

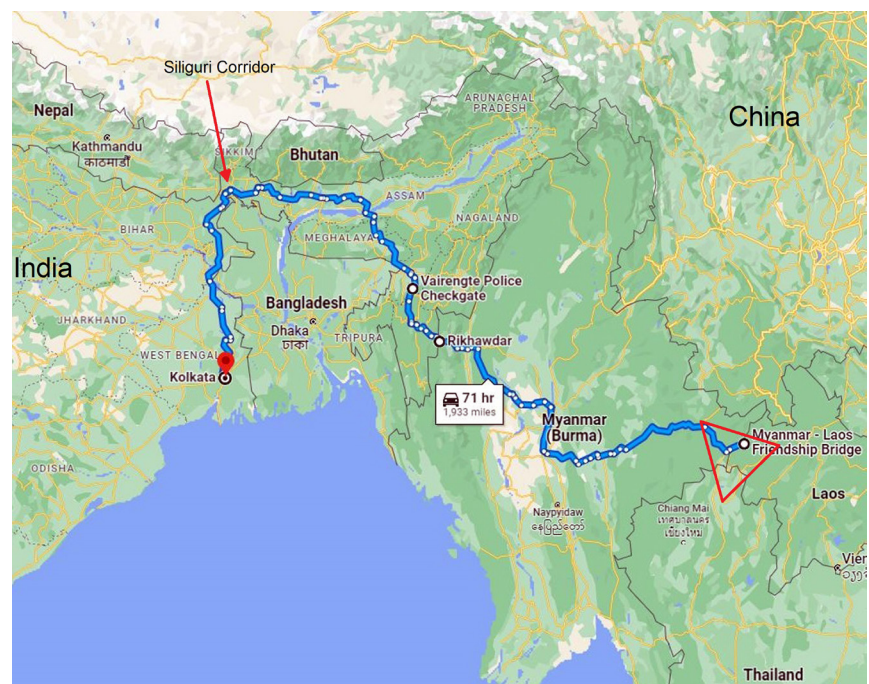
# Illegal trade of exotic wildlife along the porous borders of northeastern Indian states

Wildlife smuggling is estimated to be worth up to \$20 billion annually (Nellemann et al. 2016). Dead parts of the animals such as skin, bone, teeth, and fur are used for various traditional beliefs while live wildlife are used for meat, and as pet animals. As a result of strict enforcement of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, there has been reduction in the demand for some scheduled species in India, but there has been an upsurge in the demand for exotic wildlife species as they are not included in the act. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India has declared a voluntary disclosure scheme in June 2020 to identify the host of exotic wildlife species as a precautionary step to check and isolate Covid infected wildlife. Surprisingly, the ministry received 32,000 applications by February 2021, which is an indication of the wildlife pet markets in India.

Wild species from southern and southeastern Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal,

Bhutan, Indonesia, and Malaysia), Africa, South America, and Australia are in huge demand in the pet markets of India. The market values of wildlife species for use as pets are high since many species perish during transit, forcing the remaining ones to be sold at a higher price to offset the expense of the dead (Rosen & Smith 2010; Baker et al. 2013). The species are brought to Bangladesh and Myanmar through the surface and sea routes depending on the origin of the species and reach India illegally through porous transnational borders.

The trafficking record can be understood by the fact that a man captured by the Bangladesh Police is believed to be involved in the killing of 70 Royal Bengal Tiger from the mangrove forests of Sundarban (Aljazeera 2021). The exotic species and their articles are illegally brought to Kolkata, West Bengal through the Siliguri corridor and transported to other metropolitan cities, mainly Chennai, Mumbai, and Delhi. Siliguri corridor has a strategic location, as it is close to neighboring Bhutan,



Transportation roads from Golden Triangle to Kolkata, India. © N.R. Talukdar.



Some of the exotic wildlife seized by Assam and Mizoram police. © Assam and Mizoram Police Department.

Nepal, and Bangladesh and it also connects northeastern parts of India with the rest of the country. After several raids in West Bengal by both central and state agencies, and strict restrictions on the Meghalaya (India)-Bangladesh border during Covid-19, the illegal traders followed a detour, where the animals were brought to India through Mizoram, a northeastern state bordering Myanmar.

Champai, a border district of Mizoram is attracted to the smuggler because of its topographical features. It is always difficult to find out the international rackets of smuggling, as people involved in the transportation of wild species are unaware of the sources and are just responsible for transporting them from one point to another. The smugglers also often

changed the route to avoid checking at specific points. Although clear evidence is not available, it is believed that the infamous Golden Triangle (connecting areas among Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos) is linked to the transportation of exotic species from different continents (DRI 2020, 2021).

Around 723 exotic animals were seized in Champai district of Mizoram between January and October 2022 (Vanlalruata 2022a). It is worth mentioning that both Myanmar and Bangladesh respectively have 318 km and 510 km unfenced borders with Mizoram, although guarded by the Border Security Forces (BSF) and Assam Rifles, the Indian military wings. The reports published by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence of India under the name

“Smuggling In India Report 2019–2020” and “Smuggling in India Report 2020–21” and many seized reports (Guha 2022; Zaman 2022) show a glimpse of seizing wild species that include Red Kangaroo *Osphranter rufus*, Capuchin Monkey *Cebus* spp., Silvery Marmoset *Mico argentatus*, Golden-headed Lion Tamarin *Leontopithecus chrysomelas*, Wallaby *Notamacropus* spp., Chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes*, Slow Loris *Nycticebus* spp., Moor Macaque *Macaca maura*, Lesser Spot-nosed Guenon *Cercopithecus petaurista*, Debrazza Monkey *Cercopithecus neglectus*, Turtles, Tortoises, Blue Macaw/Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*, and other many avian species. Between September to November 2022, on three different occasions, Orangutan, De Brazza’s Monkey, and some other exotic animals were found abandoned in the Assam-Mizoram border areas of India (Assam Tribune 2022; Barak Bulletin 2022).

It is difficult to identify their source of origin as many such species are grown in breeding centers in southern Asian countries and thus deporting back to their destination is a challenging task. The Assam State Zoo-cum-Botanical Garden in Guwahati and Aizawl Zoological Park, Mizoram are the destination of the seized wildlife species. The constant effort of police has resulted in the induction of Mizoram Police into the World Book of Records, London for tackling wildlife smuggling activities (Vanlalruata 2022b).

The Government of India (2022) recently amended the National Wildlife (Protection) Act (WPA) 1972, and incorporated a new chapter, “CHAPTER VB,” to regulate the export and import of species listed under the Convention

on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The species listed under Appendices I and II of CITES have also been included under Schedule IV of the WPA to bring them under an umbrella act. The Act provides for the establishment of a Scientific Authority to advise the Managing Authority (designated to issue trade permits under the Amended Act) to restrict the grant of trade permits to species based on the status of their wild population and also increase the penalty in case of Act violations. With the implementation of the Act, the illegal wildlife trade in the country can be brought under control.

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