



PANGOLINS IN PERIL. A pangolin curls into a ball as a Natural Resources Conservation Agency official holds it up before releasing it into the wild at a conservation forest in Sibolangit, North Sumatra, Indonesia, in this file photo. Wildlife activists in India have raised an alarm that scores of lesser-known animal species are being pushed to the brink of extinction because of rampant poaching and trafficking, while conservation efforts over the past two decades were focused on saving India's iconic tigers and rhinos. Tens of thousands of lesser-known animals, such as pangolins, tortoises, and geckos, have been killed or smuggled out of India to supply a growing demand for the skin, parts, or flesh of these animals, or sold to people wanting to keep them as exotic pets. (AP Photo/Jefri Tarigan, File)

Indian poachers threaten lesser-known animals

By **Nirmala George**
The Associated Press

NEW DELHI — Wildlife poachers, hindered by India's efforts to protect majestic endangered animals including tigers and rhinos, have begun to think smaller. And activists say scores of the country's lesser-known species are vanishing from the wild as a result.

The Indian pangolin — a scaly critter whose defense mechanism of rolling up into a ball is no help against humans — and the star tortoise — a popular pet that maxes out at a foot in length — are just two of the species that are being killed or smuggled in increasing numbers while conservation efforts focus on such iconic animals such as tigers and elephants.

"The problem is that we were turning a blind eye to all lesser-known species and suddenly this very lucrative trade has been allowed to explode," said Belinda Wright, director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India, an advocacy group.

Wildlife specialists say the growing affluence of China, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries has helped drive the demand for exotic animals. Some are kept as pets, while others are eaten for their purported but questionable medicinal or aphrodisiacal properties.

Pangolins are killed for their meat, which is considered a delicacy, and their scales, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine. The scales are made of keratin, the same protein that forms hair and fingernails, and have no documented medicinal value.

The pangolin trade was once obscure in India, with an average of only about three a year reportedly killed by poachers between 1990 and 2008. Wright said that soared to an average of more than 320 per year from 2009 to 2013.

That only covers confirmed seizures. Customs officials and wildlife experts estimate that seizures form only 10 percent of the total illegal trade. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimated in a report last month that more than a million pangolins have been poached from habitats in Asia and Africa.

Star tortoise seizures by airport and port customs officials also have increased dramatically, from an average of less than 800 per year from 1990 to 1999 to more than 3,000 per year from 2002 to 2013, according to the protection society.

Similarly, the growing demand for lizard skin, meat, and bones has led to the near-disappearance of the monitor lizard in the Indian countryside, said Tito Joseph, a program manager for the society. Monitor lizard meat, especially the tongue and liver, is mistakenly believed to have aphrodisiacal properties, while lizard skin

finds use in high-end bags and belts.

Such animals became more attractive to poachers as the Indian government strengthened the tiger conservation program it began nearly four decades ago. Vast swathes of forests and hills have been turned into tiger reserves and national parks.

Indian officials deny neglecting lesser-known species. Creating the tiger reserves also helps protect smaller species in these areas, they say.

"The focus on tigers does not mean that other species are not taken care of," said S.B. Negi of the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, a government agency.

But the bureau has only just begun efforts to collect data on many smaller species now in peril, including the pangolin, reflecting the scant attention they have received so far. Kamal Datta, a director at the bureau, said the agency has asked wildlife departments in India's 29 states to collect the data, but some have yet to begin.

"The trade in lesser known species cannot be ignored, else entire species, such as the Indian pangolin, are in danger of being wiped out," said Wright.

Pangolins, often described as "walking artichokes" on account of their coats of overlapping scales, were once found across India.

When threatened by predators, the animal protects itself by curling up into a scaly ball, but that makes it easy for poachers to bundle them into sacks for transportation.

Most of the illegal trade in pangolins and other species takes place across the porous border that India shares with Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, experts said.

Activists say efforts to stop the illegal trade are hampered by a lack of knowledge among customs officials and border guards about the species they are supposed to protect.

"We're talking here of the threat of pangolins being wiped out. But most often the officials set to catch the poachers don't even know what the animal looks like, let alone who are the people involved in catching them, or those involved in the trade," said Shekhar Niraj, India director of TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring network.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, generally considered to be the most comprehensive of its kind, lists 374 species in India that are vulnerable and 274 others that are endangered, or critically endangered, and at risk of becoming extinct.

"This is a huge tragedy in the making," Wright said. "We must act before it is too late, or many of these spectacular animals will disappear."

HK news boss counters rival's fake obit with video

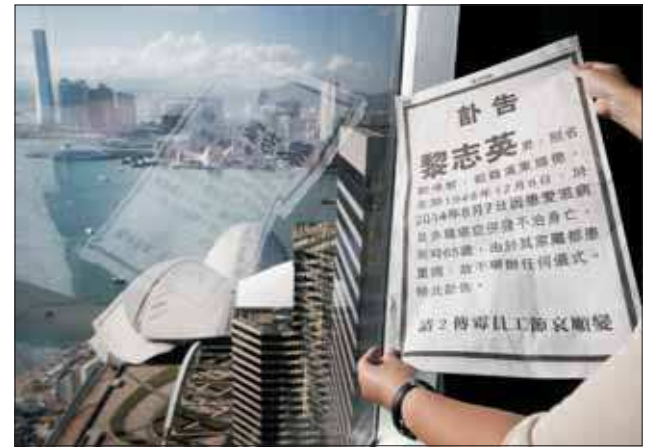
HONG KONG (AP) — A Hong Kong pro-democracy media magnate has appeared in a humorous video to counter an obituary of him published in a rival newspaper.

Next Media boss Jimmy Lai says in the video he is "sorry to disappoint" whoever paid for the full-page announcement in the *Oriental Daily*.

The newspaper hasn't commented and it wasn't clear who took out the announcement, which said Lai Chee-ying died at age 65 from AIDS and multiple cancers. It referred to Lai by his Chinese name, but used a different written character for Chee that sounds the same.

The graphic style of the fake obituary mirrored that of real obituaries in Hong Kong media. It said the tycoon was also known as "Fatty Lai" and that his family members also had severe diseases and couldn't attend his funeral. It offered condolences to staff at Two Media, a reference to Lai's company, which in Chinese is known as One Media.

Lai owns *Apple Daily*, Hong Kong's sole pro-democracy newspaper. It and *Oriental Daily* are



MEDIA HIJINKS. A copy of a full-page obituary announcement in the *Oriental Daily* is displayed in Hong Kong in mid-August. The notice says Hong Kong pro-democracy media magnate Lai Chee-ying died at age 65 from AIDS and multiple cancers. It referred to Lai by his Chinese name, but used a different written character for Chee that sounds the same. Next Media boss Jimmy Lai, who owns *Apple Daily*, Hong Kong's sole pro-democracy newspaper, appeared in a humorous video to counter the obituary of him published in the rival newspaper. Lai said in the video he is "sorry to disappoint" whoever paid for the full-page announcement in the *Oriental Daily*. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

among the most popular publications in the semiautonomous Chinese territory.

It's the latest incident to raise fears about press freedom in Hong Kong, which has tumbled in a ranking by international watchdog group Reporters Without Borders to 61st place from No. 18 in 2002.

The video intersperses cartoon images with shots of Lai filming himself, selfie-style. The plot has Lai being taken to the afterlife by traditional

Chinese gods of the underworld but sent back because his name doesn't match.

"This joke isn't good enough because I still don't have AIDS," Lai says. "If you want me to die, you'll have to keep cursing me."

Next Media Ltd. is known for firing out animated clips summarizing big news events for its readers. One of its best-known videos portrayed Tiger Woods' infamous car crash that preceded the golfer's divorce.



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