

HELL'S ZOO

Confiscated tiger heads and stools made of elephant feet

WHEN VISITORS to the National Wildlife Property Repository near Denver enter the 16,000-square-foot warehouse and see the full array of dead animals and products kept within, they tend to stop short, open their eyes wide and utter something that suggests shock and awe.

"I always like to see people's faces when they turn the corner," repository supervisor Coleen Schaefer tells a group of visitors on a warm day in February. She's part of the office of law enforcement for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which confiscated all of these products from the illegal wildlife trade and brought them to the repository, located inside the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. Outside the repository, snowcapped mountains rise up in the distance. Throughout the year, coyotes, owls, bison and a few hundred other creatures roam the 15,000 acres. Once an Army weapons factory and then a manufacturing plant for pesticides and herbicides, the Arsenal underwent a cleanup starting in 1992 and completed in 2010.

Inside, visitors come face-to-face with more than 1.5 million specimens in the repository—the only one of its kind in the U.S. The sheer volume is, Schaefer says, "mind-boggling." There are palettes of sea-turtle-skin boots, fur coats, taxidermied tigers, exotic birds, coral stolen from the ocean and rows and rows of reptiles from Mexico and South America. There are curios—turtle paperweights, bookends made of zebra feet and footstools crafted from elephant feet. Tiny seahorses packed tightly into plastic bags

will never reach their intended destination in Southeast Asia for use as traditional medicine. Shelves stock the heads of tigers and jaguars, their mouths open in a perpetual roar.

Schaefer motions to a small item on a table across from the heads. "Probably the saddest thing is the tiger fetus carved out of its mother, stuffed for someone to put on a shelf," she says.

This place is gruesome. But it should be. The wildlife trade is booming, and the future of the world's elephants, rhinos, tigers and many other species are urgently threatened as a result. Trafficking dead or live animals has skyrocketed in the past decade, with an estimated black market valued at around \$10 billion, although an exact figure can't be gauged because of its illicit nature.

The primary reason we can't control the illegal wildlife trade is because resources are thin. Only about 200 special agents and wildlife inspectors handle wildlife crime in the U.S. The inspectors serve as the first line of defense against illegal items coming in and out of the country; it's a job Schaefer held for two years in the mid-2000s at the port of Los Angeles and Los Angeles International Airport. Sometimes tourists, she says, innocently bring home illegal items, without the proper paperwork or unaware their purchases aren't allowed. But in other cases, she and her colleagues found monkeys drugged for their illicit journey and baby parrots in tube socks strapped to people's bodies, their beaks bound by rubber bands. "If you can think of it, it's probably been done," Schaefer says.

UNLIVING ROOM: The education room of the National Wildlife Property Repository is filled with furniture and accessories made with illegal animal parts.

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We pass by a collection of traditional Chinese medicines and cosmetics: turtle jelly for various ailments, caviar for expensive face cream, tiger penis for an aphrodisiac. Then we examine luxurious scarves made from the underfur of Tibetan antelopes, which can sell for \$5,000, or more if embroidered. It is unbelievably soft. Making one of these shahtoosh scarves, as they're called, requires about a dozen of the highly endangered antelope, according to Schaefer. The problem, says Dan Rolince, an assistant special agent with the FWS, is that if you want to make a shawl out of Tibetan antelope fur, "you can't shear the antelope. You have to kill it." Some confiscated carcasses can be salvaged. In the facility's National Eagle Repository, golden and bald eagles killed by unlawful shooting or trapping, electrocution, vehicle collisions or natural causes are collected, stored in a freezer and shipped to federally recognized Native American tribes that use the feathers for ceremonial purposes. The repository has a backlog of 20,000 orders for those feathers.

Since the Lacey Act of 1990, the U.S. has outlawed the trade of illegally taken, possessed, transported or sold wildlife, fish and plants. Sev-

eral other pieces of legislation passed since have aided this cause. On February 11, the Interior Department, Justice Department and State Department released a plan for the "National Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking," in light of the profitable enterprise's continued growth and its role in breeding organized crime and corruption among government officials. The plan focuses on strengthening enforcement and reducing demand through public outreach so Americans see owning ivory, for example, as socially taboo. "The artwork is exquisite," Schaefer says, as we admire ivory figurines in the repository. "But the medium they used is an endangered species."

Between 2010 and 2012 alone, poachers slaughtered 100,000 African elephants, according to a Colorado State University study. Elephants are being killed faster than they can reproduce; if left alone, the ivory craze could lead to the extinction

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of the world's largest land mammal. On May 30, in a Kenya national park, a beloved bull elephant named Satao—likely 50 years old and with tusks longer than six feet—was shot with a poisoned arrow so poachers could rip the ivory from his face.

In November 2013, the federal government crushed six tons of illegal ivory seized over about 25 years at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal to symbolize a united global fight against poaching. The demolished ivory sits in 10 large bins at the repository. Schaefer allows several of us to feel the shards—and then asks us to open our hands to prove we haven't kept any pieces as souvenirs.

Of all the endangered animals whose future existence Schaefer is trying to ensure, one causes her the most heartache. "It is the tiger. Because we are so close to losing them completely from the planet," she says, choking up. She shakes her head, muttering that she doesn't know where this burst of emotion has come from. "There are now more tigers in captivity than the wild. There are only 3,200 left in the wild, and you wonder, How much longer?"