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Trade in Bengal Slow Lorises in Mong La, Myanmar, on the China Border

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Abstract: Despite being protected throughout their range, the illegal trade in slow lorises is a clear impediment to their conservation. Little is known about this trade from Myanmar. We report on three visits to the town of Mong La, Myanmar, on the border with China, where Bengal slow lorises *Nycticebus bengalensis* are traded illegally. Combined with survey data from other researchers, it is clear that slow lorises are ubiquitously present at Mong La's animal market. They are traded either as parts—carcasses, skins, and hands and feet (average of 26 items/survey)—or alive (average of 5 individuals/survey). Live animals typically arrive at the market in the morning; they are slaughtered, and the carcass at least is sold the same day. Estimating from live animals, our data suggest that over a thousand Bengal slow lorises may be traded annually from this one market alone. Trade in Mong La may be local or may be geared towards the Chinese market, and thus the trade in Mong La is not only contra to Myanmar's law but also clearly violates the rules and intentions of CITES. We hope that by documenting the trade in slow lorises we will raise awareness amongst conservationists and primatologists about the realities of the unsustainable hunting of slow lorises and that it will be an incentive for the Myanmar and Chinese authorities to take appropriate action to curb this illegal trade.

Key words: Slow loris, *Nycticebus*, Burma, wildlife trade, CITES, conservation

Introduction

The Bengal slow loris *Nycticebus bengalensis* has the northernmost range of all of the slow lorises. It is distributed from Bhutan and Northeast India in the west to southern China and Vietnam in the east, and south to the Thai-Malay Peninsula. Individuals in the northern part of this range appear to be the largest of the slow lorises, with a head-body length of up to 38 cm and weighing up to 2100 g (Nekaris 2013). The Bengal slow loris, listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List (Streicher *et al*. 2008), is threatened in part by habitat loss and fragmentation, but it is becoming increasingly clear that in fact commercial wildlife trade poses the greatest threat. In the early 1990s, Wang *et al.* (1996) recorded Bengal slow lorises in the markets of the Chinese border towns of Ruili (~65 individuals), Longchuan (~60 individuals), and Daluo (2 individuals), allegedly all from Myanmar, and in Meng La (~40 individuals), allegedly from Laos. Starr *et al*. (2010) reported on the trade in Bengal slow lorises in Cambodia, and Osterberg and Nekaris (2015) in Thailand. Three studies concur that wildlife trade in the Northeast Indian states of Meghalaya, Assam, Arunuchal Pradesh and Nagaland is a severe threat to the species (Radhakrishna *et al*. 2006; Nandini *et al*. 2009; Das *et al*. 2014). Nekaris *et al*. (2010) concluded that of all the slow lorises, the Bengal slow loris and the pygmy slow loris *N. pygmaeus* were the species most traded internationally for their body parts. There are numerous other reports of slow lorises in trade within the range of Bengal slow lorises, but not all of them make it explicit whether it is the Bengal slow lorises or, for instance, the sympatric pygmy slow lorises, that are involved (e.g., Wenjun *et al*. 1996; Martin and Phipps, 1996; Lau *et al*. 1997; Li and Wang 1999).

Here we report on trade in Bengal slow lorises in the town of Mong La in Myanmar, on the border with China, based on spot checks. We show that slow lorises were present during all surveys, with a high turnover, to the effect that thousands of individuals are killed annually to supply the demand from this one market alone.

Methods

Study area

Mong La is a small town situated in 'Special Region 4' in Shan State in eastern Myanmar on the border with China.

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Special Region 4 is controlled by Sai Leung (also known as Lin Min Xiang) and is policed by the 3,000-strong National Democratic Alliance Army of the Eastern Shan State that enforces its own set of laws (Oswell 2010); the Myanmar central government have limited authority in Mong La. Mong La's position on the border with China's Yunnan Province facilitates cross-border trade. Starting in June 1989, when Special Region 4 was granted virtual autonomy, the town was developed by Chinese investors and focuses on the entertainment industry, with numerous nightclubs, brothels, exotic meat restaurants, and 24-hour casinos (Davies 2005). About 80% of the people working and living in the area are Chinese. Chinese is spoken widely in Mong La, Chinese writing is omnipresent, the mobile phone network and electricity providers are Chinese, and the Chinese Yuan Renminbi, and not the Myanmar Kyat, is the currency of daily use. Local time follows Beijing Standard Time and is 1.5 hours ahead of the rest of Myanmar.

Wildlife is traded in three distinct ways in Mong La (Shepherd and Nijman, 2007; Felbab-Brown, 2011; Nijman and Shepherd, 2014): first, specialized permanent wildlife shops are spread out over the town, selling ivory, wild cat skins, trophies, etc.; second, the morning market in the central town square sells a combination of live or freshly killed animals and dried animal products; and third, a row of some 15 restaurants sell wild meat, displaying live animals in cages and tubs on the street in front of the restaurants.



Figure 1. Illegal trade in Bengal slow lorises *Nycticebus bengalensis* at Mong La market, Myanmar, January 2014. From top left, clockwise: day 1, slow loris in cage; slow loris being taken apart; slow loris carcasses and skin drying in the sun; day 2, slow loris fur for sale amongst a variety of other wildlife. Photos by Vincent Nijman and Chris R. Shepherd.

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Data acquisition

VN and CRS visited the morning market on four occasions; 7 February 2006, 28 February 2009, and 1 and 2 January 2014. All slow lorises and their parts were counted, apart from a second round during the last visit when only alive and freshly killed individuals were counted (so as not to double count). We visited the market in the early morning when the animals had just arrived; on 1 January 2014 we revisited the market in the afternoon when trading was no longer active to check what was still on display. On the same days we surveyed wildlife trade shops and the wild meat restaurants. In addition we collected data on the trade in slow lorises by searching for reports from others that have visited Mong La in recent years.

Results

We observed Bengal slow lorises for sale at two locations; in shops surrounding the town's central square and in the morning market. Others have observed them in front of the exotic meat restaurants on the south side of the river (see below). They are traded for their meat (to the wild meat restaurants) but more commonly for body parts used for traditional Asian medicine.

During the 2007 survey, we observed two live slow lorises, each housed in a single cage, five skins, four hands and feet, and two whole, fresh skeletons—a minimum of seven individuals. All were found in the morning market. In the 2009 survey, we observed 19 skins, 10 whole fresh skeletons, four feet, one skull and two live individuals—a minimum of 21 individuals. One dealer charged CNY 300 (US$50) for each live slow loris, although it was being offered to a Caucasian foreigner and the price was probably inflated. During the 1 January 2014 survey we observed 15 live slow lorises in the morning market, housed singly in cages, in pairs or up to four individuals per cage. We found four slow lorises that had been killed the same morning. Twelve hands and feet, presumably of three slow lorises were on display, as were the skins of four additional lorises. No live slow lorises were on sale when we returned to the market in the afternoon, but eight freshly skinned slow lorises were laid out on cardboard to dry. In the survey next morning, we observed four live slow lorises in cages and six that were freshly killed. One vendor was in the process of skinning a loris she had just killed. One shop had two live slow lorises in a cage, observed on the second day, and another shop displayed eight hands and feet.

A documentary "The Mong La Connection," shot in Mong La in 2006 (www.cultureunplugged.com/storyteller/Karl__Ammann#/myFilms) shows two skins, two skeletons, and three live slow lorises for sale at the morning market (see also Peterson 2007). On 18 April 2008, Danny Benovitch visited the morning market and meat restaurants in Mong La and posted 91 photographs on his Flickr page; it is clear that at least four Bengal slow lorises, alive in cages, were on display, on that day, including three in front of the exotic meat restaurants. Seamus Martov (in litt. 2014) visited Mong La in January 2014 and found slow lorises for sale in the town and two live individuals in a cage in the morning market. Sebastian Strangio (in litt. 2014) visited Mong La in May 2014 and photographed at least six skins and six carcasses for sale in the morning market. Adam Oswell (Oswell 2010; in litt. 2014), who has visited Mong La nine times since 2001, recalled the presence of slow lorises during all visits but did not record enough details for us to quantify the numbers in trade.

Discussion

We observed seven, 21, 22 and 12 slow lorises, either whole or in parts, during the four surveys of Mong La. Others have observed minimum numbers of six, five, four and three, respectively. Slow lorises are evidently ubiquitous in Mong La's animal market.

It is clear that slow lorises are not normally kept alive for more than 24 hours in the market and are either sold alive on the morning of their arrival or are killed and skinned later that day. We found no storage facilities on site, and all other perishable wildlife is treated in the same manner. This practice is quite different from many other markets where we have monitored the trade in slow lorises, such as Indonesia, where they are kept alive for longer periods of time and most often sold as pets, or Cambodia where mainly skins have been observed but not live animals entering the market (Nekaris *et al*. 2010; Shepherd 2010; Starr *et al*. 2010). With this in mind, and considering only live and freshly killed individuals, it seems that between two and nineteen (and on average eight) slow lorises are killed and processed at this market per day. If our observations are indicative to what happens on other days—and we have no reason to believe this is not the case—the annual turn-over of Bengal slow lorises at this one market alone must be measured in the thousands of individuals. An annual turn-over of one thousand slow lorises requires that just under three lorises need to be killed a day; this is less than was observed on any of the days we were present. Just over five lorises killed per day would indicate two thousand sacrificed per year for the trade in this town.

It is worthwhile recalling the slow life history of Bengal slow lorises. As summarized by Nekaris (2013), the earliest that males and females start to reproduce is at the age of about 18 months, gestation lasts some six months, and females lactate for six months (during which time conception is presumably delayed). With only one offspring born at a time, this slow rate of reproduction is incompatible with the high rate of capture by hunters.

Bengal slow lorises are protected under Myanmar law, and international trade in slow lorises is prohibited as the entire genus is listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), to which both Myanmar and China are signatories (Nekaris and Nijman 2007). Trade in Mong La is geared toward the Chinese market (Shepherd and Nijman 2007) and thus the trade in Mong La is not only illegal under Myanmar law but also clearly violates the rules and intentions

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of CITES. We hope that documenting the trade in slow lorises raises awareness amongst conservationists and primatologists about the realities of this trade and that it will be an incentive for the Myanmar and Chinese authorities to take appropriate action to curb it.

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