

Briefing for the 57th Meeting of the CITES Standing
Committee
14th - 18th July 2008

Skin Deep: The need for effective enforcement to combat
the Asian Big Cat skin trade



Tiger skin for sale in Linxia, Gansu Province, PRC, June 2008 © EIA

Executive summary

- The open availability of Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins for sale in Linxia, Gansu Province of the PRC, continues.
- EIA investigators found 13 snow leopard skins, 13 leopard skins and 1 whole tiger skin for sale in just one street during a five-day period in June 2008
- Traders stated that Asian big cat skins for sale were sourced from Afghanistan, Burma, China (Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, Xinjiang), India, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia and Vietnam
- Traders stated that buyers come from all over China and the skins are marketed as ready-made rugs for home décor or taxidermy “specimens”.
- A number of traders commented on the decline in demand from the Tibetan community and there was an obvious decline in the number of shops openly selling skins in the street.
- EIA investigators observed five traders who have been documented selling Asian big cat skins in previous years.
- The trader offering a whole tiger skin clearly stated that a contact in the local Forest Bureau alerts him in advance of Bureau inspections.
- Since 2005, EIA and the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), have consistently provided sufficient information to relevant Chinese authorities to facilitate intelligence-led enforcement action.
- EIA is aware that enforcement efforts to date have resulted in the confiscation of 30 snow leopard skins and 51 leopard skins between 2003 and 2007. These efforts appear to be cosmetic and clearly more covert, pro-active, coordinated, intelligence-led enforcement approaches are required to stop persistent offenders.

EIA urges members of the CITES Standing Committee to take the following action:

- Support the Secretariat’s recommendation that the CITES tiger enforcement meeting focus on intelligence matters (SC57 Doc 31.1 regarding Dec 14.70), and insist that measurable outputs and meaningful indicators or benchmarks are set to determine enforcement effectiveness in future. Participating Parties should be Directed to report to the 58th Meeting of the CITES Standing Committee on the following, *inter alia* :
 - To what extent did participating personnel return home to work fulltime in wildlife crime enforcement?
 - To what extent was the intelligence training disseminated to other officers?
 - To what extent has historical, actionable and developmental intelligence on criminals been exchanged between enforcement agencies and between Parties?
 - To what extent have pro-active strategic plans been developed to apply intelligence-led enforcement to combat the trans-national criminal networks?
- Support the Secretariat’s recommendation that the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force (TETF) be convened in conjunction with the CITES Enforcement Expert Group (EEG) meeting (SC57 Doc 31.1 regarding Dec 14.71), and ensure the participation of senior officers from professional enforcement agencies (of budget and decision-making rank), at an opening or closing summit. This would help to secure critical political and financial commitment for more effective enforcement in future.
- If combining the TETF and EEG with a summit is not feasible, Standing Committee should Direct the Secretariat to organise an independent summit for the professional enforcement community, subject to external funding.

BELOW Leopard and snow leopard skins visible from the street, Linxia, Gansu, PRC, June 2008 © EIA



Findings of the EIA investigation June 2008

During a five-day period in June 2008, EIA surveyed 30 shops in Beida Jie (Beida Street), in Linxia, Gansu Province, PRC.

A total of 14 shops offered CITES Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins for sale in June 2008:

- 9 whole snow leopard skins
- 4 snow leopard skins made into rugs
- 13 whole leopard skins
- 5 pieces of leopard skin trim
- 1 whole tiger skin
- 1 piece of tiger skin trim.

A further two shop owners did not have Asian big cat skins on the premises but stated they could supply snow leopard and tiger skin. As in previous years, some traders openly display whole Asian big cat skins that are visible from the street, while others advertise skin stocks by displaying a piece of Asian big cat skin.

Having previously visited Linxia in 2005, 2006 and 2007, EIA notes an overall decline in the number of shops selling fur in general. In 2005 there were over 80 shops selling fur, including legal furs, in the entire street, and by 2008 there were only 30.

Persistent offenders

Through analysis of data from previous years, EIA has observed five traders who have continued to operate and sell Asian big cat skins since 2005, seemingly unhindered by any enforcement activity.

This includes the traders who offered tiger skin for sale in 2008, indeed it was the same individuals who offered EIA investigators tiger skin in 2006. However, EIA can confirm that the tiger skins offered in 2008 and 2006 were different. In 2006, the skin was approximately 2 metres long and had

three holes in it. The skin shown in 2008 was 2.65 metres long, and had no holes in it.

EIA investigators asked one of the tiger traders how they were able to continue selling tiger skin. He stated: *“Absolutely dare not hang it up! In the forestry bureau... we have a classmate in the forestry bureau. Before they conduct checks, they inform me beforehand. I take it back to my house and keep it there. When the forestry bureau is not conducting its checks, then no problems.”*

The same trader also had three snow leopard and three leopard skins for sale inside the back room areas of his shop. From the outside of his shop, only a piece of leopard skin trim is visible from the street. When asked why he does not hang whole snow leopard skins in the same way other traders do, he stated *‘The reason I haven’t hung it up these last few days is because during the Olympics, foreigners will come and take photos. That’s why we take it down. It doesn’t look good. Otherwise, we are permitted to do so’*

Another persistent offender is one of the main leopard traders observed in 2005, who, at that time, had 36 leopard skins on the walls and floor of his shop. In 2006, investigators counted 25 leopard skins. In 2007, the same trader showed investigators 20 leopard skins, and in 2008, six skins were seen hanging in his shop.

Source and destination of skins

Traders stated that Asian big cat skins are sourced from Afghanistan, Burma, China (Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, Xinjiang), India, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia and Vietnam. They did not appear to know, or be willing to discuss, the original source of the skins or whether the sources indicated were in fact transit / trading points.

The buyer demographic appears to have diversified, with buyers coming from all over China e.g. Guangdong Province, Beijing, Hebei Province, Sichuan Province. Traders stated that there has been a decline in demand from Tibetan

Table 1. Prices of skins seen by EIA / WPSI in Linxia, Gansu, PRC, 2005 - 2008

	Snow leopard skin	Leopard skin	Tiger skin
No. of skins 2005	60	163	0
Price range 2005	RMB 400 - 2000 US \$58 - \$232	RMB 13,000 - 20,000 US \$1190 - \$2900	NA
No. of skins 2006	9	42	1
Price range 2006	RMB 2000 US \$232	RMB 14,500 - 25,000 US \$2122 - \$3659	RMB 150,000 US \$22,000
No. of skins 2007	4	88	0
Price range 2007	RMB 5000 US \$731	RMB 8500 - 35,000 US \$1244 - \$5122	NA
No. of skins 2008	13	13	1
Price range 2008	RMB 1300 - 8000 US \$190 - \$1170	RMB 6000 - 17,000 US \$880 - \$2488	RMB 98,000 US \$14,639

NB: The fluctuation in the availability and price of different species over the years could be due to a number of factors e.g. time of investigation, enforcement activity, consumer changes as reflected in comments from traders



consumers, consistent with trader comments from 2006 and 2007.

Skins were clearly being marketed more towards demand for luxury home décor or taxidermy. Snow leopard traders indicated that well-dressed / tanned snow leopard skins fetch a higher price as “specimens”, while poorer quality skins are sold as ready-made rugs.

Other wildlife products

In addition to Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins for sale, EIA documented the open sale of Tibetan antelope horns and uncertified ivory. Seven shops were recorded selling more than a dozen pieces of ivory, mostly bangles, prayer beads and hair decorations. Most traders were non-specific on the source of ivory, stating that it was either from India or Africa. One trader however stated that he travels to Shenzhen to buy ivory from a factory there.



Enforcement timeline

EIA and WPSI have consistently provided the State Forest Administration with sufficient information to prompt official investigations. EIA and WPSI have always recommended that the relevant authorities engage in covert investigations in order to go beyond the retail level of trade and target the traders engaged in sourcing and trafficking skins.

August 2005

EIA and WPSI visit Linxia for the first time and immediately report findings to the CITES Silk Road Enforcement Seminar, Urumqi, Xinjiang, PRC (24-28 August 2005). A briefing document¹ was provided to the State Forest Administration (CITES Management Authority and Wildlife Conservation Division), recommendations included conducting covert investigations using investigators of appropriate ethnicity.

July 2006

EIA and WPSI return to Linxia and document ongoing availability of Asian big cat skins. A briefing² is provided to the State Forest Administration. Awareness campaigns and media reports have reached the markets and even Linxia traders document a decline in demand amongst Tibetan buyers and comment on foreigners taking pictures of skins for television.

October 2006

EIA and WPSI release “Skinning the Cat” at the 54th Meeting of the CITES Standing Committee. China was requested to submit a report to the Secretariat by 31 January 2007, on its efforts to combat the illicit trade in Appendix-I Asian big cat species. The CITES Secretariat was directed to conduct a verification mission and report to the 14th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to CITES.³ The China CITES Management Authority publicly announced that they would conduct an enforcement operation in November 2006, targeting markets selling Asian big cats.

February 2007

In February 2007, the China CITES Management Authority reported: “from November to December 2006, China Forest Public Security Organ carried out Green Shield Operation, with 2 tiger skins, 11 leopard skins and 1 leopard skeleton sequestered. In response to the claims by many NGOs on illegal sales of furs and skins of Asian big cat species happened in Linxia Furs & Skins Market in Gansu Province and A-ba Prefecture in Sichuan Province, China Forest Public Security Organs have taken special measures, with a large amount of genuine and faked goods sequestered. And the relevant dealers have promised never to sell furs and skins of Asian big cat species”⁴

February 2007

EIA and WPSI returned to Linxia and found 88 leopard skins and 4 snow leopard skins openly for sale. Clearly the reprimand issued to, and promises obtained from, traders in Linxia was not sufficient to deter them from resuming trade after Operation Greenshield. A briefing document⁵ was sent

ABOVE Tibetan antelope horns openly on sale, Linxia, Gansu, PRC, June 2008 © EIA **LEFT** Ready-made snow leopard skin rugs were on sale for RMB 1300 (approx US \$190.00). Whole leopard skins were on sale for up to RMB 8000 (approx US \$1170) Linxia, Gansu, PRC, June 2008 © EIA



LEFT The illegal sale of uncertified ivory and Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins takes place in full view of enforcement officers along Beida Street, Linxia, Gansu, PRC, June 2008 © EIA **RIGHT** Genuine snow leopard skins are sold alongside fake tiger skins Linxia, Gansu, PRC, June 2008 © EIA

to the SFA, reiterating previous recommendations that authorities plan covert investigations with investigators of appropriate ethnicity.

May 2007

As directed by the CITES Standing Committee, the Anti-Smuggling, Fraud and Organized Crime Officer of the CITES Secretariat undertook a verification mission to China to assess enforcement efforts to combat the illegal trade in Asian big cat skins. The Secretariat Senior Officer reported that there were no Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins visible on the streets of Linxia during his visit. The Secretariat's report notes that there was considerable confusion between different local enforcement agencies in Linxia and the Provincial capital of Lanzhou regarding recent enforcement action and outcomes.⁶

August 2007

A skin trader in Linxia, Mr Ma, is arrested following an investigation by Qinghai Provincial authorities who followed a lead to Gansu Province and recovered 27 snow leopard skins and snow leopard bone, as well as leopard, bear and lynx skins from his property.^{7,8}

February 2008

Local sources state that snow leopard skins are for sale again on Beida Street

May 2008

China reports that the open availability of Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins has almost been eliminated.⁹ Mr Ma is sentenced to 11 years imprisonment and fined RMB 100,000 (approx. US \$14,600).¹⁰

June 2008

EIA return to Linxia and document the ongoing sale of Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins in full view of enforcement and inspection officials. According to at least one trader

they are permitted to sell Appendix 1 Asian big cat skins, as long as foreigners are not around to document it.

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