



Using Endangered Animal Species in Traditional Chinese Medicine

The ethical issues revolving around the use of endangered species in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) are still being debated. In Asia, where TCM is very widely used, the trade of endangered animals is banned in many countries to preserve wildlife that have been driven to the brink of extinction. In recent days, however, there is a renewed call for policy changes as trade on the black market continues to thrive, leaving endangered species at a very precarious stage.

In June 2007, China announced a plan to lift the trade ban on tiger parts at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). This move was met by criticisms and concerns from India, Nepal, Bhutan and Indonesia,

where wild tiger population had drastically dropped in the recent years due to extensive poaching. In addition to its use as an ornament, nearly every body part of the tiger is believed to be a powerful ingredient in TCM. Since the trade ban was imposed in China 14 years ago, prices of tiger parts (such as penises, paws and bones) had surged sky high on the black market. As a result, hunters are all too eager to risk their lives for the huge profits. (An Indonesian reported selling tiger parts as a highly “lucrative business.”)

Chinese government officials have argued that the plan applies only to legalized trade of Chinese farm-bred tigers, which amounts to about a population of some 5000, in contrast to only 30 to 50 wild tigers

[Special Feature]

around the country. They argue that the legalization will actually help to reduce illegal poaching of tigers in India and the Sumatra area of Indonesia, but emphasized that they will need scientific research to back up their views. Conservatives blame the Chinese government for the lack of public health education, resulting in the general belief in the healing power of tiger parts, and thus ruthless hunting of the big cats. Environmentalists express fears that the proposed policy will further drive tigers to extinction — once the trade ban is lifted, the demand for tiger parts will exceed what tiger farms in China can offer; poachers and smugglers can only become more and more ruthless. Beijing's plan to revive the tiger trade was rumored to be the result of commercial pressure from powerful investors of tiger breeding centers.

On the other hand, an unlikely alliance was formed when Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) announced a joint project with the Singapore TCM Organisations Committee (STOC) to protect endangered animal species used as ingredients in TCM. The ACRES and STOC Endangered

Species-Friendly TCM Labeling Scheme was launched in March 2007, which was aimed at discouraging TCM shops in Singapore from selling body parts of endangered animals such as bears, tigers, and rhinoceros. Traders that join the scheme will place a label in front of their stores to indicate their commitment to not selling endangered wildlife. Louis Ng, executive director of ACRES, said hopefully the scheme would raise public awareness of illegal poaching for TCM. Despite the fact that Singapore has long banned the trade of endangered species in TCM shops, earlier undercover investigations conducted by ACRES revealed that trade of tiger parts and bear bile has been very active on the black market.

From a scientific point of view, Western scientists and critics remain skeptical about the healing power of TCM ingredients, such as tiger bones and bear gall bladders. In fact, they consider the hunting of endangered animals for medicinal purposes a pointless act. Rhinoceros horns, for instance, are highly valued among TCM practitioners and are said to be highly effective in combating life threatening fever, rheumatism, gout,

and even piles. Contrary to common belief, after thorough research into the chemical composition of rhinoceros horns, its main composition was found to be compressed keratin fiber — the same material found in hair and fingernails. In essence, taking rhinoceros horns as medication has no more curative power than chewing our own nails.

Some TCM researchers, however, oppose this view and claim that thousand-year-old prescriptions cannot be wrong. Denouncing such ingredients may well be defiling the effectiveness of TCM as a whole. Other more environmentally concerned practitioners propose a more compromising solution — to identify a substitute for body parts of endangered species, for example replacing rhinoceros horns with that of the buffalo's. Research on the classification of TCM active ingredients is currently ongoing in institutions like the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and so far the progress is encouraging. Scientists are optimistic that eventually a comprehensive TCM database will be in place for better application of TCM and for preserving wildlife.

