

Nillasithanukroh, Songkhun; Duke University

songkhun.nillasithanukroh@duke.edu

Authors: Songkhun Nillasithanukroh - Duke University Ekta Patel - Duke University Edmund Malesky - Duke University Erika Weinthal - Duke University

Title: Scaling back wildlife trade in the Mekong: A look into the farmer loophole



Growing economic prosperity has increased the demand for wildlife products in the Mekong region in recent years. This rise in demand has led to illegal animal trafficking, which greatly threatens the survival of many endangered species in the region, chief among which are turtles. Although several explanations exist for why the illegal trade persists, including increased demand from China, this paper examines an institutional facilitator that has not been recognized — the farmer loophole — based on a literature review and interviews conducted in Vietnam and Laos with international conservation organizations, donor agencies, local NGOs, scientists, and policy experts. The farmer loophole refers to a situation where wildlife farms launder animals by replacing or supplementing farmed species with wild-caught animals. Wildlife laws in the Mekong countries currently protect endangered species only if they are caught in the wild, but not those that are bred on commercial farms. Farmers are thus able to sell wild-caught species by illegally claiming that those animals were commercially bred. By focusing on the Asian Turtle Crisis, where many turtles species are on the brink of extinction, this paper examines factors that allow the loophole to persist such as poverty, corruption, cultural demand, regulation structures, and informational gaps. Moreover, while the farmer loophole is prevalent in many Mekong countries, the particularities of the loophole vary across countries depending on the domestic political institutions and the legal framework of each country. As such, Vietnam and Laos are treated as comparative examples to allow for systematic comparisons. Lastly, we outline three types of policy solutions to help eliminate the loophole and to promote better conservation and sustainable development.