously ignored it is only a matter of time before a catastrophe happens."

Back on the rugged slopes of Bokor National Park, it's late afternoon and the rangers are already preparing their spartan rations for another five-day patrol, this time to the remote northern reaches of the wildlife sanctuary. Ek and his men can take heart from the 1,500-odd poachers that have been intercepted in recent times and the hundreds of animals that have been released back into the wild. They are also the first to admit that unless more is done, some of the world's rarest species will become extinct.

A shipment of Pangolins that were intercepted at Bangkok's international airport as part of a crackdown on trafficking in the wild animals.

But times may be changing. Bored of empty government rhetoric and bureaucratic indifference, a new generation of conservationists is taking action into their own hands. Spearheaded by groups like WildAid and the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency, they are carrying out their own undercover operations to identify major wildlife traffickers. They are funding programs to improve training and law enforcement at a local level. And through public awareness campaigns, they are putting pressure on Western governments to impose stricter penalties on wildlife criminals.

It's a crusade which is already bringing hope to parts of Asia. In neighboring Thailand, a handful of former poachers have been persuaded to take up alternative means of employment such as growing mushrooms and organic vegetables or working as park rangers. Villagers are learning about the long term value of conservation and its potential to attract tourists who will pay money to see animals in the wild. The argument goes that if the local people are given an interest in protecting the animals and their habitat, then poaching could become a thing of the past.

And assistance is also coming from unexpected quarters. High profile celebrities like Jackie Chan and Angelina Jolie are lending their support to conservation projects. Chan recently appeared in several television commercials calling for an end to the slaughter and trade in endangered animals. His message was beamed into as many as 50 million homes in Asia.

It's only a small step. But it is one that is vital if the world is to halt the plunder before it is too late. "It will take time to stop the hunting," says Prawing Klinkai, a former poacher who machine-gunned to death more than 70 elephants before switching sides to become a tracker. "When people are poor and hungry they will try to make money in whatever way they can. But now the children are growing up with a new awareness of conservation and a better education than when I was young."

That may not come soon enough to save all the endangered animals in Southeast Asia. For the rangers of Bokor, however, it provides a ray of hope that one day the battle can be won.