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Tiger parts sold openly here

By Grace Chua

Jewellers and antique dealers here are openly selling jewellery and amulets made from tiger claws, skin and teeth, an animal welfare group said yesterday.

The Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), which investigated 134 jewellery or antique shops between December and last month, found 59 selling body parts of the highly endangered big cat.

And of the 59, only seven knew of the ban on trade in tiger ornaments; they produced the objects from under the counter, or from a safe, in front of undercover Acres investigators.

One shopkeeper advised: "When you take it out of Singapore, just say it is a talisman. Don't say it is a tiger part."

Another admitted to having "Just stocked up" for the Chinese New Year because of hotter demand for the items this Tiger year.

These retailers either do not know or are ignoring the heavy penalties that come with selling, advertising or buying the parts of such an endangered animal.

The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) subsequently checked 161 retail outlets, including Acres' 134, and seized 320 items from 30 shops.

It was the biggest seizure of alleged tiger parts here to date, in terms of quantity netted.

The AVA is now examining the items for authenticity.

Selling tiger parts is banned. All six tiger species are protected under Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites).

Singapore ratified the Cites convention in 1987.

Under the Endangered Species (Import & Export) Act, importing, exporting, re-exporting or possessing any Cites species without a permit can land one a fine of up to \$50,000 per species, with a cap of \$500,000 and/or two years in jail.

And here is the rub: Even if the parts are fakes, the same penalties apply.

This is because trading even in fakes drives up the demand for tiger parts, said Acres executive director Louis Ng.

In Asia and some parts of the world, amulets or ornaments made of tiger claws, teeth and skin are carried or worn for protection. Tiger skin, for instance, may be inscribed with prayers and rolled up in glass capsules. Some people believe that wearing such “lucky charms” gives them power and authority.

The demand for tiger parts for ornaments and traditional medicine, coupled with tigers’ loss of habitat, have caused wild tiger populations to plummet worldwide.

By some estimates, only 3,400 to 5,140 tigers were left in the wild in 2008, down from 5,000 to 7,000 in 1999.

Animal conservationists deem this critical, and yet, the continuing demand for tiger parts is fuelling its supply.

Shopkeepers told Acres that they sourced the tiger parts mainly from Thailand, India and China.

The prices for these charms ranged from \$3 for a tiger tooth, to \$350 for a piece of skin, to \$4,800 for a tiger claw set in gold.

Given the rising demand and shrinking supply, these prices can only go up.

Acres’ investigation targeted clusters of jewellery shops and antique dealers in Little India, Chinatown, Geylang and Bugis.

The actual size of the market for tiger parts is unknown, since their sale is not limited to jewellery and antique shops, said Mr Ng.

AVA spokesman Goh Shih Yong said the agency has an ongoing programme to check shops for the sale of illegal Cites species and to educate traders and members of the public.

He said: “We must acknowledge Acres for being our eyes and ears on the ground.”

The number of people nabbed for selling alleged tiger parts has been on the rise. There was one case in 2007 and another in 2008, but four last year.

All turned out to be fakes made of materials like horns or hooves and the sellers were fined between \$100 and \$500.

Those with information about shops selling tiger parts and other endangered species may call the AVA hotline on 62227-0670 or Acres’ hotline 9783-7782.