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WILDLIFE WATCH

Baby Elephant's Death a Grim Reminder of Lack of Wilderness

In this week's crime blotter: Elephant calf chews on firecracker, bear parts seized, and police nab a suspected tiger poacher.



A baby elephant died in June in India after chewing on a firecracker meant to keep wild animals away from a farm.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THEO ALLOFS, MINDEN PICTURES, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE

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By **Jani Actman**

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A three-year-old Asian elephant made a tragic mistake. Last month it strayed onto a farm Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, chewed on a firecracker that exploded, and later died from its injuries, reports *The Indian Express*.

Now police have arrested a man whom they suspect illegally kept the explosives on his farm. Law enforcement officers say that a preliminary investigation revealed that the farmer didn't intend to target elephants but rather wild boars that were eating and trampling his crops.

It's not the first time an elephant in India has become a casualty of explosives. Back in 2003, an elephant died after eating an explosives-covered fruit ball. Another died in 2009 after biting on a fire cracker.

The incidents highlight the lack of wild spaces in a country that's brimming with people. India holds 60 percent of the world's Asian elephants, estimated at 27,000, and only about 20 percent of them live in protected areas. The country's human population exceeded 1.3 billion in 2015, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Population Reference Bureau.

Shrinking habitat results in more and more of the animals passing through human settlements and stumbling onto farms, where they eat crops and uproot and scatter almost as many of them. As a result, people kill 40 to 50 elephants each year. (On the flip side, elephants kill 100 to 300 people annually). Asian elephants, which are endangered, also have to contend with poaching for their ivory, meat, and skins.

Here are other wildlife crime busts, convictions, and investigations around the world announced this past week:

BEAR PARTS: Wildlife rangers in Sabah, a state on the Malaysian island of Borneo, arrested two men allegedly in possession of various bear parts, according to Malaysia's *New Straits Times Online*. The eight bear paws, two bear gall-bladders, and eight teeth are suspected of coming from two Malayan sun bears, whose numbers are believed to be in decline in the wild because of deforestation and the illegal trade in their body parts.

TIGER POACHING: Police busted a man accused of poaching a tiger in the Pilibhit tiger reserve, in Uttar Pradesh, a state in northern India, *The Times of India* reports. Five of the man's suspected accomplices escaped, according to a forest officer. Poaching in the reserve has reduced the number of tigers there to an estimated 23 in 2013, down from 40 in 2010. The animals are killed for their bones, for tiger wine, a potion that's claimed with no validity to treat rheumatism and impotence, and for their magnificent pelts.

GIRAFFE TAILS: Poachers killed three giraffes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Garamba National Park. Documentary filmmaker David Hamlin captured exclusive video footage of the aftermath of the killings. Congolese usually kill the giraffes for one body part: their tails, considered a status symbol in some communities. Meanwhile men from neighboring South Sudan target the giraffes for their meat to feed impoverished villagers.

LOOTING LOGGERS: Law enforcement personnel nabbed three people suspected of illegally logging red sanders trees in the Chittoor district, in Andhra Pradesh, a state in India, *The Hans India* reports. Members of the red sanders anti-smuggling unit recovered 58 logs. The trees are endemic to India and valued for the rich red color of the wood.

This story was produced by National Geographic's Special Investigations Unit, which focuses on wildlife crime and is made possible by grants from the BAND Foundation, and the Woodtiger Fund. Read more stories from the SIU on Wildlife Watch. Send tips, feedback and story ideas to ngwildlife@ngs.org.

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