



TRADE | A shop owner shows off some of his wildlife products in the Thai-Burma border town of Thakhilek. The market in Thakhilek has many shops that sell wildlife products.

### RAISING AWARENESS

Sompoad Srikosamatara has a long-standing interest in endangered wildlife. During the 1970s, he teamed up with his university tutor Warren Brockelman to obtain funding from the New York Zoological Society to study and survey wild populations of the threatened pileated gibbons of Southeast Asia. But his first real experience of the trade in wildlife was in the early 1990s when he visited Laos and came across hundreds of pangolin skins hanging out to dry in the sun, before being made into leather.

“I was so shocked by what I saw that I decided that I had to do something,” he says. “Looking back on it, the incident was a turning point.”

Part of what Sompoad did was to gather data, which he passed on to the Lao authorities. The data showed how, over little more than a decade, around 90 per cent of the coun-

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try’s pangolins, a type of anteater, had been wiped out. Since then Sompoad has written a number

of papers on the wildlife trade and conservation. He and his colleagues have also attempted to instil their views in their students, the wider public and government.

Sompoad’s students comprise undergraduates and doctoral students studying a range of species from Asian elephants and orchids to tigers and pileated gibbons. Together they are attempting to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity and the impact of the wildlife trade on animal populations around the region. The hope is that they can succeed before it is too late. “We have to educate the next generation,” says Sompoad. “This is the only way forward.”

### ENORMOUS TRADE

It is a big hope. Every year around three million birds, ten



**POACHING** | According to Interpol, the illegal trade in wildlife is worth more than USD six billion a year, making it the third biggest form of illegal trafficking after drugs and arms.

million snakes, 5 000 tonnes of turtles and 500 million tropical fish are traded around the world. And that's just the legal trade. According to Interpol, the illegal trade in wildlife is worth more than USD six billion a year, making it the third biggest form of illegal trafficking after drugs and arms. And with better communications, better transportation systems and the opening up of even the most far-flung corners of the world, wildlife trafficking has never been easier or more profitable.

Burgeoning demand and only limited supply has translated into ever-rising prices. In South Korea a bear's gall bladder, used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat liver disease, can sell for up to USD 10 000, whilst in China, a single rhino horn to treat fever can go for USD 40 000. Little surprise, then, that ever larger numbers of poachers go into the forest to hunt them down. As the big valuable mammals disappear poachers turn their attention to smaller animals. Recently in Japan, a seven-centimeter-long male stag beetle was reportedly sold to a private collector for a record USD 92 240.

Even scorpions and poisonous spiders are in demand across the globe.

One woman who has watched this new trend in horror is Barbara Maas, head of Care for the Wild International in London. A recognised authority on the capture and transportation of wild animals, she has documented mortality rates of up to 50 per cent for wild-caught primates imported into the United States. In the case of ornamental fish, the figure is as high as 80 per cent.

"What we need is tougher enforcement," she says. "If governments and people are serious about stopping the illegal wildlife trade, there is an enormous amount that can be done."

Despite the best efforts of people like Barbara Maas, the situation continues to deteriorate. Over the past 100 years, the worldwide population of rhinos, tigers, elephants and bears in the wild has shrunk by a staggering 90 per cent. And that's the high profile, so-called "charismatic" species. Today it is estimated that there are just 150 Chinese crocodiles



left in the wild in China – barely enough to maintain a healthy breeding population. In Indonesia there are fewer than 5 000 of the famous Komodo dragons. Without greater action and more stringent penalties, soon the only place where we will find rare animals is in cages.

#### HUGE MARKET

One of the most shocking cases that Sompoad has followed in recent years is the case of 53 orangutans that were smuggled from the jungles of Indonesia to tourist hot spots in Thailand. The orangutans ended up in the Safari World private zoo a short distance from Bangkok where they were used in boxing shows for tourists. In November 2004, the forestry police raided the zoo. Under Thai and international regulations, the apes should have been immediately DNA-tested to prove their country of origin and then repatriated. But despite a concerted campaign by conservationists, the Thai government for more than two years refused to take action.

*“Wildlife is seen as a way to make money. Conservation is on the decline.”*

Had it not been for a Dutchman by the name of Edwin Wiek, the case might have slowly died along with most of the orangutans. But Wiek, who works for Wildlife Friends of Thailand, refused to give up. “This could be the world’s biggest case of ape smuggling,” says Wiek. “All we want is for justice to be served.”

His efforts may finally be paying off. Within the next few weeks, the orangutans are likely to be transported by plane from Bangkok to Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. The apes will eventually be transferred to the remote island of Kalimantan. After being quarantined in an animal rescue centre the orangutans will be returned to their natural habitat and reintroduced into the wild.

The 53 rescued orangutans are the lucky ones. Many wild animals end up in China, probably the world’s biggest consumer of wildlife, where they are used in traditional Chinese medicine to cure anything from piles to hepatitis and impotence.



TURTLE | At a restaurant in Hanoi, a turtle has its head removed and the blood and bile collected. The blood and bile are then drunk and the remainder of the turtle is cooked for consumption.

In one of the most horrific examples of the illegal trade, Thai police in late 2003 raided a secluded farmhouse in Nonthaburi, a short distance from Bangkok. Inside, they discovered a freezer containing 20 freshly cut bear paws as well as the body of a fully-grown tiger, which had been shot at close range then cut into quarters. Turtles, snakes and dead pangolins were scattered around the house, whilst six live tigers, five bears and two baby orangutans were held in steel cages awaiting the inevitable slaughter.

The animals were destined for a local restaurant where Asian tourists pay big money to eat endangered wildlife in the belief it will increase virility. Although the owner of the illegal slaughterhouse was apprehended weeks later, he was released soon after. As of today no one has been jailed for the crime.

*"I believe that there has to be a combination of research and action. This is something that I try to communicate to my students."*

Besides the traffickers themselves, the biggest obstacle that people like Sompoad face is complacency. "It is difficult to get governments to listen," he says. "The

international wildlife trade is not high up on their list of priorities."

To some extent that is understandable. People in the West blame wildlife trafficking on corruption in the developing world, whilst impoverished villagers in the developing world say that if westerners and the increasingly prosperous Chinese did not offer them money for animals, they would not go and trap them.

Attempts to bridge the gap have had only limited success. Back in 1975, an international convention was set up to regulate the international trade in plants and wildlife. Known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) it aimed to put an end to

the unsustainable trade in rare plants and animals. In the 30 years since, it has banned the commercial trade in tigers, rhinos and 220 other mammals as well as providing varying degrees of protection to more than 30 000 species of animals and plants.

But whilst the CITES Secretariat can claim with justification that no major species have become extinct in recent times, the reality is that the population of almost every major wildlife species has been decimated. Indeed despite growing efforts to halt the trade, the black market continues to drain wild animals from the last pristine forests on earth.

That is why increasingly the onus is falling on academics like Sompoad and the big non-governmental organisations like WWF and WildAid to carry on the fight. Celebrities like Jackie Chan are also doing their bit to bring home the message that we must stop the trade in protected wildlife.

"It is very simple," says Chan during a rare interlude in his busy work schedule. "Do not buy any products made from endangered species."

#### HARD WORK

Back in Mahidol it's 11am and Sompoad's students are hard at work in the fifth-floor biodiversity centre. Reminders of the illegal wildlife trade are scattered all over the spacious laboratory. They range from bottles of gecko wine and a civet's skull to bear bile products and pangolin scales. The pangolin is being traded to extinction by villagers who believe the scales will bring them good luck and cure cancer.

Sompoad is only too realistic about the difficulties that he faces in raising public awareness about the scale of the wildlife trade in Asia. But that does not stop him from trying. With the help of his students, he has carried out investigations in wildlife markets along the Thai-Lao border as well as in Chatuchak Market, which is situated just a short distance from the university. Recently one of his students monitored the illegal trafficking of ivory from Africa, where elephant populations are still relatively buoyant compared to Asia. Much of the smuggled ivory is used to make meticulously sculpted personal name stamps known as 'hankos'. These command high prices and are particularly popular amongst the Japanese who consider ivory stamps a status symbol.

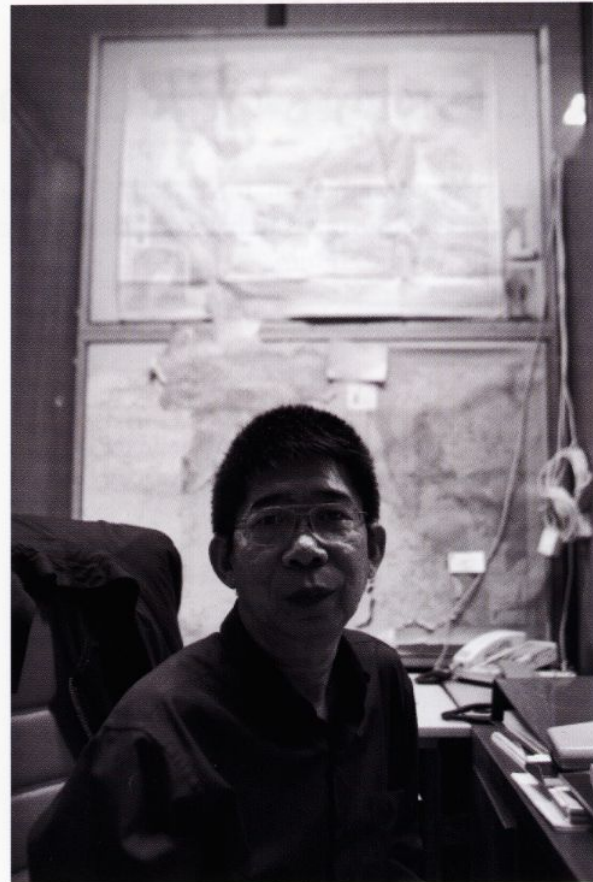
To halt the trade in ivory, exotic pets and other types of wildlife, Sompoad and his colleagues know that they must change long-standing beliefs and superstitions. "I am a scientist, but not everything that we do here is normal scientific work," he says. "I believe that there has to be a combination of research and action. This is something that I try to communicate to my students."

The emphasis on action makes Sompoad something of a

rare breed in the world of academia. But he also knows that he is battling against the odds and that without greater international cooperation and support some of the best known species on the planet will be lost. Time is running out. **CK**

*Ben Davies is author of "Black Market - Inside the Endangered Species Trade in Asia", published by Earth Aware Editions, a division of Palace Press International.*

*Patrick Brown is an award-winning Australian photographer.*



MISSION | Sompoad Srikosamatara is on a mission to save the world's most endangered wildlife.

# Traded to Extinction

It is ten o'clock on a steamy Bangkok morning and Sompoad Srikosamatara, an associate professor at the city's prestigious Mahidol University, is on a mission to save the world's most endangered wildlife.

BEN DAVIES | TEXT

PATRICK BROWN, PANOS | PHOTOS

BANGKOK, THAILAND

CLUTCHING A BOTTLE of tiger tonic pills in one hand and a gibbon's skull in the other, the 51-year-old environmental biologist describes how some of the rarest species on the planet are being plundered to satisfy demand for everything from tiger penis – used as an aphrodisiac – to exotic pets and furs. Worse still, he says, the authorities are doing little to stop it.

“It is a sad, heart-breaking story,” he says. “Wildlife is seen as a way to make money. Conservation is on the decline.”

Sompoad's sense of urgency is not hard to understand. A poster on the wall of Mahidol's biodiversity centre dramatically illustrates the explosion of the wildlife trade in Thailand and its shift from common animals to exotic pets. Beautifully patterned Indian star turtles, rare hornbills and large-eyed slow lorries can be purchased openly in Bangkok despite being protected under local and international law. Birds and reptiles smuggled from neighbouring countries can be ordered on the Internet, like supermarket groceries.

The sale of a few wild animals is hardly going to wipe out the planet's biodiversity, but the trade here in Thailand is multiplied thousands of times the world over. Combined with large-scale deforestation it is driving many species to the brink of extinction. “People have to take responsibility for what is going on,” he says. “We need to be able to convince governments and the authorities of the need to act.”