At the CITES Conference of Parties (CoP16) in Bangkok, earlier this year, I attended a press conference where the South African Minister for the Environment announced that South Africa had tried a wide range of measures to curtail rhino poaching, but she confirmed that so far they had failed and it was now time to look at the option of legalizing the trade. This proposal will result in a heated debate for months or years to come. Discussions will be very polarized with neither side willing to make compromises on what they see as core principles.

Value additions to lion bones sold into the Traditional Chinese Medicine Market:

- Trophy hunter in SA books a lion ‘hunt’ of a captive born cat for approximately U$8000-25000 (the cost of hunting a female is a fraction of the cost of hunting a male).
- The taxidermist, in collaboration with the hunting company arranges for the sale of the skeleton to a large scale buyer in Laos for U$1500 per skeleton
- The importer sells skeletons in bags to Vietnamese buyers for U$700-800 per kg (a hundred kilo lion would yield about 18 kgs of bone) or a sales price of about U$15000.
- Vietnamese buyers from Ha Tinh province buy the lion bones by the ton and make down payments in the hundred thousands of dollars
- Bones are shipped across the Laos - Vietnam border with no CITES permits and in contravention of the treaty
- In Vietnam a 15 kg skeleton of a lion is mixed with approx. 6 kg’s of turtle shell, deer antler and monkey bone is then boiled down in large pots over a three day period
- This yields approx. 6-7 kg of tiger cake which is then cut into chocolate like bars of 100 grams resulting into 60 or 70 portions which will be marketed as TIGER BONE CAKE.
- Each bar will be sold at a price of around U$1000 to buyers who believe in the value of Traditional Chinese Medicine and the myth associated with the consumption of “tiger cake” which in most cases is consumed by being added to a glass of rice wine.

The skeleton of U$ 1500 will have been turned into a value added product (with the addition of bone material from other species) of some U$ 60-70000.
I have visited several ranches in South Africa and seeing happy, live rhinos enjoying what to me looked like a good quality of life. It made for a pretty convincing argument that having a dehorned rhino grazing with its calf is a better option than an orphaned calf trying to suckle on its slaughtered mother.

However, on my last trip to Laos and Vietnam, in October this year, I once again investigated the trade in tiger bone - another traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) product in the same league as rhino horn and I found a situation that might have relevance when discussing the proposed legalizing of the rhino horn trade.

First, a bit more background on the tiger bone/cake trade: a demand which is most pronounced in Vietnam with tiger wine being the Chinese equivalent and with the penis being a key ingredient.

In 2010 a group of Vietnamese journalists managed to get into one of the biggest tiger farms in Laos. They reported that a tiger carcass was selling for U$ 140 a kg. The buyers, usually from China or Vietnam, choose a live tiger and then pay per kg after the cat has been shot or electrocuted. 7-10 kg is deducted from the weight for the intestines. The price in 2010 per kg was quoted a U$ 140 per kg for cats above 100 kg’s, a little less for tigers below that. In October this year, a Swiss print journalist and myself managed to get a Vietnamese investigator to visit the same farm and film with a hidden camera. In 2010 the Vietnamese writers mentioned a stock of 100 tigers. Now the farm has over 300, plus some bears and clouded leopards. The farm is also being expanded to hold about 700 tigers. This will be achieved with breeding and importing other captive borne tigers, mostly from Thailand and Malaysia. Plus there are new such farms being set up. All of this is illegal under CITES resolution (14.69) passed in 2012 and stating:

"Parties (to the convention) with intensive operations breeding tigers on a commercial scale shall implement measures to restrict captive populations to a level supportive ONLY FOR CONSERVING WILD TIGERS. Tigers should not be bred for their parts or derivate."
There has never been a valid explanation how tiger farming in any form will support the conservation of wild tigers since they cannot be reintroduced into the wild. Commercial captive breeding might be viewed as having the potential to satisfy demand and bring down prices of tiger parts and as such taking the pressure of the wild populations, however that seems not to be what is advocated with the above notification.

As with other such international regulations, the above is totally ignored in countries like Laos where even national laws do not seem to apply to rich foreign investors. The CITES enforcement regime would allow a country like Laos to be suspended with all legal aspects of the trade having to stop, but that is a measure of last resort as far as CITES is concerned. The policy seems to be to increase the number of member states irrespective of their ability or willingness to comply with the convention.
The breeding at this farm in Laos is clearly commercial, which appears to be legal in Laos. The cats are pumped full of antibiotics with weekly injections due to previous outbreaks of epidemics which not only killed a lot of tigers in many of the farms but in some cases also effected farm workers. The estimates are that this farm alone sells several hundred tigers a year to be turned into TCM.

In addition to the numerous tiger farms across Asia, increasing the supply far above what the poaching of the remaining wild tiger population could ever have produced, there are also the imports of lion bones and skeletons from South Africa which are sold as "tiger bone" to be turned into tiger wine (China) or tiger bone cake (Vietnam). We are talking of several hundred skeletons being exported and imported on an annual basis and during our investigations we were told of a 3 ton shipment about to arrive. CITES trade statistics show the export of 101 full lion skeletons from South Africa in 2010 and over 500 skeletons in 2011 (No figures are available yet for 2012).

When comparing prices for full tiger carcasses between Hanoi, the Laos and Vietnam border, and the prices quoted by the journalists in 2010, the 'per kg' rate now averages out at U$ 200 - A 30% increase since the Vietnamese media team visited three years ago. This despite the drastic increase in supply of both tiger and lion bone.

If we then put this in context with the estimate of only 3000 tigers remaining in the wild and only a handful left in a country like Laos, the message is that prices are still going up, even more so for wild tigers (A wild tiger can be identified by the color
and damage to its canines which are stained and chipped after a lifetime of hunting and catching wild prey, while a captive tiger has snow white teeth with no cracks or breaks as they are fed on chickens. The poacher today also gets more per kilo then he did three years ago and while it might still be a fraction of the sales price of U$ 25000 per carcass, it is still more than enough incentive for qualified tiger poachers to spread out from countries like Vietnam to far off destinations in Malaysia and Myanmar to get their hands on some of the world’s last wild tigers.

Returning to the trade in rhino horn and the debate to legalize or not, the question arises - would the same supply and demand scenario play out if the market was supplied with stocks of legal rhino horn?

Supposedly one of the main objectives of South Africa discussing the possibility of legalizing the rhino horn trade is to flood the market with stores of rhino horn which will cause the price (currently U$ 60000 per kilo) to crash, decreasing the incentive for poachers.

This is the opposite of what we have found in our investigations into the trade in tiger and lion bones - the additional supply from captive farming, and the introduction of imported lion skeletons - which now exceeds by far the supply from the remaining wild tiger population - has not decreased the price, in fact the price of tiger carcasses has increased drastically in the last three years.

There are many more tigers today in all of the countries involved in this industry than there used to be, but they’re captive bred and living in small cramped cages waiting to be electrocuted at the request of a Chinese or Vietnamese buyer.

Is this the way the world wants to see a flagship species preserved?

Demand for tiger products as status symbols is also on the increase.