

Headline: The Trail of Death
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Publication: Black Market
Date: April 2005
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India's border with Nepal cuts down through the stony plains of the southern *terai* past a series of spectacular mountain ridges, intersected to the east by rivers and lush tropical valleys. It is a landscape of breathtaking beauty stretching for almost 1,000 kilometers through scattered hills and tea plantations, rice fields, and an occasional forest. But this rugged border area has other less widely known distinctions. For it also contains one of Asia's biggest wildlife-smuggling routes and serves as a major transit point for illegal goods bound for Europe.

Every year, millions of dollars' worth of tiger bone, leopard skin, rhino horn, and ivory are smuggled out of India's north and northeastern provinces into remote districts of Nepal, from where they are transported further afield. Wildlife is not the only commodity that finds its way over these tortuous roads and mountain passes. Guns and drugs are also smuggled along this underground network that stretches from Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and Karachi to Hong Kong and the Middle East.

So porous is the India–Nepal border and so lax is the enforcement by the poorly paid guards stationed at its crossings, that for a bribe of around U.S.\$0.25 per day, local people and illegal laborers can walk from one country to the next virtually unchallenged. Once illegal goods reach the other side—hidden in rice sacks or occasionally carried on buffalo carts – local agents arrange to have them taken by courier on an overnight bus to the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu. From here they can be sent overland to China — or by air to virtually anywhere in the world.

In the early hours of 12 January 2000, police acting on a tip-off raided the Indian town of Khaga, which is a nine-hour drive from the border. Inside three illegal tanning factories, they discovered 18,000 leopard claws, 70 leopard skins, 4 tiger skins, and an assortment of other wildlife parts, conservatively valued at U.S.\$1 million. After an extensive search they also turned up another 175 kilograms of tiger bone and leopard bone on one of the sites, which is located only 200 meters from the local police station.

This was by far the largest seizure in India's recent history. Yet it marked the second major wildlife confiscation in less than a month. On 18 December, tax officials in Ghaziabad near Delhi had flagged down a vehicle that they suspected belonged to an international racket involved in smuggling illegal garments, a common activity in India's flourishing underground economy. What they discovered was far more serious. Concealed inside the vehicle and meticulously packaged in a consignment of cloth were fifty leopard skins, three tiger skins, and a handful of other skins ready to be shipped over the border like a batch of mass-produced textiles.

The third seizure was less dramatic. On 6 May 2000, fifty leopard skins were found in unclaimed railway parcels in the city of Haldwani. The parcels had been sent from the capital Delhi. Once again, they were due to be taken by truck to the India–Nepal border.

If anything could bring home the fact that India's wildlife laws were being broken with impunity this was it. Tests on the skins revealed that the majority of animals had been poisoned or electrocuted. A few may have been caught in traps and bludgeoned to death. But these staggering finds might be just the tip of the iceberg. Almost two years after the seizures,

the illegal trade in wildlife between India and Nepal continues to flourish despite pledges by the two governments to clamp down on it.

From the great national parks of India, which are home to one of the largest and most diverse populations of wild animals in Asia, skins and parts are smuggled to Delhi, Calcutta, and the country's other teeming cities where most of the big traders are based. For generations families of skilled Indian taxidermists and traders have controlled the business. In the 1990s, growing profits started to attract a new generation of criminals. Much of the trade is now in the hands of Tibetans living in exile. One of them, Atuk Tsering Tamang from Humla in northeast Nepal, was arrested by Indian special task force police in early 2003. The others remain at large.

The underground channels have changed in other ways. As it has become tougher to move shipments, traffickers have diversified their routes and methods of concealment. On occasions, rhino horn and ivory pieces have been smuggled in tins of *ghee*, a type of salted butter. The *ghee* solidifies in cooler months making detection virtually impossible. Hollowed-out timber is also widely used. Increasingly, women and children act as "mules" to move smaller consignments.

Despite growing awareness of wildlife crime, most illegal animal parts reach their final destination. "India has never been very good at directing enforcement," says Belinda Wright, founder of the respected Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), which is based in Delhi. Established in 1994, WPSI has files on more than 10,000 individuals suspected of being involved in the wildlife trade. "When I started out in this business, most people involved in the trade were doing it as a full time profession," says Wright, who is widely considered one of the country's leading wildlife investigators. "Today we are dealing with hardcore criminals involved in a whole range of illegal activities."

Better communications and new transportation networks are also opening up even the most remote areas of the Indian subcontinent. Exploiting India's long coastline, smugglers traverse coastal routes between Southern India and the United Arab Emirates in *dhow*s, ferrying anything from ivory and falcons to gold and electronics. In Kashmir, tiger bone is bartered for the wool of the rare Tibetan antelope. Today, the illegal underground channels lead not only through the remote mountains of Nepal, but into neighboring Tibet, Burma, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Like any criminal business, a handful of senior officials provide protection and take a hefty cut of the proceeds. Besides that, few people know what is going on in the remote border areas far from the government and administrative centers. In the case of wildlife, which was until recently openly traded, few people care. "Who is going to take notice of a few skins when there are big volumes of guns and drugs crossing over the border?" asks one enforcement official.