



AOTE calls for tighter controls in China's zoos and the end to the legalization of trade in tiger product

An *Animals on the Edge* report, written by Chris Weston

In the northeast of China lies the province of Liaoning, a centre of heavy industrial development with a reputation for high levels of pollution. Despite this, Liaoning is celebrated for its food, which is considered one of the eight famous cuisines of China. The province's wide, flat plains make it well suited for modern farming methods and its level of food production is often cited as an example for the rest of China to follow. But this is of little consolation if you happen to be a tiger.

Shenyang Forest Wild Animal Zoo is located along the southern bank of the Hun River amidst a thick stand of forest in Liaoning's Qipanshan International Scenery and Tourism Development Zone. It sounds idyllic but among the 500 animals the zoo is purported to house are thirty Siberian (Amur) tigers, eleven of which have starved to death since the beginning of the year, having allegedly been fed nothing but chicken bones. A further three tigers are reported by the official Xinhua News Agency to be desperately ill, shedding fur and listless having lost their appetites. This follows the shooting to death of two tigers at the zoo in November 2009, which had attacked their handler in an apparent hunger-driven frenzy.

Official statements from the zoo's owners and the Shenyang Municipal Government, which holds a 15% stake in the business, have been guarded and ambiguous. Various spokespeople have refused to confirm that the animals, which are allegedly kept in inappropriately small cages that restrict their movement, starved to death and instead attributed the deaths to "various diseases" and the "unusually cold winter". In the wild, Siberian tigers survive in a region where temperatures regularly drop to below -30°C. If cold and disease were the symptoms, malnutrition is almost certainly the reason they succumbed.

Another reason given for the dire state of the zoo (according to a local source, up to 26 other animals have also died at the zoo this year, including four camels, a lion, five monkeys and a brown bear) is a desperate lack of funding. The cost of feeding the tigers is currently around \$1,300 per day and equates to 50% of the total budget provided by local government. This despite the fact the tigers form less than 6% of the zoo's animal population. Previously, staff at the zoo have been on strike after receiving no pay for 18-months.

Despite the lack of funds and concern for their well being, tigers in Shenyang have continued to be bred at an unsustainable rate, ostensibly with a view to releasing them back into the wild. Below the surface of this apparent concern for conservation, however, lurks a darker, more disturbing prospect.

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For many years, the Chinese government has overtly lobbied for the legalization of the trade in tiger parts obtained from so-called legitimate sources – essentially, tiger farms. It was continually unsuccessful. So, in 2007, in a move made with such clandestine adroitness that it went unnoticed even by those in official negotiations with China over wildlife conservation, the Chinese State Forestry Administration released a document that covertly sanctioned the sale of “legally obtained” tiger skins and their products.

When the existence of the document became apparent, in 2009, conservationists voiced their concern with its wording, in particular the ambiguity of the words “and their products”, which they believe were left specifically vague in order to enable trade in tiger parts other than the pelt, a view voiced by Xu Hongfa, of the wildlife trade monitoring network Traffic, when he observed “the wording will be used as a cover by tiger farmers to make tiger bone wine and other tonics, the income from which would dwarf the revenue from tourism”.

A recent BBC report revealed that another Chinese zoo, the Siberia Tiger Park, based in Heilongjiang Province in the northeast of China, is selling a tiger-bone wine that contains three small tiger bones. Wu Xi, manager of the Shenyang zoo, is eager to discount that the eleven dead tigers might be used in this way. After news of their deaths became public, Xi claimed that the whole bodies were put into cold storage and that invitations had been sent to vets and experts from the Shenyang Agricultural University to conduct autopsies. To date, no autopsy results have been released.

Worryingly, a zoo worker, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity, claimed that the tigers’ bones were indeed used to make tiger-bone wine, regarded as a health tonic, and that “the liquor was used to serve important guests.” “Only the boss has the key [to the cold storage unit],” the worker went on to say. Other zoo workers are quoted as saying that several cans of tiger-bone wine were made and kept at the zoo.

The events at Shenyang have attracted global publicity, embarrassing to China in this Year of the Tiger. Worldwide attention has heaped pressure on the local authority, which has responded by allocating \$1-million to the zoo. It is, at least, a short-term fix. But the deaths of the tigers highlights a wider problem and it is now paramount that China introduces stringent controls for the management of animals in publicly and privately controlled zoos, backed up by effective deterrents and law enforcement, to protect captive wildlife from poor practices and negligent management; and for the Chinese State Forestry Administration to rescind its sanctioning of trading in legally obtained tiger products, which not only increases the pressure from commercial poachers on the worldwide wild tiger population but also places temptation in the way of impoverished people, with tragic consequences for wildlife.