

# CAT

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# news





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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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# Largest Tiger seizure ever in Malaysia

**Malaysia's wild tiger *Panthera tigris* population may be as high as 500, making it one of the most significant countries globally for tiger conservation. However, poaching and commercial trade poses an urgent and critical threat; having the potential to cause the greatest damage in the shortest span of time. While Malaysia has adequate legislation, implementation and enforcement of the laws are hampered by the lack of suitable convictions to serve as deterrents.**

On 10 February 2012, acting on a tip, officers from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks raided a house in Kota Setar, in the Malaysian state of Kedah made what turned out to be Malaysia's largest seizure of tiger *Panthera tigris* parts ever, representing at least 22 tigers - the equivalent to at least 4% of the estimated national tiger population in Malaysia.

Inside the house, the officers found bags of tiger parts, including eight skins and bags containing bones and skulls from a minimum of 22 tigers. This is the largest seizure of tiger parts since 2008 when 42 skins were seized from the Southern Viet Nam province of Binh Duong.

A 29 year old Malaysian male, Mohd Shahrizam Nor, was arrested and appeared in Alor Setar Sessions Court on 15 February where he was charged under 68 (2;c), Section 68 (2;c), and Section 68 (1;b) of the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 for being in possession of totally protected species. Mohd Shahrizam was said to be an odd job worker and welder in his village in Alor Setar, and when released on bail of MYR 70,000 (USD 23,000), paid the sum on the spot. During the course of the trial, Mohd Shahrizam Nor maintained that he was not the owner of the seized wildlife and had instead been keeping it for a Thai national. He nonetheless could not provide proper identification or contact details for the Thai national. The trial also revealed that the offender had gone to great lengths to pick up the wildlife from third parties, which he claimed he did not know and had only briefly met. There were no further probes into a possible wider network.

Under Peninsular Malaysia's Wildlife Conservation Act 2010, anyone convicted of possession of parts of totally protected wildlife, such as tiger skins and elephant ivory, faces a maximum fine of MYR 100,000 (USD 33,000) or up three years in jail or both, for each offence.

Along with the tiger parts, nine elephant tusks and one deer antler were also seized. Although forensics analysis confirmed the bones to be from tigers, no further examinations were conducted to determine the subspecies.

Given the size of the haul, the accused would have been looking at up to 13 years in jail and fines that could have exceeded a million Ringgit. After a trial that spanned an entire year, the accused was found guilty, but received a mere 24 month jail sentence and the presiding judge failed to impose a mandatory fine of MYR 200K (USD 66,700) upon conviction.

The leniency demonstrated in this case recalls earlier incidents in which convicted wildlife traffickers in Malaysia have received paltry punishments. For example, in 2005, a Malaysian man was convicted of possession of a five year old tiger, which was chopped into four parts and stuffed in a freezer in his home. The tiger was snared and shot repeatedly prior to being butchered. The accused, Tan Ang Chun, received a mere MYR 7,000 (USD 2,300) fine, which he paid immediately and walked out of court, smiling. At the time, the highest penalty under the Protection of Wildlife Act 1972 was an MYR 15,000 (USD 5,000) fine or up to two years in jail.

The Wildlife Conservation Act 2010, which came into force in 2011, gave hope to Malaysians that such low penalties for serious wildlife crimes would become a thing of the past. Yet, eight years later, this has failed to become a reality.

Malaysia has an estimated 500 tigers left in the wild (Kawanishi et al. 2010; Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers 2012). Remaining suitable habitat in Malaysia could support as many as 1000 tigers (DWNP 2008). This makes Malaysia a significant country for tiger conservation.

In 2008, the Malaysian government endorsed the National Tiger Conservation Action Plan



(NTCAP) as a blueprint to saving the Malayan Tiger. Within this Plan, enforcement ranks very high as a priority, as poaching for commercial illegal trade remains a key threat. TRAFFIC, a partner of the Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers (MYCAT), supports the implementation of the NTCAP, particularly in the implementation of aspects related to illegal hunting and trade of tigers.

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