

## Thanh Hoa authorities say tiger glue auction is legal, NGO slams it as a self-defeating move

By AN MINH

A decision to auction nearly three kilograms of glue made from bones of a seized tiger carcass by Thanh Hoa Province defeats the very purpose of conservation, activists charge.

"The decision has shocked the conservation community and raises a big question: who is protecting Vietnam's endangered wildlife? Endless efforts can end up in glue pots," the NGO Education for Nature - Vietnam (ENV) said in a statement on Tuesday (November 30).

"The authorities have made great efforts to uncover the violations and confiscate evidence that might have gone to the market without their intervention. But then the wildlife is confiscated only to be auctioned off back to the trade," it said.

With this action, the role of authorities becomes the role of a middleman in the illegal trade, it said.

Earlier, authorities in the north-central province confiscated a tiger carcass from the farm of Nguyen Mau Chien of Tho Xuan District's Xuan Tien Commune, who was illegally keeping the big cat. It is believed that the animal died because of poor care.

The tiger bones were handed to the Thanh Hoa Traditional Medicine Hospital and converted into 2.77 kilograms of glue. Tiger bone glue is used as a medicine that strengthens bones, increases vitality, and treats a range of other ailments.

On November 19, the provincial administration - Thanh Hoa People's Committee - issued a decision to hold an auction to sell the glue and donate the skin to the provincial museum. An investigation by ENV found that the glue was selling at VND50 million (US\$2,564) per kilogram.

Douglas Hendrie, ENV's technical advisor, said that this was a major concern "as it puts government agencies in the supply chain for trade of tigers [products] and thus has the government encouraging demand by supplying the market."

ENV cited experts saying that by supplying the market with wildlife, of legal or illegal origin, "we increase demand by making the products readily available to consumers."

"In this case, tiger products are more accessible to consumers and considered as 'legal' because it was legalized by wildlife protection



Confiscated animal skins, including a tiger's, at Heathrow Airport in the UK. Conservationists have slammed a recent decision by Thanh Hoa Province to make glue with the bones of a seized tiger carcass and auction it. PHOTO COURTESY OF WWF

# Wildlife protectors turn 'middlemen'

authorities," it said.

Le Minh Thi, ENV program manager, said that this could be the only chance to "prevent Vietnam from turning into a major tiger consumer state."

"Our opportunity to do something about this is here and now. While everyone looks at China, the tiger trade here in Vietnam may be on the verge of a boom," she said.

ENV said the decision was even more shocking in the context of a Vietnam delegation having just returned from the Tiger Summit held in Russia from November 21 - 24 that elicited strong commitments on protecting the species.

"Thanh Hoa authorities must recognize their duty to protect tigers and act responsibly. The people expect nothing else from the authorities tasked with wildlife protection," she said.

According to ENV, the most reasonable solution now is to transfer confiscated wildlife or wildlife parts to a scientific establishment which has the legal and technical capacity to receive them and destroy the remains in accordance with law.

### Auction is legal

Meanwhile, Thanh Hoa authorities have asserted that the auction plan is legal and in line with regulations issued by the

## Vietnam hosts animal trafficking summit

Key international and national organizations met in Hanoi on Thursday in a summit designed to bolster co-operation in tackling the illegal trans-boundary wildlife trade.

The two-day workshop brought together Vietnamese and international enforcement agencies to discuss enforcement challenges and strategies, according to wildlife trade monitor network TRAFFIC in a press release December 2.

The discussions will also draw from the knowledge of enforcement experts in other fields of illegal trade (such as narcotic and human trafficking), it said.

Representatives from international organizations including INTERPOL, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, World Customs Organization, and South Africa National Wildlife Crime Reaction Unit, will join nearly 30 representatives from Vietnamese enforcement agencies.

Despite an increase in enforcement efforts by international organizations and governments to control illegal wildlife trade at the national, regional and global level, this thriving business continues to threaten species such as tigers, rhinoceroses and elephants with extinction, TRAFFIC said in a statement.

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

"I confirm that Thanh Hoa [authorities] and I have handled the case based on Circular 90," Trinh Van Chien, vice chairman of the provincial people's committee, told the media on Tuesday (November 30).

He also confirmed that the provincial Finance Department had valued the glue at VND5 million (\$256) per hundred grams for the auction.

Chien said he had instructed related agencies to thoroughly

consider the legality of the tiger bone glue auction before issuing the decision on November 19.

"I have had the Thanh Hoa Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Thanh Hoa Forest Management Agency ask for directions from the central Forest Management Administration, who suggested dealing with the case as regulated by Circular 90. I also asked for counsel from the provincial Justice Department and they said they are doing it right," he said.

According to Circular 90, exhibits of wildlife coming under

Group 1B, including tigers, can be handed to scientific, education and conservation centers, museums and management agencies for research or making medicine; or destroyed in case there is a risk of spreading diseases.

Chien said he suggested an auction as a "fair" process in order to avoid speculation that some officials are being favored. He said a part of the auction proceeds would be given to the tiger farm owner Chien as compensation and the rest would go to the provincial budget.

ENV said this move amounted to abuse of legal loopholes to get directly involved in wildlife trade.

"As we all know, the relevant authorities are tasked with protecting wildlife and laws are designed to serve this purpose. We can blame the law and its loopholes, but that merely deflects attention from the fact that Thanh Hoa authorities lack the will to protect our wildlife," it said.

"It is of great concern that there are still two frozen dead tigers on Nguyen Mau Chien's farm in Thanh Hoa waiting for disposal by the authorities. These tigers were farmed by Chien and found dead in August 2010. ENV has been in touch with Thanh Hoa authorities to find solutions for dealing with the frozen tigers," the NGO's statement said.



