

Bones of Contention

In China, the way to pronounce Chardonnay seems to be Char-do-bone-nay

We are beginning to see some worrying trends in the illegal trade of animal parts – and this time it is not just about rhino horns, elephant tusks, bear gall bladders, and shark’s fins – it is about lion bones. Yes, you read that right, lion bones.

Ian Michler, writing for Africa Geographic Magazine in February 2009 as reported by Big Cat Rescue, exposed a growing trend in this shady business, and I suspect we have only just exposed the tip of this rotten iceberg.

It all has to do with the “traditional medicine” or “Chinese traditional medicine” market – not just in China, but also in Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, etc. The history of Chinese traditional medicine goes back a very long way, and is rooted in Taoist and Buddhist beliefs. There are estimated to be about 800 herbal and other medicinal remedies, linked with the belief that humans are closely integrated with their environment. Therefore, by taking such “medicines”, the belief is that ingredients will cure specific ailments and/or correct our “balance” add/or let us absorb aspects of the wild animal. Like for example the use of tiger penises to cure limpness in the appropriate human body part, rhino horn for the same and to be taken with fever, ginseng against lassitude and a number of other ailments (the root is supposed to resemble the human body), etc. There is no doubt that some traditional medicines, especially the herbal remedies, do work – artemisinin made from Chinese wormwood is now recognized worldwide as a cure for multi-drug resistant strains of falciparum malaria and being investigated as a possible anti-cancer agent. Ingredients of certain mushrooms are also proving medically valuable, and acupuncture, another aspect of Chinese traditional medicine, is gaining in importance as an alternative procedure for many maladies.

Chinese traditional medicine has a long and fascinating history, but many aspects are not so acceptable. Use of animal products and therefore the market for them has contributed to the decline of many species, including some you might not have realized – like sea horses. Dried, they are considered an essential ingredient in the treatment of asthma, clogging of the arteries, incontinence, impotence (again), thyroid disorders, skin ailments, broken bones – the list goes on, and seahorse populations are being significantly impacted. None of these “seahorse remedies” have actually been proved to be effective..... well, maybe seahorses contain some iodine that has been shown to cure thyroid problems?

But back to lion bones. Big Cat Rescue reports the use of “tiger wine” (rice wine carefully aged with added tiger bones or even whole carcasses) to make a person less fatigued and take care of arthritis and rheumatism. Since the tiger harvest is falling off a bit, the manufacturers of tiger wine are now looking for an alternative to make their vintages – lions. Consequently, and probably not only because of the wine market, the price of lion bones is increasing by leaps and bounds. If you happened to have some lion bones lying around the house two years ago, you could have sold a kilo for about \$10. If you sell them now, you get \$300. Big Cat Rescue estimates that the bony bits of a whole lion can now be sold for \$4,000.

The market has responded. Chris Bever, of The Campaign against Canned Hunting in South Africa reports this:

“On Tuesday, 1st December 2009, the permit committee of the Department of Environment, Tourism and Economic Affairs, Free State Province decided to approve the permits for the exportation of lion bones to one Cobus van der Westhuizen. The Free State is one of the worst provinces in SA for captive lion breeding”.

Well done Cobus, so now you can canned hunt your lions and then make a nice profit from the bones your “hunters” don’t want anyway. Who is next in line for permits? Make an orderly line please, no shoving and pushing. Are the professional hunters taking note – get an export permit and a few more dollars from your client’s carcass?

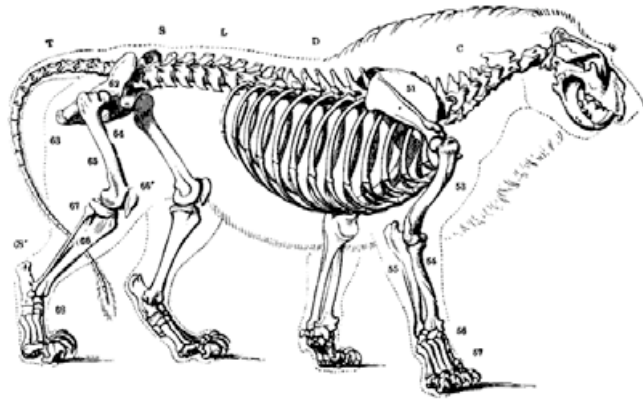
And in case you don’t want to stand in the permit line, you could always use the illegal export route as this enterprising Vietnamese man attempted as reported in the Pretoria News (SA) on 1 April 2009:

“A suspected smuggler living in an upmarket Pretoria suburb has been arrested for allegedly slaughtering lions and rhinos at his luxury home. Police made the discovery on Tuesday after city officials received a tip-off that wild animals were being killed and chopped up at the man's Brooklyn home. It is believed the man is living in the country illegally and is thought to have been found with fake residency documents...Some of the bones were hidden in the bathroom in maize meal bags, others were hidden in bedrooms and other rooms...It was believed the animals were killed for their skins, bones and horns, which are sold in the East where it is thought they help in curing medical and sexual conditions such as impotence”.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Cobus applied for a permit, and the neighbours of the Vietnamese man complained, so they were found out. How many more bones have made their way to China etc in the mean time? Will we now see lion poaching networks in Africa as there were (and still are) rhino poaching networks? Will we now see more “problem” lions killed by farmers as they have an “added value”? How many lion bones will be found in the suitcases of traditional medicine practitioners attending the World Cup in SA? Oh, for those interested, you can now buy seahorse, tiger penis, and lion bone products on the internet from the comfort of your own home.

WWF, IUCN, CITES – are you paying attention?

For this article, I relied on information from Simone Eckhardt, Chris Bever, TRAFFIC, and Big Cat Rescue. I am solely responsible for the content.



Lions have many bones



Delicious....



Better and cheaper than Viagra



What aisle for the lion wine?