

Curtail North Korea's illegal wildlife trade

Although North Korea aims for economic self-sufficiency, it does not exclude the use of international, often illicit, trade to generate revenue ([1](#), [2](#)), including the trade of legally protected native wildlife ([3](#)). Furthermore, in response to the country's economic and food crises ([4](#)), a black market in wildlife products has emerged that encompasses almost all native mammal species weighing more than 500 g, including those protected under North Korean law and Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) ([3](#), [5](#)). Illegal trade imperils North Korean biodiversity and threatens the recovery of metapopulations in these species across the Korean Peninsula ([6](#)).

Before 2020, animal products from highly protected species such as tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), and Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) flowed from North Korea into China, breaching China's CITES commitments and, in the case of wild meat, UN Security Council Resolution 2397 ([3](#)). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea closed its borders, which restricted cross-border smuggling ([4](#), [7](#)). Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, North Korea has moved to reengage with its historic allies, Russia and China ([8](#)).

North Korea's neighbors must act to minimize the trade of protected species. As North Korea's largest trading partner, China can mitigate the ecological, health, and reputational risks associated with illicit North Korean trade to Chinese buyers by curbing domestic illegal wildlife demand ([9](#), [10](#)). Other countries should remain alert to the risk that even official, state-sponsored North Korean wildlife trade may include protected species ([11](#)).

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests.

10.1126/science.ady8692