

Some observations on India's Illegal Trade in Mustelids, Viverrids and Herpestids

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TRADE IN WILDLIFE and its derivatives combined with habitat destruction and pesticide pollution are some major causes of India's dwindling wildlife. High level of commercial exploitation of several groups of animals, once common and widespread, has brought several species on the endangered list. Use of live animals for pets, killing animals for their meat, trophies, fur and skin are the main reasons for organised poaching and trade network. Though in recent years there have been several trade studies focused on tiger, rhino, shahtoosh, elephant ivory, turtles and birds in India, there is little information on trade and utilization of civets, mongoose and otters. The aim of this article is to present the little known trade in mustelids, viverrids and herpestids (MVH).

Several products derived from MVH were traded in domestic and international markets. For example, less than a decade ago, many of us started our day using a shaving brush made from mongoose hair, of which most of us were totally unaware. For men-folk of Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh a cap was an essential item while coming out of the house, without realizing that they were wearing a dead otter on their heads.

TRADE IN MUSTELIDS

Otters

All the three Indian species viz. Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra*, smooth-coated otter *L. perspicillata* and Oriental small-clawed otter *Aonyx cinerea* (Prater 1971) have been recorded in trade. Otters are mainly trapped

for their pelts in many parts of the country, especially central India, Guwahati and south India. Seizure figures of wildlife offences in the country reveal that 20-30% of the fur trade is in otter skins. From 1984 to 1999, 1006 otter pelts and 8 garments were confiscated from Delhi and Calcutta (TRAFFIC India database, New Delhi). The main markets are Lucknow, Kanpur, Kota, Calcutta, Bangalore and Delhi. The otter fur trade, which is practiced in many parts of the world, routes out via Nepal and Bangladesh, to importing countries. It is reported that since mid-1980's, the fur trade has sharply risen. During field surveys in south India, the second author saw several otter traps with *Narikorava* tribe near Pondicherry. These tribes regularly trap otters for their skin in central India.

TRADE IN VIVERRIDS

a) Binturong *Arctictis binturong*

It has a very limited distribution, restricted only to northeastern states of India. Not a commonly sighted species but traded as live animal for zoos and private collections.

b) Spotted linsang *Prionodon pardicolor*

It is becoming rarer as evident from very infrequent sightings. Off late it is not seen in trade due to its rarity, but earlier was much sought after in the fur trade for its golden-colored coat with black spots (TRAFFIC, 1996).

c) Civets

Most of the civet species found in trade are poached for the famous 'civet secretion'

which is believed to have medicinal properties. Some species recorded in trade are:

Common palm civet *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*

Brown palm civet *Paradoxurus jerdoni*

Masked palm civet *Paguma larvata*

Small Indian civet *Viverricula indica*

Large Indian civet *Viverra zibetha*

The trade and trapping of civets is mainly for their secretion which is utilized for its medicinal properties. Some tribes regularly shoot, snare and trap with the help of hunting dogs for meat. Small Indian civets are commonly exploited for their secretion. *Mir Shikhar toli* traders from Patna largely carried out trade in civets for zoos, traveling zoos, private collection and Russell market traders in Bangalore. During a bird trade survey in various animal markets, about 20 live specimens of common civets species were recorded for sale by second author in places such as Allahabad, Meerut, Varanasi, Calcutta and Itanagar. They were normally sold at a rate of Rs. 300 to 800 per individual at the trapper or sub-dealer level. An animal trapper interviewed near Cochin was found to be involved full-time in trapping civets for the illegal animal markets.

Captive breeding of civets in India was not recorded for commercial trade, however wild caught civets were regularly kept in Kerala for their secretion used in perfume industry (TRAFFIC, 1996). Brown palm civet is a very common species found in limited areas in low densities. Although occasional hunting of this species has been reported, there is no evidence of commercial trade. Though no commercial trade is recorded for masked palm civet, it is being hunted for its pelt.

TRADE IN HERPESTIDS

Mongoose

The following species are recorded in wildlife trade.

Small Indian mongoose *Herpestes*

auropunctatus

Striped-necked mongoose *Herpestes*

vitticollis

Indian grey mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii*

Bristles of the mongoose family are in great demand for wildlife trade. Their meat is eaten by several tribes and the hair is utilized for making shaving brushes, paint brushes, etc. Earlier, stuffed mongoose were openly sold as artifacts in many Indian markets. This taxidermy trade in mongoose species has however, declined in recent years. The Indian grey mongoose is widely used by snake charmers and *madaris* for street performances (TRAFFIC, 1996). Seizure figures from TRAFFIC India database analyzed from 1983 to 1996 reveal that 115,178 brushes/products of mongoose hair/ bristles, 69 skins and 132 kg of mongoose hair were confiscated in Delhi and Calcutta alone. During wildlife trade survey by second author, about mongoose 100 specimens were being seen utilized by snake charmers or being sold in Calcutta bird markets. The trade in all three species for zoos and illegal private collections is carried by the *Mir Shikhar toli* in Patna in Bihar. The *Mongia*, *Bawaria* and *Kalvaleyia* communities of Rajasthan, the *Narikorava* community of south India, the *Nath-Sapera* community of Dehradun and Jammu, regularly exploit mongoose for their meat and commercial trade.

LEGAL STATUS OF THE TRADED SPECIES

The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WPA) bans the use and commercial exploitation of Indian wild animals. The legal status of each individual species as per WPA and CITES (Convention on International trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna) listing is mentioned in the introductory chapter of this volume.

Since most of wildlife trade is carried in a covert manner, it largely remains

All the three Indian species of otters have been recorded in trade for their pelts. Seizure figures reveal 20-30% fur trade is in otter skins. The trade and trapping of civets is mainly for their secretion which is used for their medicinal properties. Bristles of the mongoose are in great demand for making various kinds of brushes.

undocumented. Seizure figures mentioned above indicate the amount of ongoing trade in this group. Comparative seizure figures of MVH indicate that the maximum trade is in mongoose hair. There is a substantial trade in otter skins too. A detailed study on these species could reveal the *modus operandi* of traders, their trapping methods and volume of utilization. Better enforcement of laws along with awareness campaigns would be a positive step to curb illegal trade in wildlife and its derivatives.

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