

Luxury, Social Status and Wildlife Trade in Asia; can this Trend be Reversed?

Wildlife trade takes many forms, from the sale of exotic reptiles or birds for the pet trade, wild animals intended for human consumption as a delicacy, or the products of animals such as rhinos, elephants or tigers poached for their horns or skins. A multi-billion-dollar industry, with illegal transactions alone valued at up to US \$23 billion a year (Africa Wildlife Foundation, 2015), wildlife trade has led to the widespread decimation of species and continues to threaten the survival of many species today.

Much of the demand for wildlife products comes from Asia, and predominantly China (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2016). This demand has increased with recent social and economic development, accompanied by the emergence of 'conspicuous consumption' and the desire to attain social status through the purchase of rare or luxury goods. This essay will discuss the negative impact of the growth of the Asian luxury market on wildlife trade, and present potential strategies in response.

Health and wealth

For millennia, claims of the perceived health benefits of wildlife products have fuelled demand for products derived from species including tiger, rhinoceros, black bear, musk deer and sea horse (Cao, 2015). An additional appeal to buyers is the luxury status associated with such items. In the 1970s, ivory carvings were presented as gifts from Chinese leaders to foreign dignitaries, including the US President (Cao, 2015). Latterly, such items are not beyond the means of many Chinese. The explosive growth of China's economy has seen, in particular, the parallel growth of an affluent middle class, and, consequently, a burgeoning increase in China's luxury goods market. Economic growth has seen a rise in billionaires, with forecasts that the number of billionaires in China will exceed that of the UK, France, Switzerland and Russia combined by 2023 (Kotze, 2014). A similar trend is expected in Vietnam, with manufacturing industry transferring from China due to lower labour costs, and the number of ultra-high net-worth individuals, defined as an individual with investable assets of at least \$30 million (Investopedia, 2018) projected to increase by 166% by 2023 (Kotze, 2014).

With China predicted to be the world's biggest luxury goods market by 2020 (Kotze, 2014), this wealth is novel to citizens who just years ago had never experienced ostentatious wealth, and has sparked an obsessive desire for status, and luxury items associated with that status.

Products derived from rare species are an example of luxury-based expenditure, and it is no coincidence that the market for rhino horn has experienced exponential growth, in line with the

growth of China and Vietnam's gross domestic product (Johnson, 2006). A 2014 Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) report found that 'wealth is replacing health as a primary consumer motivation' and that 'tiger parts are now consumed less as medicine and more as exotic luxury products' (CITES, 2014:online).

Traits of luxury goods

Luxury items are distinguished by their inaccessibility to the average citizen. Sought after wildlife derivatives typically possess unusual attributes such as size or morphology, attractiveness or bright colours, distinctive taste, professed cultural significance or medicinal properties (Hall *et al.*, 2008). The most defining attribute, however, is rareness, with the belief that owning a rare item increases the consumer's social status, since their 'acquisition may require perceived attributes such as money, power, skills and endurance' (Hall, *et al.*, 2008:online).

The rarer an item is, the more desired it is. Thus, the products from threatened species are highly desired and expensive, for example, a pangolin is worth \$350 a kilo in a restaurant in Vietnam (Johnson, 2016). It is hypothesised that the high value placed on products derived from a rare species, in turn increases its subsequent market value. This ultimately leads to extinction of that species in the wild, a process termed the 'anthropogenic allee effect' (Hall, *et al.* 2008).

The wildlife trade is dependent on its profitability. Increasing poaching costs (through increased enforcement or higher penalties, or via the provision of alternative livelihoods) will only counteract the rarity-driven market value if the poaching costs increase at least as rapidly as the price (Hall, *et al.*, 2008). Given the high costs of protecting species, the well-resourced criminal networks coordinating wildlife crime and the high sales revenue, this is unlikely. Therefore, reducing consumer demand may be the most effective strategy.

Reducing demand

To reduce consumer demand, engagement with the luxury good industry itself is paramount. The World Wildlife Fund for Nature's report *Deeper Luxury* states the case for a new type of values-based luxury industry, suggesting that consumers are concerned about social and environmental issues and wish to be associated with companies that reflect these values in place of 'shallow' luxury (Bendell and Kleanthous, 2018).

However, it is clear that many purchasers of luxury wildlife products currently do not even consider such issues. Additional strategies must be adopted to either encourage the development of such values, or to reduce the social esteem afforded to wildlife products.

Johnson (2016) suggests buyers are seeking the prestige and significance that luxury goods bestow and that advocates should therefore develop behavioural campaigns which act on such drivers, rather than those of empathy. Such campaigns may focus on negative emotions, such as fear, uncertainty or doubt (status anxiety or health anxiety) to achieve this. An example is Rhino Rescue Project's campaign to trigger anxiety that using rhino horn is a reputational risk, or that people who accept gifts are figures of national shame, rather than true leaders.

In more practical terms, the Rhino Rescue Project has taken preventative action to deter the appeal of rhino horn as a luxury item for human consumption. A medicinal compound called ectoparasiticides is injected into the horn. Safe for animals but poisonous to humans, this acts a deterrent to both poachers and the end consumer (Brekke, 2015).

Looking at the shark-fin industry (luxury seafood is associated with high-status events and groups), it has been suggested that consumer-orientated media and awareness campaigns link members of high-status groups with the rejection of or sustainable alternatives to shark fins (Wilk, 2002). Furthermore, Wilk proposes that reducing the inequalities that encourage 'conspicuous consumption' and that broader initiatives that 'reduce social inequality and therefore social competition' (Wilk, 2002: 8), will be most effective in the long term. Whether those with newly acquired wealth will conform to this is another question.

Targeted initiatives to reduce the status of so-called luxury wildlife goods will not, in isolation, eradicate wildlife crime. However, given the increase in disposable income in Asia, and the intense longing to achieve social status, it can be argued that such campaigns are both timely and crucial. The luxury industry has the power and influence to manipulate buying patterns. Nevertheless, efforts to combat wildlife crime could likewise benefit from drawing upon the social sciences to execute similar campaigns.

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