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HOW A RAIL LINK WITH CHINA
SUPERCHARGED AN ILLEGAL WILDLIFE
TOURISM INDUSTRY IN LAOS

JULY 2025

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SUMMARY

This report presents compelling evidence that Laos has become an essential stockpile consolidation and market access node in the transnational trafficking of endangered wildlife. Through a sophisticated retail system intertwined with the tourism industry, Laos is fuelling a criminal market for illegal wildlife products potentially worth hundreds of millions of US dollars annually. This investigation, undertaken in collaboration with Mongabay, has confirmed a network of 18 large-scale retail venues operating under the cover of cultural centres, museums and legitimate business fronts that systematically market and sell illicit wildlife products to Chinese tourists. Rhino horn, ivory, tiger parts, pangolin scales and bear products are clandestinely sold through a supply chain that spans continents: sourced from Africa, South East Asia and North Korea, moved through sophisticated logistics networks and delivered into the hands of predominantly Chinese consumers through tourism itineraries masked as cultural getaways.

Laos has long been a hotspot for illegal wildlife trafficking, most prominently through the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which was central to Laos's wildlife crime boom in the 2000s.¹ The global expansion of illegal wildlife trade (IWT) networks from Laos has been linked to transnational criminal syndicates such as the Xaysavang network,² known for its role in rhino horn and ivory trafficking. Informants and investigative reports have indicated that this network, along with affiliated shell companies, has received de facto protection through joint ventures and profit-sharing arrangements with Lao state officials, particularly in the form of kickbacks funnelled through casino and tourism operations in SEZs.³ This pattern of corruption and criminality is supported by two major indices: Laos scored just 33/100 and ranked 114th in Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index,⁴ reflecting deep-rooted governance weaknesses. Similarly, the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index highlighted state-embedded corruption and low resilience to criminal syndicates operating within Laos.⁵

Despite global pressure, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) sanctions and international aid to Laos for conservation and governance, IWT has not been reduced in any meaningful way.⁶ Laos has been a CITES party since 2004, yet limited enforcement capacity has allowed wildlife trafficking to continue unabated. The country has received upward of US\$81 million in foreign aid since 2015 from governments and multilateral donors – including the US, EU, UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) – aimed at countering IWT,⁷ as well as enforcement training from bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN). Nevertheless, IWT continues almost openly, suggesting those efforts have not fundamentally reduced trade.

In 2020, Laos approved a National Ivory Action Plan,⁸ again demonstrating the country's intent to improve law enforcement efforts to prevent ivory sales. However, no centralized storage or registry system was established for seized wildlife products, and items were held by the agency that conducted the seizure, undermining transparency and accountability in stockpile management.

Since 2023, Laos has been under a recommendation by CITES to suspend all commercial trade in CITES-listed species due to non-compliance with the convention.⁹ Reports of continuously increasing IWT in Laos highlight that even with formal pressures in place, the country lacks the domestic mechanisms and political will to enforce the measures.¹⁰

A key driver of the recent surge in IWT, the tourism industry-linked system of superstores described in this report, is the China–Laos Railway, launched in 2021 under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the railway has enhanced regional connectivity, it has also enabled mass tourism from China and become a high-capacity trafficking infrastructure for IWT. After the railway opened for cross-border service in April 2023, Chinese tourist numbers surged from around 45 000 in 2022 to over 1 million in 2024,¹¹ with growth projections suggesting up to 1.3 million Chinese visitors in 2025.¹² Organized tours, run by Chinese and Laotian operators, bring visitors to known IWT-linked sites using coded language and scripted disclaimers. These shops operate with apparent impunity, sometimes disguised as government or military-linked premises, and in some cases with the presence of armed personnel in military garb.

The arrival of cross-border transport infrastructure, coupled with Chinese demand for illicit wildlife commodities, has transformed Laos into a key trafficking corridor, both as a market and as a transit state. Although the acquisition, sale and transport of these products are violations of Laotian, Chinese and international law, enforcement remains absent or obstructed. Without urgent action, both from within Laos and through sustained international pressure on demand and supply chains, the country risks cementing its role as a strategic node in this transnational criminal economy.

Methodology

This report investigates the existence of a network of IWT superstores in Laos originally brought to the GI-TOC by Mongabay, and jointly investigated with them, including through site visits by Mongabay journalists.

Our investigation draws on multilingual open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysis, which corroborates information provided by confidential informants, namely individuals with expertise in IWT in Laos who have personally participated in tours and visited the sites. Our investigations included reviews of English, Laotian and Chinese-language forums; tourism websites; social media platforms (such as Douyin); and media outlets. Web searches were conducted using keywords in multiple languages, including 'rhino horn Laos' (老挝 犀牛角), 'pangolin Laos' (老挝 穿山甲), 'shopping tour Laos' (老挝 购物游) and 'Angong Niu Huang Wan [rhino horn pills] Laos' (老挝 安宫牛黄丸). Although a variety of sources were used, the most revealing information came from videos on Douyin (Chinese TikTok). The videos openly display IWT sites, product offerings, tourist behaviour, tour guide behaviour and, in many cases, the full script of the tours from start to finish. Many of the images presented in this report are compiled from videos posted on the platform.

Site geolocation was conducted by cross-referencing informant-provided location names, descriptions and approximate coordinates with satellite imagery, Google Maps and visual landmark matches from videos of IWT-linked tours. We searched for tour itineraries that contained one or more of the known IWT sites to investigate the language they used and patterns in key words and terms they used to reference the sites. Where possible, we examined the ownership of the establishments through the Laos Ministry of Industry and Commerce's Department of Enterprise Registration and Management website.¹³

In addition, local and international media sources, NGO reports and published scholarly literature in multiple languages were analyzed to understand the structure of tour operations, product sourcing and pricing, and connections to known trafficking routes and stockpiles.

Requests asking for comment on the contents of this report were sent to tour operators and sites where IWT was being sold, where contact details were publicly available or obtainable. No responses to any of the requests for comment were received. If such responses are later received, they will be published online.

Finally, to estimate the economic scale of IWT linked to Chinese tourism in Laos, we developed a bottom-up revenue model based on tourist purchasing behaviour in online videos, tour operator itinerary patterns and product pricing. We began by analyzing 30 videos from the platforms Douyin and Xiaohongshu, which showed tourists visiting known IWT-linked venues between October 2023 and May 2025. Across 13 videos that clearly displayed visitor groups at wildlife counters, the average group size was approximately 15.6 people. Using this average and an estimate of four tour group visits per day during an assumed high season of 180 days,¹⁴ we approximated a total seasonal tourist footfall of 11 200 visitors to IWT venues. Note that given the modus operandi described in this report, these customers have been profiled and vetted as probable consumers of IWT. We then modelled five purchasing scenarios ranging from 5% to 50% of these visitors making at least one IWT purchase based on qualitative reports and market dependency on tourist traffic. Buyers were distributed across five product categories (see Figure 1) with prices based on receipts detected in videos and reported prices from literature. These prices included:

- rhino horn at US\$600 per gram and average purchase of 10 grams;
- Angong Niu Huang Wan (ANW) rhino-horn pills at US\$500 per box;¹⁵
- ivory jewellery at US\$400 per item;¹⁶
- tiger parts at US\$1 500 per item;¹⁷ and
- bear bile at US\$300 per item.¹⁸

Buyer shares are modelled based on product price, availability and observed prominence in Chinese-language tour itineraries and video footage. Ivory jewellery is assigned the highest share due to its low cost, widespread visibility and cultural acceptability among tourists. Rhino horn, while expensive, is also extremely prominent throughout the shops and ANW pills also remain prominent despite high prices, owing to their persistent marketing as luxury or medicinal items. Bear bile products occupy a lower tier due to their strong traditional medicine associations and moderate cost. Tiger parts, while expensive, are comparatively less prominent across the IWT venues and thus allocated the smallest share of buyers across scenarios.

Product	5% scenario	10% scenario	20% scenario	30% scenario	50% scenario
Rhino horn (raw)	15%	20%	25%	30%	35%
ANW rhino pills	15%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Ivory jewellery	25%	30%	35%	35%	35%
Bear bile products	10%	13%	12%	12%	12%
Tiger teeth/parts	5%	7%	8%	8%	8%
Total buyers	5%	10%	20%	30%	50%

FIGURE 1 Modelled buyer purchasing scenarios.

Key findings

- At least 18 large-scale, professionally branded shopping sites linked to IWT are operational across Laos (Appendix I), receiving a conservative estimate of 11 000 visitors per year.
- In many cases, these are large superstores or warehouses, with layouts sometimes over 2 000 square metres, set up with professional jewellery display cases.
- These sites include cultural centres, museums and IWT shops disguised as coffee shops and jewellers. Many offer rhino horn, elephant ivory, tiger parts, live pangolins, pangolin scales and bear parts (bile, gall bladder and oils).
- Tour operators funnel Chinese tourists to these shops under the guise of 'cultural experiences', creating a commission-based economy that depends on the sale of illegal wildlife products. These operators actively facilitate the trade by including IWT shopping opportunities in their tour itineraries and disguising it as legitimate tourism in their marketing materials.
- Within the shops, imagery of Laotian military personnel, Chinese and Laotian government officials and official agency logos are used to create the appearance that the commercial activities are state-sanctioned.
- Although it has provided a high-quality infrastructure upgrade between the two countries, the China–Laos Railway has also created new, low-risk channels for large-scale trafficking, despite reportedly high security screening on the train itself.
- Potential revenue streams from this IWT tourism system range from millions to tens of millions of US dollars, even with conservative estimates.
- While the tour companies and superstores use some coded language, and the stores bar entry to non-Chinese nationals, the existence of this industry was easy for our analysts to detect on social media and should not have been difficult for mandated state authorities to uncover in the Laotian cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

The rapid emergence of new shops following the launch of the railway, the seamless integration with Chinese-language tour operators, and the use of sleek, well-funded retail fronts all point to an illicit tourism economy that is not only coordinated but exceptionally well planned. The marketing tactics used by tour operators, the apparent volume of tourist visits and purchases, and the evident illegality of the products (under Laotian, Chinese and international law) suggest the emergence of a highly coordinated illicit tourism economy. That so many venues registered and became operational within a year of the railway's opening (complete with dedicated tour logistics, bus networks and receipt-issuing storefronts) strongly suggests significant levels of planning, inter-actor coordination and financial investment. Although the extent of political awareness or protection remains unclear, the sheer visibility, scale and sophistication of this network raise serious questions about both potential government complicity and the structural failure of enforcement.



THE LAOS ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE TOURISM CIRCUIT

The China–Laos Railway, a flagship project of China's BRI,¹⁹ was inaugurated in December 2021 to link Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, with Vientiane, Laos's capital city.²⁰ While its economic benefits include a significant infrastructure upgrade and increased bilateral trade capacity, the railway has also catalyzed a boom in cross-border tourism.²¹ This tourism surge has accelerated the development of a parallel criminal economy, most notably centred on IWT.

The railway's launch coincided with Laos's gradual reopening to international tourism in early 2022, following COVID-19 lockdowns, and was identified as a key economic recovery pathway.²² By mid-2022, group tours for Chinese nationals had resumed, with packages advertised around the China–Laos Railway offering cultural and shopping itineraries. This created conditions for a coordinated trafficking infrastructure to flourish, enabled by weak governance and a lack of enforcement.

This pattern is not unique to Laos. Major infrastructure projects, particularly in under-regulated or high-corruption environments, can inadvertently facilitate organized criminal activity by reducing transit times, expanding market access and embedding illicit economies within licit development corridors.²³ Parallel IWT issues have already been documented within the BRI across Asia, where newly developed rail-linked corridors and land concessions have been exploited to traffic pangolin scales and tiger parts into China, enabled by weak border enforcement and governance gaps in host countries.²⁴

How the tours work

Chinese and Chinese-speaking Laotian tour operators offer group itineraries lasting five to nine days, which are marketed as cultural, panoramic tours of Laos. They target primarily elderly tourists and promote travel through the China–Laos Railway. These tours promote visits to known IWT-linked venues using coded terms such as 'specialty product visit' (特产购物站), 'intangible heritage experience' (非遗体验) or simply 'tasting Laos coffee' (品尝老挝咖啡).

Several itineraries reference RC Coffee (荣昌咖啡) and Military Region Cultural Park (军区文化园) as places to 'taste Laotian handmade coffee and learn about folk crafts',²⁵ with 'shopping time' listed as 120 minutes. RC Coffee comprises a small bamboo hut with a coffee stand and a large, adjacent mall structure as the main attraction, whose logo and branding cannot be found anywhere else on web searches and are only present at the location. Similarly, the Lao Art Museum/Vientiane Art Museum (老挝艺术博物馆) is a 'redwood cultural

display site²⁶ with beautiful wood carvings. However, videos from the social media site Douyin reveal that the souvenir session at the end is used to funnel Chinese tourists into a backroom IWT shopping area²⁷ with agarwood, rhino horn and ivory openly for sale in display cases.²⁸

Another popular destination, the Luang Prabang Tourism and Cultural Promotion Center (琅勃拉邦文化旅游推广中心) is labelled as a 'coffee cultural experience' (咖啡文化体验) or 'resource museum' (资源博物馆) with references to tasting 'famous Phaksong coffee' (品尝帕松咖啡) and 'Laotian handicrafts' (老挝手工艺品).²⁹ It is also directly linked to Kinliao Coffee, which issues receipts for IWT products under its name and has been verified to sell rhino horn and North Korean bear bile products.³⁰

Some itineraries include the Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens (老挝国家民族风情文化园), presented as an 'ethnic weaving village' (民族文化村) with performances and teas, followed by souvenir shopping, which is described as part of 'cultural appreciation'.³¹

These tour companies adopt clever tactics to circumvent Chinese tourism law, which prohibits travel agencies from false advertising tours, organizing activities that violate Chinese law (including IWT) or arranging shopping experiences not agreed upon in advance.³² By stating that shops within scenic areas 'are not arranged by the agency' or that 'guides are not responsible for answering questions about products',³³ tour operators not only appear to mislead travellers but also attempt to construct plausible deniability, possibly in an attempt to avoid liability. Agencies continue to advertise IWT-linked sites using terms such as 'cultural promotion centres' (文化推广中心), 'sacred wood museums' (神木博物馆) and 'national treasure parks' (国宝博物馆), and provide guides that start and end with the group in China.

Tour leaders reportedly pre-register visitors using their passports, allowing shops to prepare for specific tourist groups in advance and streamline transactions. This use of official identification documents demonstrates the level of coordination involved, suggesting that the system is not designed for spontaneous IWT tourism, but to direct high-value customers to IWT-linked venues while preventing unwanted visitors.³⁴ It also appears that some Chinese tourists and tour operators have become aware of these types of group tours, as some Laos tours now find it necessary to specify 'no shopping' in their itineraries when taking similar routes.³⁵

On the tours, tourists are guided through typical Laotian landmarks, such as temples, ruins, historic buildings and natural features such as waterfalls, but are discreetly steered towards shopping stations disguised as cultural centres, museums, jewellery stores and coffee shops embedded within the tour. These establishments appear to serve largely as fronts for IWT shops that secretly sell lucrative elephant ivory, bear bile, pangolin scales, tiger parts, rhino horn and well-known 'traditional medicines' such as North Korean ANW pills, which frequently list rhino horn as a primary ingredient.³⁶

Chinese consumers are likely aware of the prominence of counterfeit IWT products circulating in Laos, which has been documented for over a decade.³⁷ According to Save the Rhinos, nearly 90% of rhino horn in circulation is fake.³⁸ As a result, ANW pills are often sold alongside raw rhino horn and rhino horn jewellery to assure customers of its authenticity.³⁹ Ivory products are typically verified by shining a light through them.⁴⁰ Products are often marketed as life-saving remedies and once in a lifetime purchases by skilled Chinese-speaking sales agents known as 'lecturers' (讲师),⁴¹ who blend cultural information, ecological misinformation and medical advice to encourage the purchase of rhino horn and other wildlife products.

Available evidence suggests that tour leaders book appointments with the shops in advance using travellers' passports, ensuring a steady flow of clients and that no outsiders enter the shops. Lecturers and shop clerks monitor visitors closely while in the shops, prohibiting photography when they see it. Prices are significantly inflated, with rhino horn reportedly selling for over US\$600 per gram,⁴² compared to the US\$17 per gram estimated average for Asian markets.⁴³ Some receipts for products in the shops show price tags of up to ¥54 810 (US\$7 600) for rhino horn⁴⁴ and ¥3 500 (US\$500) for ANW pills.⁴⁵

Purchase receipts are stamped and formatted to resemble official documentation, giving buyers the impression of legality, and tourists are often told they can take home up to 1 kilogram of goods without issue. Although the mechanisms of cross-border smuggling remain unclear, and train security between Laos and China is stringent, available evidence suggests that illicit products are moved separately through couriers or informal channels across porous border points rather than directly by tourists themselves.⁴⁶

The tour system is self-reinforcing: since these transactions occur openly at the sites and without enforcement, they appear legitimate. Tourists interpret the official-looking receipts, establishments and lecturer propaganda as evidence of legality, which builds trust. Sellers, in turn, exploit that trust and a fear of missing out to drive demand. In the absence of meaningful enforcement, the cycle continues unchallenged.

Tour operators

Tour operators advertising visits to known IWT sites include: Chongqing China International Travel Service (重庆中国国际旅行社),⁴⁷ Chongqing Meiya International Travel Agency (重庆美亚国际旅行社),⁴⁸ Uzai (众信旅游悠哉网),⁴⁹ Maoming International Travel (茂名国旅),⁵⁰ Shenzhen China Travel Service (深圳中国旅行社),⁵¹ Comfort Travel Network (康辉旅游),⁵² Vietnam Holidays (Shanghai Huayi International Travel Agency Co., Ltd.) (越南假期 – 上海华一国际旅行社有限公司),⁵³ Meiyu Travel – Henan Datang International Travel Service Co., Ltd. Zhongyuan Branch (美遇旅行 – 河南大唐国际旅行社有限公司中原分公司),⁵⁴ Ctrip self-operated (携程自营),⁵⁵ iFlying (飞扬旅游)⁵⁶ and Poetry and Painting Travel (深圳诗画旅游 / 拼游惠).⁵⁷

Each of the travel agencies involved in this illicit trade includes one or more known IWT-linked sites in their itineraries. Several discreetly acknowledge the presence of IWT shops, often waiving responsibility for the products sold or including vague disclaimers that suggest awareness of illicit activity. In some instances, the itineraries appear to use generalized names, such as ‘Laos ethnic park’ (万象国防部公馆), for the sites rather than the real names, since there are legitimate tourist destinations with similar names. This appears to be a tactic for illicit tour operators posing as legitimate tours. The deception lies in how the itineraries are structured. Trafficking-linked tours appear to mimic the format of legitimate Laos itineraries. For example, Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens is across the street from Luang Prabang Tourism and Cultural Promotion Center (Kinliao Coffee), so some itineraries present a tour sequence for a visit to ‘Laos ethnic park’ (万象国防部公馆) followed by ‘Laos Coffee Promotion Center’ (矿业免税店) in Luang Prabang, where there are no ‘ethnic parks’.⁵⁸ The legitimate sites they appear to be mimicking are in Vientiane, such as the National Ethnic Cultural Park and the Sinouk Coffee Pavilion.⁵⁹

The following are the observed characteristics of the confirmed IWT sites in Laos:

- Each site has a Chinese, or both Chinese and Laotian, name and Chinese and Laotian flags hanging from it. All signs appear to be primarily in Chinese text, with few in Laotian text.
- Most sites feign the appearance of legitimate businesses such as jewellery stores, coffee and tea shops, medicinal or naturopathic shops, furniture stores, cultural centres and museums. While such features may exist at some sites, all confirmed sites include areas where illicit products are sold.
- Most sites have shops embedded within them in a separate area. Access is only allowed for Chinese nationals on group tours by approved guides who send advanced notice. Many of the sites are gated and seemingly closed to the public.
- Many sites have imagery or signs of high-level Laotian and Chinese diplomats meeting and shaking hands, of Laotian officials in front of the facility, or portraits of Laotian officials and military personnel. Some sites have the official Luang Prabang Tourism Authority logo, adding to the appearance of state-sanctioned legitimacy.

- The Vientiane Museum of Contemporary Arts has had multiple visits by various diplomats,⁶⁰ as well as the current vice president of Laos (since 2021).
- Some sites have armed personnel in camouflage clothing, occasionally carrying firearms.
- Several sites have maps on the walls with lecturers who explain that their wildlife products (elephant ivory, bear products, rhino horn and pangolin products) are sourced locally in Laos and that there are no protections against their harvest or sale in the country.
- Open sale of rhino horn cross-sections, full rhino horns, rhino horn pills (ANW), elephant ivory products, tiger parts (bone, teeth and powders), bear oil/bile and gall bladders, as well as pangolin scales and live pangolins, was observed within shops. The most common products are overwhelmingly rhino horn, ANW, ivory products, and bear oil and gall bladders.
- Most sites present on Google Maps obscure their name and/or location. Most map names appear in Chinese text that does not match the name on the facilities themselves, indicating an attempt to conceal their presence. For example, RC Coffee is listed as 'Shopping Mall', and Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens is listed as 'Laos Nationality Park'.

Confirmed illegal wildlife trade superstore locations

Through an analysis of firsthand descriptions from informants, cross-referenced with videos, marketing materials and business listings available online, 18 IWT superstore locations were confirmed.

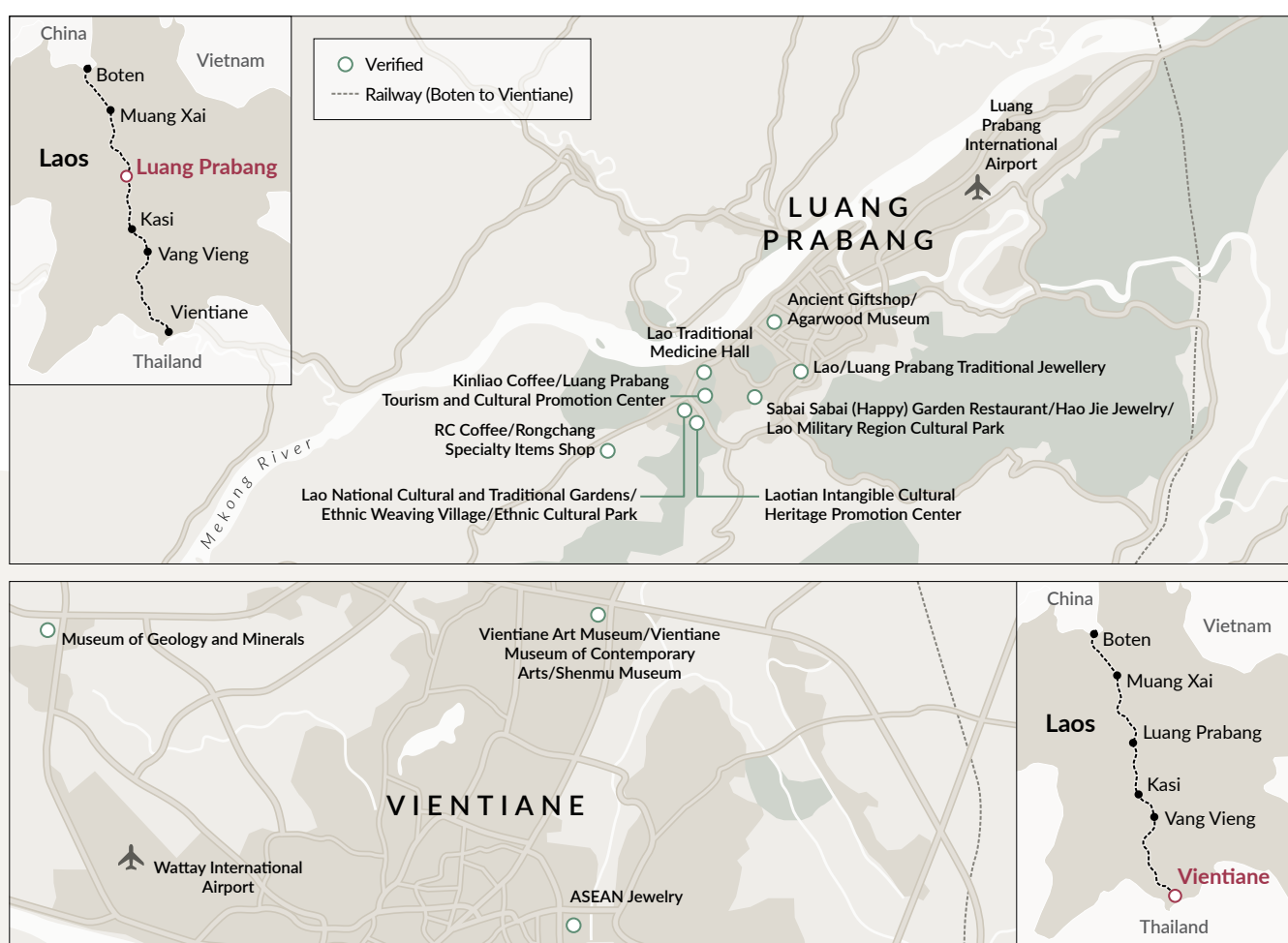
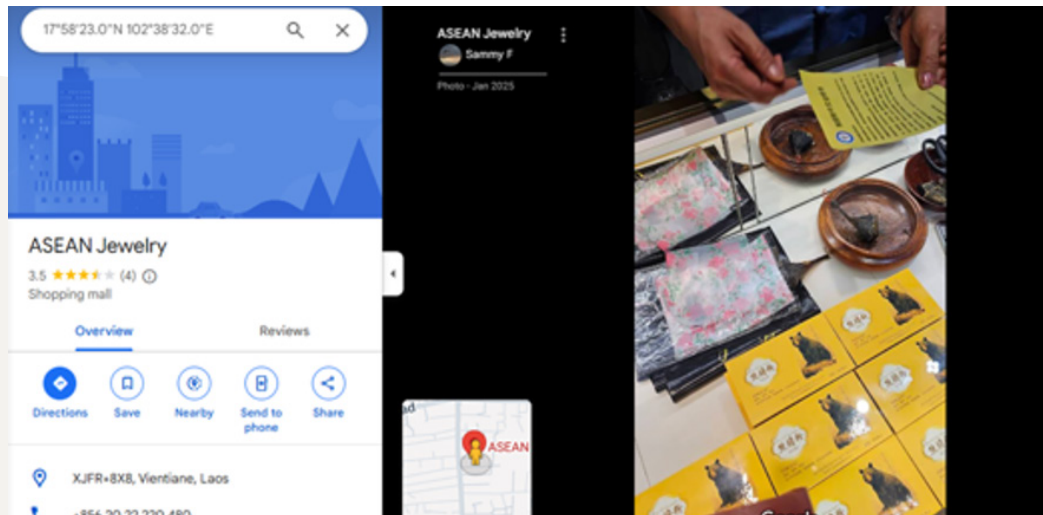


FIGURE 2 Confirmed sales points for illegal wildlife retailing in Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

ASEAN Jewelry

This site was confirmed by informant reporting and videos posted to Douyin showing bear bile and wildlife-derived traditional medicines displayed in-store. The shop appears in multiple Chinese-language travel itineraries. The Google Maps listing itself has reviews with photos of bear bile and gall bladder products (see images below).



Screenshot of the listing for ASEAN Jewelry in Vientiane on Google Maps,⁶¹ with a review photo showing bear bile and bear gall bladder products.

Kinliao Coffee/Luang Prabang Tourism and Cultural Promotion Center

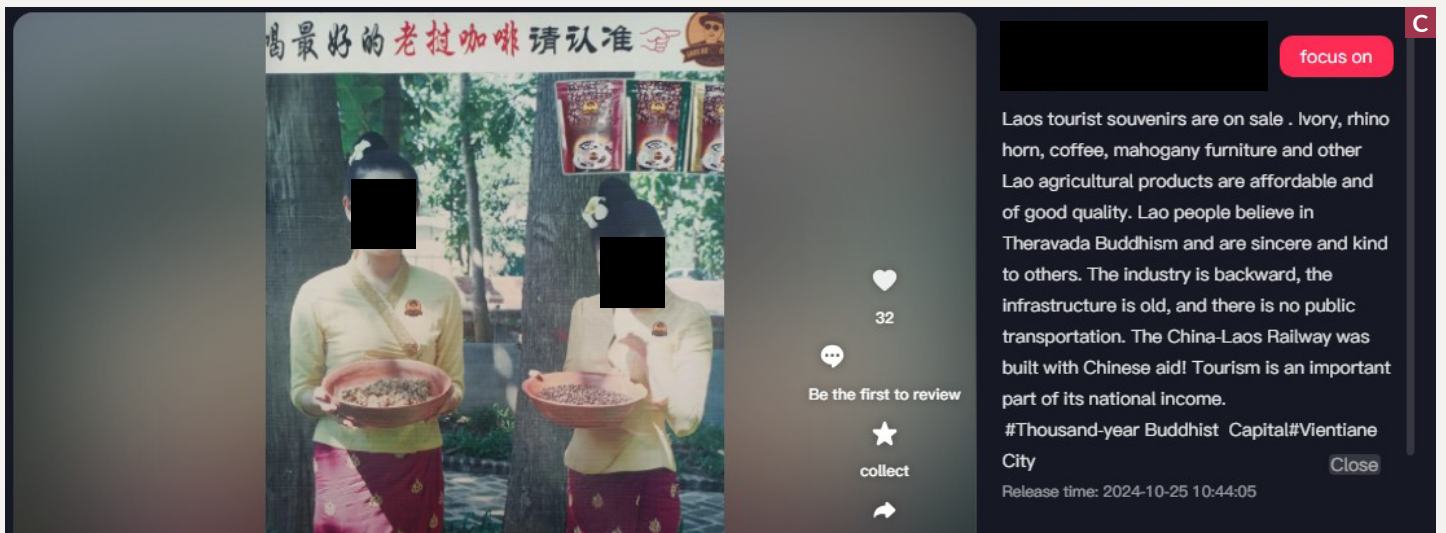
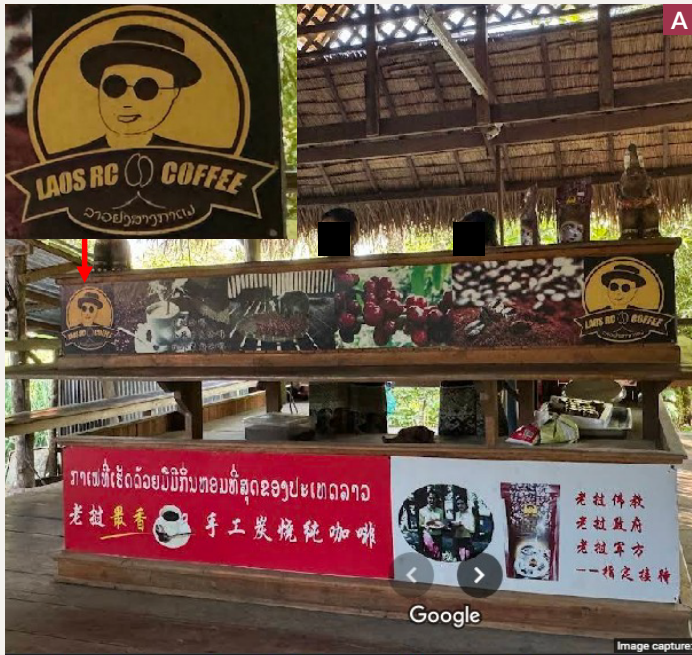
A routine stop on nearly all Chinese 'shopping tour' packages along the China–Laos Railway, this site is publicly promoted as a cultural centre, but evidence suggests that it operates as a front for IWT. Under the cover of a café named Kinliao Coffee (see images below), which itself is listed as a 'jewellery store' on Google Maps,⁶² the shop sells rhino horn, ivory, North Korean-labelled bear bile and ANW pills, and issues invoices under its name. It appears to be exclusively targeted at Chinese tourists, with no evidence of non-Chinese-speaking visitors. Chinese-language tour itineraries, videos posted to the Douyin platform and posts on Meipian show tour guides escorting groups into the location, followed by footage of buyers in a showroom openly displaying wildlife products and their receipts of purchase.⁶³

RC Coffee/Rongchang Specialty Items Shop

This site was identified through Chinese-language tour itineraries and visually matched in videos posted to Douyin showing RC Coffee with descriptions of purchasing rhino horn and ivory products on site. The site is promoted as a 'specialty shopping stop' across multiple platforms catering to Chinese tour groups. On Google Maps, this site is listed as 'Rongchang Specialty Shop' (特产商店 荣昌) and is labelled as a 'shopping mall'.⁶⁴ This venue seems stricter than others about allowing photography and video inside the facility and is gated from public access. As a result, the only evidence of sales within are video accounts and online descriptions explaining what can be found inside. One Douyin video, for example, shows a tourist pointing directly at a building within the RC Coffee shopping area, while the video description indicates the tourist may have been coerced into purchasing rhino horn for ¥17 000 (US\$2 300) (see images below).⁶⁵



Douyin video screen captures of (A/B) Luang Prabang Tourism and Cultural Promotion Center/Kinliao Coffee (the 'Luang Prabang Timeless' logo is the official government tourism authority logo);⁶⁶ (C/D) sale of rhino horn with a receipt labelled 'Kinliao Coffee' for ¥54 810 (US\$7 600); (E/F/G) the shop also sells bear bile/oil and gall bladder, ANW pills and ivory jewellery; (H) a shopkeeper is shown holding a light to a cross-section of rhino horn to emphasize authenticity; the white logo on the lower images reads: 'Cultural Promotion Department of Luang Prabang Military Region, Laos' in Chinese.



The photographs and screenshots above were taken from Douyin: (A) a coffee stand at RC Coffee/Rongchang Specialty Items Shop with its yellow logo featuring a man in a black hat and sunglasses, with 'Laos RC Coffee' in English and Lao text below it; (B) another view of the main building encompassing RC Coffee; (C) a Douyin video screenshot with a user image of the RC Coffee sign explaining ivory, rhino horn and other products are for sale here; (D) a screenshot from the same structure as (A) explaining that the poster purchased ¥17 000 (US\$2 300) worth of rhino horn here (note the RC Coffee logo on the sign in the back), while the person filming points at the main building shown in (B).

Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens

This location is cited in most, if not all, Chinese tour operator itineraries. Posts and videos on social media platforms show ivory jewellery and trinkets, rhino horn and ANW pills, and bear oils/pills on display (see images below). The shop's true purpose is hidden under cultural pretexts where the tours first provide an overview of historical Laotian culture, cultural dances and shows, and then conclude by inviting tourists to drink coffee or tea and visit the souvenir shop, which contains floor and wall exhibits of wildlife products.



(A) The entrance to the Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens, as seen on Google Maps; (B) the end segment of the tour where a lecturer provides tea and describes products in the shop, with a map behind him supposedly showing where bear, rhino and elephant products originate in Laos, and a poster to the right describing the ANW pills that originate from North Korea; (C) professionally branded bear bile products; (D/F) North Korean ANW pills manufactured by Koryo Chilbo Pharmacy; (G) a shop clerk putting plastic wrap smeared with bear oil (E) around a tourist's leg for product testing.⁶⁷

Sabai Sabai (Happy) Garden Restaurant/Hao Jie Jewelry

This site was confirmed through informant interviews and Chinese social media posts indicating the presence of rhino horn, ivory and bear products. Videos posted to Douyin typically include only the shopfront, as the posters say heavily armed guards (see images below) would not allow them to take any photos inside. This is corroborated by several social media posts on Meipan, which refer to the location as the ‘Military Cultural Park’,⁶⁸ or the ‘enterprise run by the Laotian Ministry of Defence’.⁶⁹



(A) The small building next to Sabai Sabai (Happy) Garden Restaurant with a logo overhead that translates to ‘Luang Prabang Exhibition Hall’; expired artillery can be seen on both sides of tourists entering the building; (B) a man standing next to an armed guard wearing military clothing and holding an AK-47 rifle, with another person behind them in a military uniform; there is an image on the wall of Chinese and Lao diplomats; (C) inside the building is a large jewellery store with jade, rhino horn, elephant ivory and bear products. *Photo (Image C): MongaBay*

Museum of Geology and Minerals, Vientiane

This site was confirmed through visitor social media posts⁷⁰ and video content on Douyin,⁷¹ including footage of a popular Douyin travel influencer waiting in the area that describes how to purchase or avoid purchasing products.⁷² The site is labelled as a 'museum' on Google Maps.⁷³ Products on display include elephant ivory jewellery and trinkets, bear gall bladder and ANW pills (see images below). A lecturer shows visitors a map that claims Laos is rich in minerals and natural resources, and that all rhino horn, pangolin scales and ivory products come from Laos.⁷⁴ The same map found in the Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens (shown above) is used here with the same narrative to falsely substantiate the local origin of the wildlife products.



(A) Shopfront view of the Museum of Geology and Minerals, Vientiane; (B) inside view of the shop within the site; (C) ivory jewellery and trinkets for sale in the shop; (D/E) North Korean ANW pills manufactured by Koryo Chilbo Pharmacy.

Vientiane Art Museum/Vientiane Museum of Contemporary Arts

This museum is commonly referred to as the Laos National Sacred Tree Museum (老挝国家神木博物馆) or Shenmu Museum in Chinese tourism itineraries and primarily exhibits carved mahogany artworks. Originally a private collection owned by Phisith Sayathith, once considered the richest man in Laos, the museum also serves as a reception place for visiting foreign dignitaries⁷⁵ and has only been open since January 2025.⁷⁶ The museum reportedly has a total of five floors, though only the ground floor is open to the general public; access to the second floor and above is said to be restricted to VIP guests.⁷⁷

Virtually all travel itineraries from China that extend into Vientiane include a stop at this museum, often framed as a cultural observation and shopping opportunity. Multiple sources have reported or shown that rhino horn, ivory and other wildlife products are available for sale at the museum's internal store.⁷⁸ Although the museum appears on various general tourism platforms, all information regarding alleged IWT stems solely from Chinese-language sources. This indicates selective targeting of Chinese visitors.

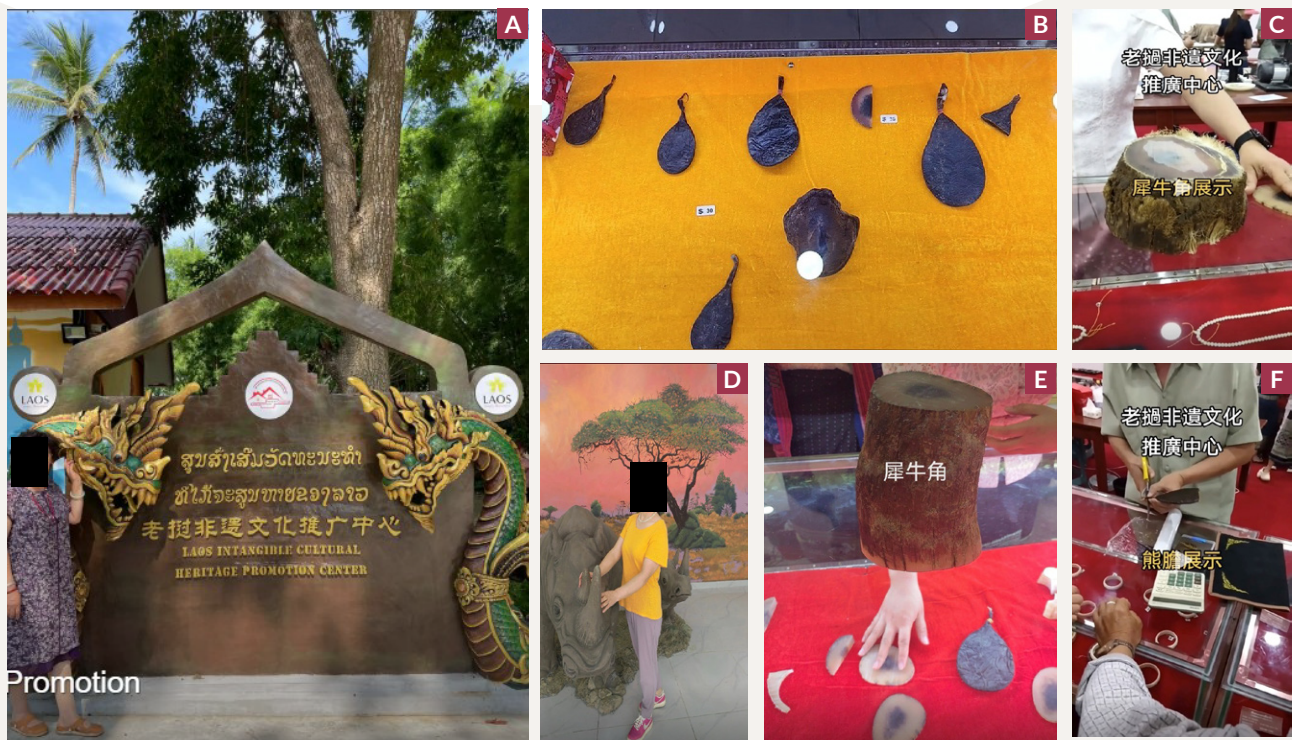
The shop is located in the museum where the tour ends. First, there is a display of wooden products (statues, wooden trays, bracelets, etc.), including mahogany and agarwood. Further on, a hallway leads into the main shopping section (see images below) with agarwood, rhino horn, rhino horn pills and ivory products.⁷⁹ The shop itself can also be seen and verified on Google Maps review images.⁸⁰ In reviews on Trip.com, visitors say, '[translated from Chinese text] This is actually a big store in the name of a museum, a big store, a big store, a big store, the important thing is said three times.'⁸¹



(A) Entrance to the Vientiane Museum of Contemporary Arts; (B) rhino horn products; (C) a review from a Chinese user on a Laos tour acknowledging the products being sold; (D) view of the shop selling IWT products, which can be seen on Google Maps,⁸² and the scope of the shop and its products on Douyin; (E) visitors being shown ivory bracelets by a shopkeeper; (F) a tourist standing in front of the logo and branding of the museum shop; (G) agarwood bracelets; (H) agarwood in a pouch with the shop's logo and professional branding; (I) a piece of rhino horn in a display case seen in Douyin video footage within the shop.

Laotian Intangible Cultural Heritage Promotion Center

This site is classified as a 'park' on Google Maps under the name Laos Intangible Cultural Heritage Promotion Center in Chinese characters (老挝非遗文化推广中心),⁸³ and is within 500 metres of the Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens and Kinliao Coffee. Videos posted to Douyin show rhino horn, bear gall bladder and ivory jewellery in the shop (see images below).⁸⁴



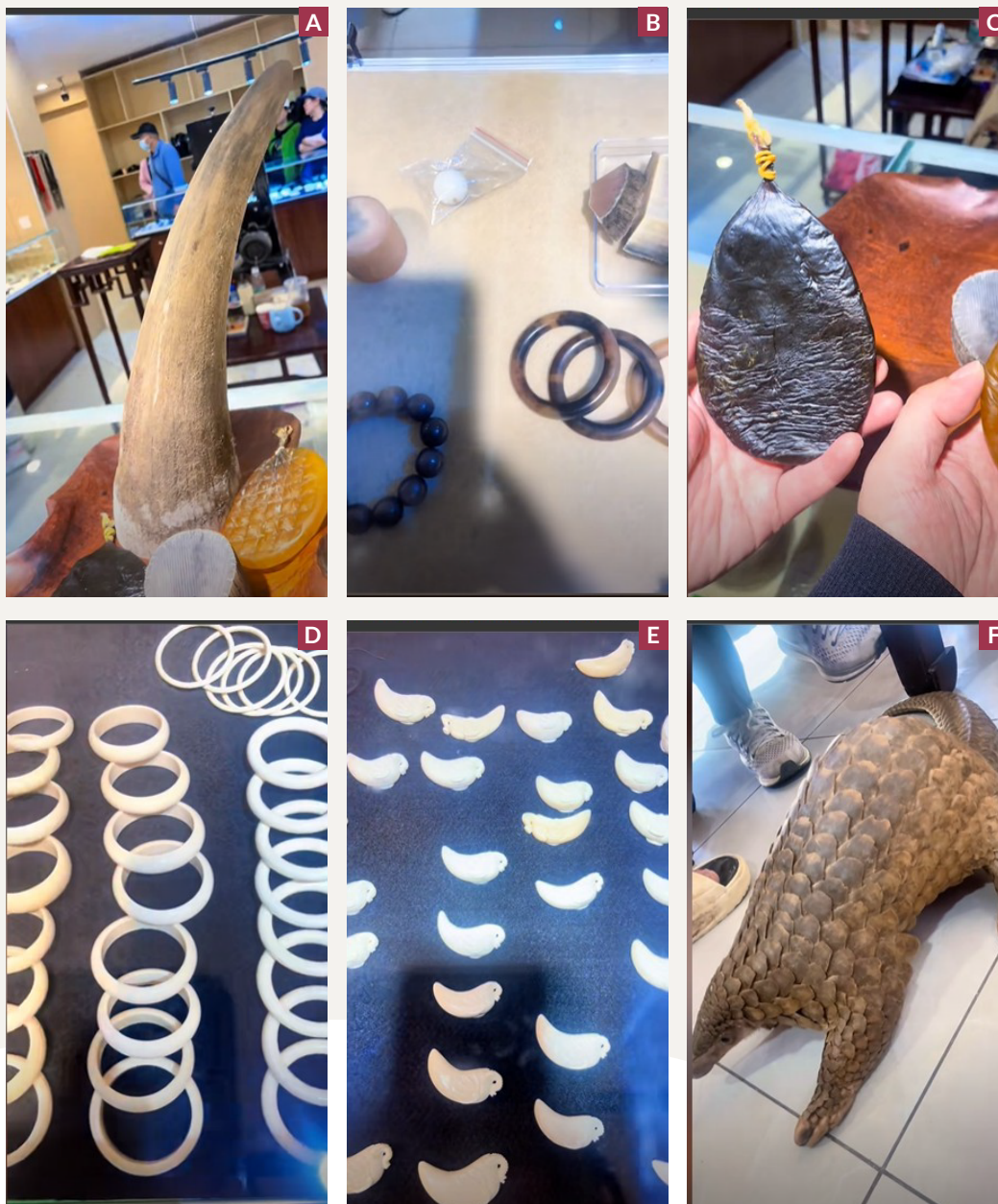
(A) The entrance sign for the Laotian Intangible Cultural Heritage Promotion Center with the Luang Prabang official tourism authority logo in the centre; (B) bear gall bladders in a display case; (C) a cross-section of rhino horn; (D) a tourist posing in front of a rhino statue at the site; (E) rhino horn and bear gall bladder; (F) ivory jewellery and a shopkeeper cutting a piece of bear gall bladder.

Unconfirmed illegal wildlife trade sites

In addition to the confirmed sites, we have identified shops of uncertain location. These could not be cross-referenced with descriptions provided by confidential informants, but similarities in decor, display cases, products, wooden wall frames and flooring seen in online videos suggest they may be the same shops listed under different names. However, this has not been confirmed and requires further investigation.

Laos Museum of National Treasures (老挝国家国宝博物馆)

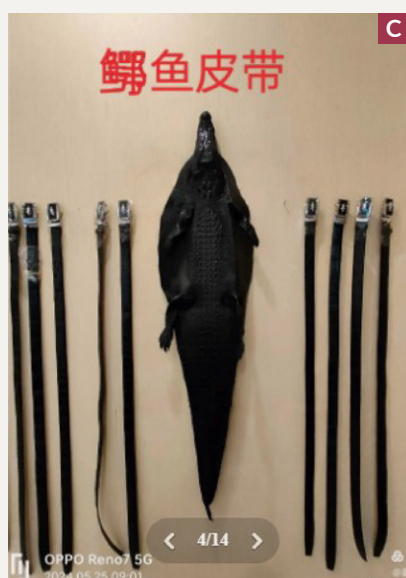
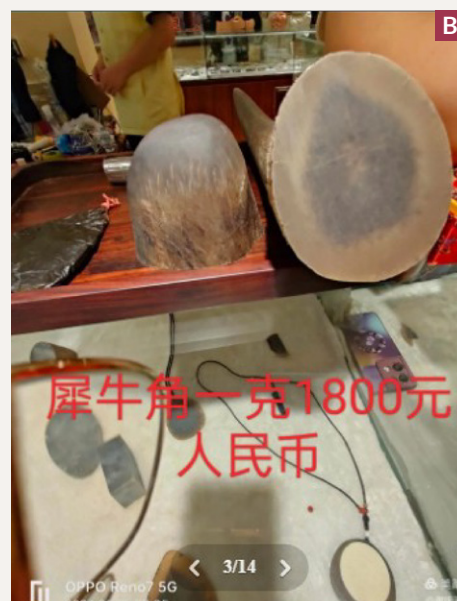
This site appears in at least one tour video,⁸⁵ exhibiting rhino horn, ivory products, tiger teeth, bear gall bladder and even a live pangolin on a showroom floor (see images below).



Footage from a Douyin video taken at the Laos Museum of National Treasures, showing (A) rhino horn and bear gall bladder; (B) rhino horn cross-sections and jewellery; (C) bear gall bladder; (D/E) ivory jewellery and trinkets; and (F) a live pangolin on the showroom floor.

General Songwang's Mansion

According to various videos from Chinese tourist visits, this site is a mansion or shop facility that purports to have military support.⁸⁶ Hanging on the wall inside is a photo of a senior Laotian military figure, with text below it stating in Chinese 'General Songwang of Laos' (老挝松王将军). In each tourist video of this site⁸⁷ (see images below) the subsequent tour destinations are typically either the Luang Prabang railway station or the Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens, indicating the site is likely to be situated somewhere in Luang Prabang.



(A) A large shop within the building; (B) rhino horn, ivory pendants and bear gall bladder; (C) crocodile skin and crocodile leather belts; (D) the entrance to the site.



ENABLING FACTORS, PRODUCT ORIGINS AND REVENUE

Although the sources of the products in Laos's IWT-linked shops are undetermined, previous reporting points to potential origins. For some species, the origins clearly lie outside of Laos; rhinos, for instance, have been long extinct in the country. However, for tiger, elephant and bear products, there may be both national and international origins. For internationally sourced products, many – if not all – supply chains would rely on trafficking by organized crime groups.

Main drivers of growth

- **China's domestic crackdown** on ivory and rhino horn, starting in 2015, drove displacement of product into adjacent countries such as Laos.
 - **2015–2017 ivory trade ban:** Raw ivory and rhino horn stockpiles were moved across borders from China into Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar.⁸⁸
 - **Shutdown of legal ivory trade and workshops in China:** Chinese traders relocated their stock and production abroad, notably to Laos.⁸⁹
- **COVID-19 travel disruptions and lockdowns** created pent-up demand for high-end, guided tourism. They also increased the online presence of IWT products, and the expansion of courier networks fuelled by fear and the promise of fake cures containing rhino horn and other products derived from endangered species.⁹⁰
- **BRI infrastructure**, especially the China–Laos Railway, enabled mass flows of Chinese tourists into Laos. Tour operators offer itineraries that include visits to IWT-linked superstores, which were previously less accessible under the existing ports of entry by air travel.
 - **BRI's China–Laos Railway facilitated tourist influx and opened new transit routes.**
 - The railway 'transform[ed] Laos from a landlocked country to a land-linked hub', significantly boosting Chinese tourist access along the north–south corridor.⁹¹
 - In 2023, rail linked Laos directly with China, providing easier access to major tourist destinations such as Luang Prabang – services that previously depended on limited air routes.

- **BRI infrastructure enabled the creation of wildlife trafficking nodes along rail corridors.**
- The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) warned in 2020 that BRI projects 'bring increased risk of endangered wildlife consumption and illegal wildlife trade', specifically citing rail infrastructure.⁹²
- Several BRI hubs are known to be hubs of organized criminal activity.⁹³
- One study described how wildlife crime networks operate parallel to formal BRI infrastructure, including the China–Laos Railway, enabling trafficking of tiger parts and pangolins.⁹⁴
- **Tour providers are now integrating IWT into their itineraries with the inclusion of visits to wildlife product superstores, enabled by the railway.**
- Chinese tour packages include visits to IWT shops and warehouse tours, facilitated by rail transport speed and convenience.
- Laos's weak enforcement, opaque governance and high levels of corruption make it an ideal base.⁹⁵ ■

Origins and flows

Known sources of high-value illegal wildlife products in Laos include the following:

- **Rhino horn:** The vast majority of rhino horn comes from South Africa, with the remainder from several other African countries.⁹⁶ Raw product often enters Laos through stockpiles in Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia and Thailand.⁹⁷ ANW pills are apparently manufactured in North Korea, then shipped to and sold in Laos.⁹⁸ North Korea appears to smuggle its own raw product from African countries.⁹⁹ Laos acts as a re-export hub for processed items sold to Chinese tourists.¹⁰⁰
- **Ivory:** Virtually all ivory in Laos is of African origin, smuggled over maritime or land-based routes, and sold as carvings and jewellery.¹⁰¹
- **Pangolin scales:** While large shipments of scales are trafficked into Laos from Africa – primarily Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda – as part of transcontinental smuggling routes,¹⁰² there is also persistent local demand for live and freshly slaughtered pangolins. Open-air markets and restaurants in Laos, especially those targeting Chinese tourists, are frequently featured in videos posted to Douyin, encouraging the purchase, consumption and also occasional release of native Sunda pangolins (*Manis javanica*) and Chinese pangolins (*Manis pentadactyla*) back into the wild.
- **Tiger parts:** Tigers are bred in captive-breeding operations in Laos and Thailand, often kept in the same farm facilities as bears.¹⁰³ They are sold openly in SEZs or privately to VIP buyers,¹⁰⁴ but are also widely trafficked throughout South East Asia.¹⁰⁵
- **Bear bile:** Bear products are often from Laos as there are known farms in Boten (the border city between China and Laos) that harvest bear extracts and synthesize products, under conditions of dubious legality.¹⁰⁶

The international commercial trade in all of these products is banned under CITES Appendix I.

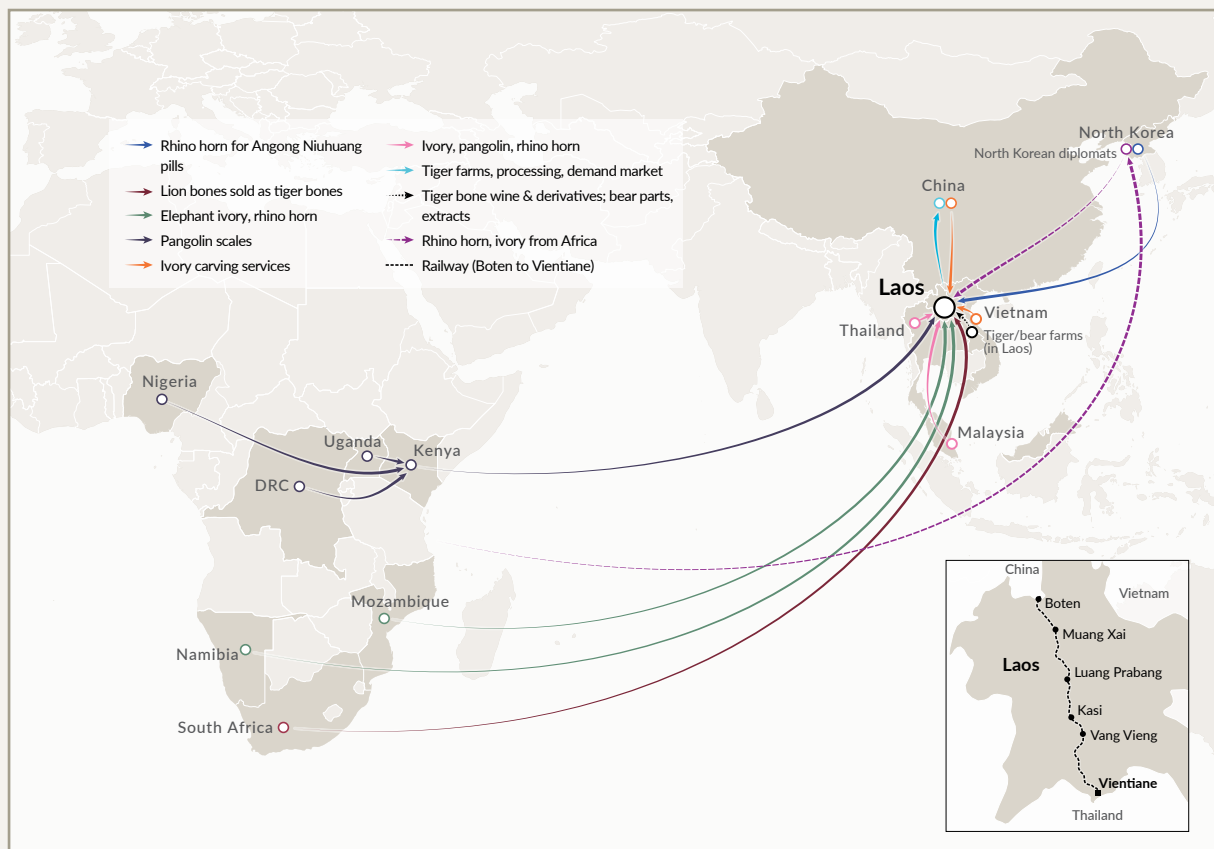


FIGURE 3 Origins and flows of illegal wildlife products to and from Laos.

Revenue

While it was not possible to confirm the origins of the wildlife products sold at retail sites through our research, the financial flows tied to their sale are more apparent and revealing. To understand the scale of potential revenue from IWT product sales, we modelled several purchasing scenarios based on observed group sizes, tourist flows and product pricing. Even conservative estimates indicate that relatively modest tourist participation can generate millions in seasonal revenue. If true, illegal wildlife sales would represent a significant, though unacknowledged, pillar of Laos's tourism economy.

Purchase rate	Estimated buyers	Ivory jewellery	Rhino horn	ANW rhino pills	Tiger parts	Bear bile	Total revenue
5%	561	US\$56 000	US\$504 000	US\$42 000	US\$42 000	US\$16 800	US\$660 800
10%	1 123	US\$134 400	US\$1 344 000	US\$112 000	US\$117 000	US\$43 500	US\$1 750 900
20%	2 246	US\$314 400	US\$3 366 000	US\$224 500	US\$268 500	US\$80 700	US\$4 254 100
30%	3 369	US\$471 600	US\$6 060 000	US\$336 500	US\$403 500	US\$121 200	US\$7 392 800
50%	5 616	US\$786 000	US\$11 790 000	US\$561 500	US\$673 500	US\$201 900	US\$14 012 900

FIGURE 4 Estimated revenue from tourist purchases of illegal wildlife products in 2025, by scenario.

NOTES: The scenario assumes ~11 232 seasonal visitors to IWT venues during winter/spring high seasons (see methods in the Executive Summary). Pricing: ivory = US\$400, rhino horn = US\$6 000, ANW pills = US\$500, tiger parts = US\$1 500, bear bile = US\$300. Buyers are assumed to purchase one item in one category.

Under these assumptions, even a modest 10% buyer rate could generate over US\$1.7 million in illicit wildlife sales during the high seasons alone. At the upper-bound estimate of 50%, this figure reaches US\$14 million, reflecting substantial market activity despite the relatively small seasonal sample of tourists.

Raw rhino horn is the highest-value product. Although the purchase rates modelled for rhino horn are lower than for elephant ivory jewellery, these transactions account for around 70% or more of total revenue in each scenario. Ivory, while more affordable, draws far more buyers and represents the second largest contributor to total revenue. Tiger parts, ANW pills and bear bile generate smaller yet still substantial income.

It is likely that these estimates underrepresent the full scope of annual IWT revenue, however, as they exclude off-season tourism, repeat purchases, online orders and courier-facilitated sales, as well as sales elsewhere in the country. This model therefore shows that even limited tourist footfall can sustain a significant illicit economy within the China–Laos tourism infrastructure. And it is possible that IWT in Laos is much more widespread and lucrative than these estimates suggest. Our model is based on a sample of 11 232 visitors to IWT venues, but in 2024, there were over 1 million tourists from China alone.¹⁰⁷ Applying our model to this cohort, given their presence at wildlife markets,¹⁰⁸ and assuming one in three visitors visited these sites and only half made wildlife purchases, these visitors would have injected over US\$400 million into the illegal trade. This is a startling figure rivalling Laos's own legal tourism revenue. For context, 4.12 million international tourists in 2024 generated US\$1.13 billion officially.¹⁰⁹



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence presented in this report highlights an urgent situation: a large, organized system of retail stores are selling illegal products made from the world's most protected animal species, enabled and strengthened by a boom in mass tourism from China. This is in the context of weak governance, particularly with regard to enforcing counter-wildlife trafficking laws. The launch of the China–Laos Railway has expanded the reach of this illicit economy, transforming previously less-accessible regions into hotspots of IWT under the guise of 'cultural appreciation'.

The Laos authorities should investigate each of these establishments, the tour operators that bring customers to them and the networks involved in supplying them, as well as how they have been able to operate so brazenly without attracting law enforcement attention.

However, the prospects for domestic action are weak and the external levers are few. Laos was already considered a major hotspot for IWT following years of scandals that showed probable state complicity with criminal networks in SEZs,¹¹⁰ running illegal tiger farms,¹¹¹ and a persistent failure to enforce CITES obligations. Despite these ongoing issues, CITES partially lifted its formal trade suspension on Laos in February 2025,¹¹² raising further concerns about the credibility of international enforcement mechanisms in the face of entrenched impunity. Laos risks not only becoming an epicentre of IWT impunity in the region, but a model that neighbouring countries may well follow.

This is an inflection point for the region. Laos has officially committed to CITES enforcement and has in the past received millions in donor support for counter-IWT initiatives. With the withdrawal of US funding for many overseas aid programmes under the Trump administration, there is a drastic reduction in money available for counter-IWT programming. At the same time, much of the programming that was implemented to boost state capacity in Laos seems to have had little effect. After US\$81 million in investment since 2015, IWT operates not in the shadows but in coffee shops and museums in the capital city. Technical assistance and broader counter-IWT programming must account for the system of governance that has allowed this economy to grow so rapidly and with so much investment. The scale of these problems, and their continuity with old patterns of criminality, strongly suggests funding for state-led enforcement will not work until there is strong and credible evidence that corruption is being acted against, and transparency and accountability around the wildlife trade is improving.

On the other hand, domestic reforms, such as the 2018 ivory and rhino horn bans, and high-volume prosecutions (there were 12 000 wildlife crime cases in three months through the Qingfeng Action initiative)¹¹³ give China strong statutory grounds to act beyond its borders. Under law, Chinese citizens or tour companies who facilitate wildlife crime overseas can be prosecuted at home. Coupled with international cooperation mechanisms, regional customs–police task forces (e.g. ASEAN-WEN) and extraterritorial enforcement initiatives such as Sky Net and Operation Fox,¹¹⁴ this provides a clear avenue for targeting illegal tours, traders and consumers linked to the China–Laos route.

Now is the time for Beijing to turn legal authority into action: by investigating and prosecuting Chinese tour operators, businesses and tourists who traffic wildlife through Laos and following the illicit proceeds generated from these sales, China can close the loop on this crossborder syndicate activity and tip the balance towards enforcement, not impunity.



APPENDIX I: SITES ASSOCIATED WITH LAOS IWT TOURS AND VERIFICATION METHODS

No.	Location	X,Y	Name	Confirmed by
1	Luang Prabang	19.862541, 102.110511	Kinliao Coffee/Luang Prabang Tourism and Cultural Promotion Center	Informant/Itinerary/Ground/Video
2	Luang Prabang	19.858016, 102.095963	RC Coffee/Rongchang Specialty Items Shop	Informant/Itinerary/Video/Ground
3	Vientiane	17.973047, 102.642222	ASEAN Jewelry	Informant/Itinerary/Video/Ground/Google Maps
4	Luang Prabang	19.861840, 102.110413	Lao National Cultural and Traditional Gardens/Ethnic Weaving Village/Ethnic Cultural Park	Informant/Itinerary/Video
5	Luang Prabang	19.86584, 102.12251	Sabai Sabai (Happy) Garden Restaurant/Hao Jie Jewelry/Lao Military Region Cultural Park	Informant/Itinerary/Video/Ground
6	Vientiane	18.020499, 102.545986	Museum of Geology and Minerals	Informant/Itinerary/Video/Social media
7	Vientiane	18.028095, 102.651390	Vientiane Art Museum/Vientiane Museum of Contemporary Arts/Redwood Museum	Informant/Itinerary/Video/Ground/Google Maps
8	Luang Prabang	19.860622, 102.111076	Laotian Intangible Cultural Heritage Promotion Center	Informant/Itinerary/Video
9	Luang Prabang	Redacted	Site A	Informant/Ground
10	Luang Prabang	19.867447, 102.132142	Lao/Luang Prabang Traditional Jewelry	Informant/Video/Ground (videos show shopfront, but often stop immediately on entry)
11	Luang Prabang	19.8766, 102.12752	Ancient Giftshop/Agarwood Museum	Informant/Itinerary/Ground
12	Luang Prabang	Redacted	Site B	Informant/Ground

No.	Location	X,Y	Name	Confirmed by
13	Luang Prabang	Redacted	Site C	Informant/Ground (site appears to have the same features as others, but is inaccessible to public)
14	Luang Prabang	19.86869, 102.11072	Lao Traditional Medicine Hall	Informant/Ground
15	Luang Prabang	Redacted	Site D	Informant/Ground – Still under construction. IWT unconfirmed at this stage but propaganda and design indicate it will be a large-scale venue.
16	Luang Prabang	Redacted	Site E	Informant/Ground – This site is disguised as a bus stop restaurant on Google, but the actual IWT shop is next door.
17	Vientiane	Redacted	Site F	Informant/Ground – This location is a large, gated shopping mall structure surrounded by factory buildings.
18	Vientiane	Redacted	Site G	Informant/Ground – The front of this site states that it is both a tourism company and law firm, but it has a visible gift shop with Chinese goods and signage.

NOTE: Informant = undisclosed informant; Itinerary = present on known IWT tour itineraries; video = documented in online video footage; social media = social media posts of the facilities and tours; ground = journalist verification on the ground; Google Maps = IWT images or shops present in Google Maps reviews and photos. Sites that could not be verified by OSINT or where informants did not have inside access to IWT product sales are listed as Site A, B, C. etc, and have had their coordinates redacted.



APPENDIX II: LAWS AND POLICIES PROHIBITING IWT

The following is a list of Laotian laws and Chinese policies prohibiting the sale and smuggling/import of wildlife products detected at the sites featured in this report.

LAOS

- **Law on Aquatic and Wildlife No. 07/NA (2007)**¹¹⁵
 - Prohibits trade, transport or possession of protected species (e.g. rhino, elephant, tiger, pangolin, bear).
 - Only scientific or conservation use is permitted for Category 1 species.
- **Prime Minister Order No. 05/PM (2018)**¹¹⁶
 - Enhances control and inspection of illegal wildlife trade.
 - Bans sale of protected species and parts in all markets and tourism venues.
- **Penal Code No. 118 (2017)**¹¹⁷
 - Criminalizes illegal hunting, trade, possession or smuggling of wildlife.
 - Penalties include fines and imprisonment.
- **CITES Membership (since 2004)**¹¹⁸
 - Commercial trade in CITES Appendix I species (rhino, elephant, tiger, pangolin) is strictly prohibited.
 - Laos is obligated to enforce trade bans and control domestic markets.
- **NIAP (National Ivory Action Plan 2020)**¹¹⁹
 - Commits Laos to enforce bans on ivory and rhino horn.
 - Requires market inspections, public awareness and stockpile monitoring.
- **Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) Agreement No. 0188 (2019)**¹²⁰
 - Regulates wildlife farms and zoos.
 - Bans unauthorized breeding or trading of protected species.
- **MAF Action Plan No. 0654 (2018–2025)**¹²¹
 - Outlines enforcement strategies against wildlife crime.
 - Focuses on multi-agency collaboration and intelligence-based operations.

CHINA

- **Wildlife Protection Law and Criminal Law (Art. 36 WPL; Arts. 116–118 Criminal Law)¹²²**
 - Criminalize illegal import/export and smuggling of wildlife and their products, including ivory, rhino horn, etc.
 - Penalties ranging from confiscation and fines to up to 10 years' imprisonment depending on scale and level of organization.
- **National People's Congress Standing Committee Decision (24 February 2020)¹²³**
 - Reinforces a comprehensive ban on all IWT and consumption.
 - Explicitly prohibits Chinese citizens and tourists from bringing wildlife products into China as personal souvenirs.
 - Enhanced penalties and stricter enforcement mechanisms apply.



NOTES

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