

## Observations of Takin from wildlife markets in Myanmar and a call for further research

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### Introduction

Traditionally one species of Takin *Budorcas taxicolor* is recognised, with three or four subspecies, with an allopatric distribution from eastern India northern Myanmar and southern China. The species is assessed as being Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Song *et al.*, 2008), with the principle threat being habitat loss and hunting (Salter, 1997; Song *et al.*, 2008). We here report on the trade in Takin in Myanmar. Groves and Grubb (2011) revised Takin taxonomy and recognised four different species. The nominate occurs in northern Myanmar where they are confined to high-elevation rhododendron forests, bamboo forests and alpine meadows of Kachin State (Song *et al.* 2008; Nijman 2015). Takin regularly visit salt-licks which renders them very vulnerable to poachers who lay in ambush or who set iron traps. Takins seasonally migrate; in spring and early summer they gather in large groups and move to higher altitudes whereas in autumn and winter they break down in smaller groups and move to forested areas at lower altitudes. Altitudinal migration and gathering in large groups makes them vulnerable to poaching (Schaller *et al.*, 1986; Song *et al.*, 1997).

In Myanmar, Takin are protected under the Protection of wildlife and protected areas law (1994). However, poaching occurs (Salter, 1997; Rabinowitz and Saw Tun Khaing, 1998; Nijman 2015), and is likely a major threat to their survival in Myanmar.

According to Rabinowitz and Saw Tun Khaing (1998), this species was still considered to be common in mountainous forests in the Hkhakabo-Razi Wildlife Sanctuary, where local hunters reported seeing groups as small as 5–10, and as large as 50–60 individuals. Rao *et al.* (2010), based on data collected in 2004–2005 from the same area, considered the species to be rare, and, overall, the populations are more recently considered to be in decline, largely due to hunting for their meat (Song *et al.*, 2008). More recently, Nijman (2015), providing an overview of surveys conducted in the Imawbum Mountains in Kachin State bordering China between 2010 and 2014, noted that tracks and feeding signs of Takin were recorded eight times. Records came from all months of the year (April, twice, March, May, twice, October, November and December) and from elevations between 2,500 – 3,200 m asl. Sites where Takin sign was observed included salt licks where Takins obtain minerals.

Illegal wildlife trade is widespread in Myanmar, with many species being traded openly, often in well-known wildlife markets catering to locals, but more often, to buyers from neighbouring countries (Shepherd, 2001; Shepherd and Nijman, 2007). Rabinowitz and Saw Tun Khaing (1998) stated that Takin were heavily hunted, and mentioned the horns and skins were purchased by Chinese traders. Rao *et al.* (2010) recorded 2 sets of horns and one batch of Takin meat during eight months of field work in Hkhakabo-Razi. Min (2012) observed a total of 29 Takin skull and horns in four towns in Kachin over a four year period between 2007 and 2010, including eight in the Myanmar-China border town of Laiza. Nijman (2015) reported observations of carcasses, full skulls, frontal plates (set of horns attached to the frontal portion of the skull), dried skins in the villages and hunting camps in the Imawbum Mountains and reported that most Takin were caught using iron traps or, less commonly, guns. Information provided by the hunters and villagers suggested that

parts were sold on to Chinese-owned timber companies operating in the area, or directly to Chinese traders across the border in Yunnan.

Unfortunately, there is little information on the illegal trade in Takin and of the impact on wild populations. This note provides observations of Takin parts observed during inventories carried out by us in Myanmar, which will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of the threats this species faces, and to further conservation efforts to ensure this species is not lost from Myanmar.

## Methods

We carried out surveys of wildlife trade in markets within Myanmar, especially along the border with China and Thailand. Specifically, four major wildlife markets have been surveyed, with two (Tachilek and Three Pagodas Pass) being on the border with Thailand, one (Mong La) being on the border with China, and one (Golden Rock, a. k.a. Kyaik-tiyo) in the interior. Full inventories were made five times in Tachilek (1999, 2000, 2006, 2009, 2013), four times in Mong La (2006, 2009, 2014, 2015), twice in Golden Rock (2000, 2015) and once in Three Pagodas Pass. While none of the surveys focused on any species in particular (though more information, such as prices, buyers, etc was gathered for certain species, such as bears, Tigers and elephants, due largely to project priorities), all species were recorded during each survey. Details of the parts and products of each were recorded.

Here we report on the number of surveys carried out, and on observations of Takin parts observed, and the absence of Takin parts in other markets. It is important to note that many of these markets were far from Takin habitat, but given species from as far away as Africa have been observed in this market, this is not seen as an issue. Wildlife is often sold closest to where the demand is, not necessarily closest to where the species originated. Having said that, lower-value species are not often transported great distances.

## Observations

Tachilek – This market caters largely to tourists from Thailand and East Asia. In the past, the wildlife trade in this market was significant, but has declined greatly over the past two decades (Nijman and Shepherd 2014). A total of 89 sets of Takin horns (horns still attached to the top of the skull) were observed openly for sale. In 1999, 43 sets were observed, in 2000, 39 sets were observed and in 2006, seven sets were observed. None were observed in 2009 and 2013. As the numbers of Takin horns observed in this market declined over the years, so too did the overall wildlife trade in this market, with the most recent surveys finding very little trade in any species. In the late 1990s, this market had Tiger *Panthera tigris* and Leopard *P. pardus* skins, Eld's Deer *Rucervus eldii* antlers, Gaur *Bos gaurus* and many other trophies from protected and highly threatened species openly displayed for sale, but by 2013, the vast majority of the trade in these species was gone, with only small amounts of smaller, less threatened species remained. The number of shops selling wildlife in this market was 35 in 2000, but had dwindled to only six by 2013 (Nijman and Shepherd, 2014).

Three Pagodas Pass – This small market caters largely to buyers from Thailand, with wildlife sold largely for trophies and ornamental purposes, and to a lesser extent, for use in traditional medicines. One complete inventory was carried out in 2006 and no Takin parts were observed.

Mong La – This is most likely the largest wildlife market in Myanmar, selling wildlife for use in traditional medicines, for food and for luxury purposes (trophies, decorations) to buyers from China. During four complete inventories carried out in this market no Takin parts were observed.

Golden Rock (Kyaik-tiyo) – This market sells wildlife parts largely for use in traditional medicines to locals and foreigners. During complete inventories carried out in 2000 and again in 2015 no Takin parts were observed.

## **Discussion**

There are six species of Caprinae found in Myanmar (Shepherd and Shepherd, 2012) – more than any other country in Southeast Asia and all of which poached for local consumption and for commercial trade. Sadly, like many species in Myanmar, especially those that are not ‘high profile species’, such as Tiger and Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus*, there has been little attention given to their status and conservation needs, no matter how dire the situation may be.

While these surveys showed that Takin were only observed in one of the four markets surveyed, it is hoped that these observations provide some baseline data, and encourage others surveying wildlife markets in Myanmar to pay attention to the trade in this and other little known species.

A total of 89 sets of Takin horns were observed in one of the markets surveyed in Myanmar, however, overall there is very little information available on the trade of Takin, or any of the Caprinae species in Myanmar. Furthermore, there is very little information on the impact trade is having on wild populations. While it is generally thought that Takin are in decline and becoming scarce, the lack of detailed information impairs planning and prioritisation of conservation actions. Clearly, more research into the hunting and trade of Takin, and other Caprinae species, in Myanmar is imperative. Furthermore, information, including trade from Myanmar to neighbouring countries, is essential to formulate enforcement strategies to reduce illegal trade within Myanmar and across international borders. As such, the most pertinent recommendation from this note is a call for resources to support further research into the impacts of hunting and trade on Takin in Myanmar, and the development of a strategy to reduce trade and to ultimately secure the future for this species in Myanmar.

There do not appear to have been any law enforcement actions involving poaching or trade in Takin in Myanmar (Nay Myo Shwe, pers. comms. To Chris R. Shepherd, 21 June, 2016). It is hoped that future observations of this species in trade lead to actions being taken to deter further illegal poaching and trade of this species. All observations of this species in trade in the future should be reported immediately to the relevant authorities, in support of their efforts to reduce the threat of illegal wildlife trade in Myanmar.

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