

# South China's taste for wildlife

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The destruction of wildlife habitat in South China started about 1000 years ago and continues today. It has led to animal extinctions and to severe reductions in wildlife populations generally. Superimposed on habitat destruction has been the excessive use of wildlife for food and as ingredients in traditional Chinese medicines. One might imagine that the pressure on wildlife would have decreased because of the increased level of education of China's people combined with the general increase in urban incomes. However, the greatest reduction in the amount of wildlife consumed occurred in 2003 as a result of the public's fear of catching Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) from wild animals; bird flu added to this concern (SCMP, 4/ 18/ 06). In late 2004, the demand for meals of civet cats decreased so much from the fear of SARS that 14,000 of them from 141 farms were released to the wild (SCMP, 8/11/ 04). Some Chinese believe that eating wildlife is a bad habit (6/19/ 03) and some even say that it is barbaric, but the practice has persisted in China for about two-thousand years (SCMP, 4/ 02/ 05). A 2003 poll taken in Guangdong Province found that half the population had eaten wildlife and that snake was the favorite of 45 percent of those surveyed (SCMP, 7/ 19/ 03).

With the increased affluence in large South China cities such as Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, well educated men from these urban centers in recent years traveled to mainland cities to enjoy feasts of endangered and protected wildlife species and to flaunt their wealth. The feast menus typically included cobras and other poisonous snakes, pangolins (a small, scale-covered animal), and civet cats (SCMP, 11/ 30/ 98; 4/ 29/ 03).

Twenty tonnes of snakes and as many as 20,000 birds were eaten each day in Guangdong restaurants in 2001 (SCMP, 4/03/01). The Guangzhou restaurant, Chock Full O'Snakes, served 600 kg to 700 kg of snakes each day throughout January 2001, the first month of the "Year of the Snake" (SCMP, 2/ 03/ 01). Some wildlife restaurants in Guangzhou seat as many as 1,000 people (SCMP, 5/ 07/ 03). In 2001, China established a fine of Yuan 1,000 to 10,000 for anyone caught eating protected wildlife (SCMP, 4/ 03/ 01). Yet, *Xinhua*, China's official newspaper, reported in 2004 that the State Forestry Administration found that the cobra population has fallen 90 percent in the last decade while the common rat snake numbers have dropped 75 percent (SCMP, 6/12/ 04). Intense snake hunting in some grain-producing areas of South China has been associated with a rise in local rat populations which in turn

has led to significant loss of grain eaten by the rats (SCMP, 1/30/01).

Wildlife markets obtain their animals from hunters who scour the countryside and from mainland wild-animal farms. The wild-animal trade provides a substantial income to a hunter or wild-animal farmer (SCMP, 4/29/03; 7/18/03). For example, one pound of civet-cat meat costs about US\$8-\$10/lb in a restaurant (SCMP, 1/09/04). Some species of wildlife eaten in South China or included in their traditional medicines and tonics include: poisonous snakes (especially cobras), song birds, owls, bear parts, rats, pangolins, elephant "nose", boas, monitor lizards, tiger parts, crocodiles, monkeys, swans, peacocks, pheasants, civet cats, foxes, emus, Sika deer, leopard cats, mice, centipedes, bats, salamanders, worms, scorpions, beetles, and cocoons. Domesticated cats and dogs are another common food source.

Wildlife farming is viewed by some researchers at the Animal Institute, China Academy of Sciences, as a way to protect wild animals (CWCA/WildAid, 2005). They believe that the farm-raised animals cost less than those poached and that these raised animals have fewer legal and medical risks. They note, however, that few people will cultivate wild animals as a general benefit to society or to restock dwindling wildlife populations. Other researchers at Jilin Agricultural University (CWCA/WildAid, 2005) feel that any policies on raising wild animals should place priority on the protection of wild animals above their commercial value. In addition, they feel that a need exists today to protect the animals without the necessity of using them commercially.

Wildlife in its natural setting benefits society in a variety of ways. For example, some species carry seeds to degraded land sites and, thus, help to aid land restoration. Some snake species prey on agricultural pests like rats in grain producing areas, and in doing so help assure adequate food production for society (SCMP, 1/30/01). Some birds and amphibians consume mosquitoes, flies and other disease-carrying vectors, thus, reducing the human chance of infections. However, raising concentrations of wild animals on food farms only benefits that site. Clearly, the loss of wildlife from their natural habitats can harm society in a variety of ways.

The demand for and scarcity of wildlife in Guangdong Province has resulted in the importation of wildlife from other southern provinces as well as southeast-Asian countries (SCMP, 11/02/01a) like Indonesia (SCMP, 12/22/01), Thailand, Malaysia (SCMP, 11/02/01b; 12/22/01) India, Vietnam (SCMP, 4/29/03), and even some African countries (SCMP, 5/25/05). These imports in turn increase the pressure on wildlife from these primary locations.

Smuggling has become commonplace in nearby Hong Kong because certain endangered or protected wildlife species have a high market value in mainland China (SCMP, 4/29/03). Examining a few Hong Kong police reports on wildlife smuggling helps spotlight the magnitude of the problem. For example, crates containing 600 cobras were smuggled into Hong Kong from Malaysia in 2002 but were intercepted by the police during a dangerous, high-speed boat chase near China's mainland border (SCMP, 11/15/02). During 2001, the Guangxi Forestry Department confiscated 5,000 kg of boas, one tonne of

monitor lizards, and one tonne of pangolins (SCMP, 9/ 26/ 01). The Hong Kong authorities uncovered a shipment of 2.7 tonnes of pangolin scales in 2001 for probable use in Chinese medicine and as an aphrodisiac, a yield that would require the scales of 5000 to 6000 pangolins (SCMP, 11/ 02/ 01b). In the same year, 7,500 turtles were uncovered in a container shipment in Hong Kong headed for China (SCMP, 12/ 22/ 01). In addition, 665 Malaysian box turtles were confiscated in 2003 (SCMP, 4/ 05/ 03), and 10,260 more later in the year (SCMP, 7/ 11/ 03). Hong Kong authorities in 2005, opened a shipment of 1800 skinned and vacuum packed pangolins (SCMP, 4/ 20/ 05). These incidents probably represent the tip of the iceberg of wildlife smuggling.

The 2003 SARS outbreak caused widespread concern among the Chinese people about the possible hazards of eating wild animals. A link between SARS and the handling or eating of certain wildlife was proposed by medical researchers. The Chinese government closed or moved some wildlife markets and closed some wildlife restaurants as well (SCMP, 5/ 23/ 03). At the height of the outbreak, the Guangdong government banned the breeding, consumption, and trading of wildlife (SCMP, 5/ 28/ 03). Trading resumed shortly after the SARS crisis passed (SCMP, 7/ 12/ 03). The owners of seventy Hong Kong snake shops believed they would have had to close if the ban continued (SCMP, 5/ 29/ 03).

The China Wildlife Conservation Association in cooperation with WildAid (CWCA/WildAid, 2005) conducted a survey in December 2005 and January 2006 to determine the wildlife status in China. It was similar to another survey carried out in 1999 (CWCA, 2005). The recent survey released its findings April 18, 2006 showing that:

- wild animals are increasingly farmed commercially;
- about 63 percent of those people surveyed believe that eating wild animals from illegal sources is not safe;
- restaurants that serve wildlife have decreased by 6.6 percent whereas the number of grocery stores that sell wild animals has increased 22.8 percent;
- 74 percent of the respondents knew that eating wild animals was against Chinese law;
- the concern for potential health hazards of SARS and bird flu from eating wildlife seems to be the leading reason for the drop in animal consumption since 2003; and
- seventy percent of those people surveyed in Guangzhou in the 2006 survey viewed eating wildlife as a potential health risk.

The CWCA/WildAid 2005-survey authors still express concern for the need to reinforce laws to eliminate poaching, smuggling, and illegal trade in wildlife. An important element of their survey was to identify the reasons why people chose to eat wild animals in the first place. The reasons include: health and nutrition (32.4 %); curiosity (31.3 %);

taste (27.3 %); and social status (9.2 %). Nevertheless, 71.7 percent of those surveyed said they had not eaten wild animals during the past year. The earlier 1999 survey showed that 40.3 percent of those surveyed did not eat wildlife and today the percentage stands at 51.1 percent. Overall, South China population consumes wildlife to a greater extent than elsewhere in China.

Although evidence exists that wildlife consumption has slowed, there is also evidence that wildlife smuggling continues. Over the next year or two it will be useful to follow the SCMP reports on the frequency of smuggling interceptions and amount of wildlife coming into Hong Kong and moving into mainland China. If a SARS outbreak does not resurface, will the public become increasingly complacent about eating wild animals again? Will environmental education permanently alter people's eating habits so as to reduce wildlife consumption? I am not so certain. Just prior to the SARS period, conversations I had with some highly educated, Chinese ecologists on the subject of eating wildlife lend to my concern. Even though these individuals understood the damage that was occurring to South China's wildlife, they told me that when an important scientist came to visit they would often make sure that some endangered or protected animal was served for dinner to show their high regard for the visitor. Will environmental education and law enforcement be able to make changes in the two thousand year-old custom of wildlife consumption in time to avoid further wildlife declines and extinctions? We can always hope.

***\*Footnote on SCMP Web Edition:***

The South China Morning Post (SCMP), an English language, Hong Kong newspaper now about 100 years old, publishes a web edition at [www.SCMP.com](http://www.SCMP.com). The SCMP surveys a wide array of mainland and local Chinese newspapers and provides English versions of some of the most important issues on their web site. The web edition provides an excellent window on current happenings in China.

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