The Donkey Skin Trade and Its Convergence with the IWT

Introduction to the Illegal Trade in Donkey Skins

The donkey skin trade is a widely unregulated industry that results in the slaughter of millions of donkeys yearly and is fed by the Chinese demand for *ejiao*, a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) derived from the collagen in the hides.[1] The majority of exports are from Africa and Latin America to China, with hubs determined in part by nations' trade agreements with China. Driven by this trade, donkey populations are rapidly declining. According to the Animal Welfare Institute, the current rate of slaughter could cut the global donkey population in half in just a few years.[2] The Donkey Sanctuary has reported 20% year-on-year growth in *ejiao* production.[3]

During ELI operations focusing on totoaba, shark fin, and jaguar trafficking in Latin America, our teams also gathered intelligence on donkey skin trade involving the same persons of interest (POIs), logistics networks, and transit routes. ELI therefore assesses that this trade often converges with the trafficking of higher-profile endangered species. ELI also received information from sources in East Africa about Chinese criminal networks sourcing and processing high volumes of donkey skins there. As with other IWT species that ELI has investigated, POIs are a mix of locals, who tend to be involved in the initial poaching and sometimes processing of wildlife products, and Chinese criminal networks, who often have processing facilities and warehouses in the region, and handle exports and money laundering.

Donkey Skin Trade in Africa

In East Africa, the price of a live donkey as of the early 2020s was equivalent to the price of a donkey skin in South America, so Chinese traffickers–primarily from Fujian and Shandong–source large quantities from Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia. A Chinese trader in Uganda told ELI that his network could source 300 donkeys, though the time frame was not specified; he owned a facility to make TCM. Another POI told ELI that he also owned a secret TCM factory in Kampala, with over 500 donkey skins in stock. According to this POI, he sources donkeys along the border of Uganda and South Sudan, then smuggles them to Kampala for processing. Most of the donkeys sourced from South Sudan are farmed, but many from Ethiopia are poached from the wild because of higher populations.

Donkey Skin Trade in South America

Through firsthand collection, ELI found the donkey skin trade to be prevalent in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Prices were variable depending on location, scarcity, applicable laws, and other factors. Donkeys are both farmed and poached from the wild. ELI observed that traffickers often operated in border regions so if the trade was met with scrutiny, they could

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[1] The Donkey Sanctuary. (n.d.). *End the Donkey Skin Trade*. The Donkey Sanctuary. https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/end-the-donkey-skin-trade

[2] Animal Welfare Institute. (2023). *Ejiao Act*. https://awionline.org/policy-efforts/ejiao-act/#/537/

[3] The Donkey Sanctuary. (2023). *What is Ejiao?* https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/end-the-donkey-skin-trade/what-is-ejiao The Donkey Sanctuary.

easily change trade routes or falsify the donkeys' country of origin. As is normal in the IWT, traffickers were agile in changing sources, locations, and routes in response to changing regulatory environments or increased scrutiny. For example, traffickers told ELI that Brazil was once a hotspot for the trade, but dwindling wild populations and a Federal Court ban on donkey slaughter in Bahia[4] significantly curtailed the industry and resulted in traffickers shifting smuggling routes away from Brazilian ports. This is a positive indicator that strong, enforced laws do in fact have a deterrent effect on the trade.

Bolivia

Hotspots for the donkey trade in Bolivia include La Paz, which is near the Peruvian border, and Potosí, which is near the Argentine border. ELI POIs prior to 2025 had indicated that the trade was illegal and high risk here, but this has since changed to a perception that Bolivia is a good country from which to export donkey skins, in part due to improved China-Bolivia relations. As of late 2025, an ELI POI in Mexico even planned to move his donkey skin trade south to Bolivia. A Fujianese POI in Bolivia told ELI's operatives that a butcher's shop owned by a Chinese trafficker can provide 100 skins each week from La Paz and Potosí.

Ecuador

It is illegal to trade donkey skins in Ecuador, where wild donkeys are now scarce. Nonetheless, ELI identified multiple traffickers there. The biggest is based in Guayaquil and smuggles large quantities of many types of illegal wildlife products, such as jaguar parts and shark fins. Another POI, Sa4, claimed in 2022 to be able to provide 40 hides a month from wild populations at $90 each and has a butcher shop where donkey meat and lard are sold.

Mexico

One of ELI's priority POIs in Mexico is a totoaba trafficker who expanded into the donkey skin trade circa 2017. Sources told ELI in the mid-2020s that China only accepted donkey skins exported from Latin America from Mexico and Peru (at that time), which helped prompt the involvement of criminal network M24. The M24 network sources some of its donkeys and/or hides from the U.S., to be processed at a facility it owns in Mexico. Some of the processed hides then reenter the U.S. en route to China. As of late 2025, the network planned to take advantage of geopolitical and legal developments to ship skins to China from Bolivia.

Peru

A well-connected Chinese trafficker based in Peru, POI Sa160, collaborates with Mexican and Colombian TCOs, and Chinese TCOs operating in other countries. Despite these connections, Sa160 expressed a preference for trafficking donkey skins over marine wildlife products because of the lower risk and increased cost of sourcing higher-profile commodities such as shark fins. Sa160 sends donkey skins to middlemen or directly to TCM factories in China via

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[4] The Donkey Sanctuary. (n.d.). *End the Donkey Skin Trade*. https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/end-the-donkey-skin-trade

shipping containers. Another POI in Peru described to ELI that sanitation certificates could be obtained with a $1000 bribe and the right relationship at the relevant Ministry. He also reported paying the border police $300-$400 to smuggle skins from Bolivia.

Photo of donkey skins sent to ELI by a POI in Peru

Convergence with Other Forms of IWT

Most POIs identified by ELI trafficked various wildlife products and used the same transit routes and logistics networks across all of their businesses. One POI told ELI that he hid jaguar fangs and bones inside donkey skins for shipment to China because the smell of donkey skins hides jaguar parts. He told ELI he's hidden 20+ jaguar teeth inside shipping containers of donkey skins destined for China. Traffickers sometimes conceal small quantities of donkey skins within shipments of legal commodities such as produce to reduce shipping costs.

While investigating the illegal totoaba, shark fin, and jaguar trades in South America, ELI met several traffickers who had either broadened or shifted to the donkey skin trade, referencing the lower risk in most countries and rising marine product sourcing costs. The exception was a very well-connected trafficker with contacts in the Chinese diplomatic and business communities, who exited the donkey skin trade because he preferred higher risk with higher profits.

The donkey skin trade deserves more publicity and information-sharing within IWT circles. The patchy legality and lack of endangered species status or CITES restrictions on the donkeys may make traffickers less guarded, opening promising points of entry for broader IWT investigations. In addition, the behavioral shifts that ELI POIs reported based on regulatory changes suggests that solid, enforced laws do deter the trade. ELI recommends developing zone defenses, whereby governments across South America and East Africa cooperate to ensure strong, enforced laws regionwide, to avoid exploitable loopholes and shifts to more lax environments.