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A Global Challenge : The Illegal Wildlife Trade Chain

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Abstract

Illegal wildlife trade threatens key forest landscapes throughout the world. These practices decimate valuable resources and millions of livelihoods, and contribute to global warming. Illegal trade in wildlife is depriving developing economies of billions of dollars in lost revenues and development opportunities. Understanding the phenomenon requires a broad insight into the relationship between the environmental resources at stake, their legal and illegal exploitation, loopholes, as well as the scale and type of crimes committed. Due to the problem's broad scale, a comprehensive approach is required. To curb the rise in environmental crime the response must involve legal responses, enforcement, legislation, regulation, environmental management, consumer and demand-reduction strategies, and alternative livelihood opportunities.

Keywords: *Illegal, Trade, Wildlife, Crime, Poaching, Fauna and Flora.*

1. INTRODUCTION

World Bank Environmental Scientist Valerie Hickey once said - "Wildlife crime is leading to the proliferation of guns in exactly those areas that need less conflict, not more; it is providing money for corruption in exactly those countries in which corruption has already stalled all pro-poor decision making and doing business legitimately is already hard enough; and it is oiling the engine of crime and polluting efforts at good governance, democracy and transparency in exactly those communities that need more voice, not more silence... The fight to end wildlife crime is a fight for humanity."

The illegal wildlife trade is flourishing all over the world, to the point of being out of control. Unsustainable forest clearing and the illegal wildlife trade threatens key forest landscapes. These practices decimate valuable resources and millions of livelihoods, and contribute to global warming. The opportunities ecosystems provide for future development, however,

are threatened by serious and increasingly sophisticated transnational organized environmental crime, undermining development goals and good governance. Transnational organized environmental crime may include illegal logging, poaching and trafficking of a wide range of animals, illegal fisheries, illegal mining and dumping of toxic waste. It is a rapidly rising threat to the environment, to revenues from natural resources, to state security, and to sustainable development.

The consequences of the illegal trade in wildlife span environmental, social and economic impacts. This theft of sovereign natural capital affects the resource base for local communities. The illegal trade in wildlife is therefore a barrier to sustainable development, involving a complex combination of weak environmental governance, unregulated trade, loopholes and laundering systems used to conduct serious transnational crime, and undermining government institutions and legitimate business. The illegal trade in wildlife involves a wide range of flora

and fauna, with impacts across all regions. It is estimated that \$48-153 billion of natural capital is lost through illegal trade of wildlife including forest products globally each year.

2. ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE- GRAVITY OF THE PROBLEM

Illegal Wildlife Trade describes any environment related crime that involves the illegal trade, smuggling, poaching, capture or collection of endangered species, protected wildlife (including animals and plants that are subject to harvest quotas and regulated by permits), derivatives or products thereof.

The illegal wildlife trade is flourishing all over the world, to the point of being out of control. Each year, hundreds of millions of plants and animals are caught or harvested from the wild and then sold as food, pets, ornamental plants, leather, tourist curios, and medicine. While a great deal of this trade is legal and is not harming wild populations, a worryingly large proportion is illegal and threatens the survival of many endangered species.

The lure of trafficking in wildlife is exemplified in the following quote by American Fish and Wildlife officer Tom Striegler: *“A padded vest studded with 40 eggs from Australia’s endangered black palm cockatoo, each worth \$10,000, is far easier to smuggle than an equal-valued cache of cocaine, simply because custom officials aren’t looking for cockatoo eggs.”* In this quote is contained the nature of the problem- highly demanded, prohibited commodities precipitate a lucrative black market, made all the more profitable by ease of smuggling and the lax enforcement of regulations.

In our world it is hard to find a single wildlife product that hasn’t been traded legally or illegally. All species are traded for their meat, fur, bones, teeth or ornamental value. Every year China, The United States, Europe and Japan, which are the four most financially prosperous parts of the world, purchase billions of dollars of wildlife from biologically rich parts of the world such as the Americas, Asia and Africa.

A 2011 report from *Global Financial Integrity*, a program of the Center for International Policy, analyzed the scale, flow, profit distribution, and impact of the main types of illegal trade. According to that report, illegal wildlife trade, including timber and fisheries, is the fourth largest global illegal activity after narcotics, counterfeiting and human trafficking and ahead of oil, art, gold, human organs, small arms and diamonds. Illegal wildlife trade is believed to be on par with drug trafficking and the arms trade, both in terms of revenue produced for criminal enterprises and in the threat to global security.

China is the number one market for all species of wildlife, but the other alarming statistic is that United States has become the second largest market of illegal products in the world. The trade has become highly profitable with exceptionally low risks. The estimates on the trade in live wildlife are appalling. Two to three million live birds are for sale each year. As an example of the profits, a single Golden lion Tamarin, a species of primate, is worth approximately \$20,000. One gram of coral snake venom can be worth about \$30,000.

The chain of the trade from capture to the market often requires intermediate processing and may involve intermediate destinations. The international trade in particular is characterized by flexible distribution lines and networks of intermediaries, from harvesters through middlemen and on to wholesalers, exporters, processors, and retailers. Routes used in the wildlife traffic are often complex and take advantage of weaknesses and regulatory loopholes in the international trade control regime especially in those cases in which controls have been relaxed to encourage free trade as in the European Union.

The value of animals and wildlife products typically increases by 25%-50% as it moves through the supply chain and in some cases, the inflation is far greater. For example, an African gray parrot exported from the Ivory Coast increases from \$20 at capture to \$100 at the point of export to \$600 for the importer in Europe or the United States and to \$1,100 to the specialist retailer.

Some facts that give an idea of how serious the trade is:

- (i) **Around 35,000 – 50,000 African Elephants are poached every year :** The African elephant population has been cut in half since the 1970s due to ivory poaching. It is estimated that the African elephant will be extinct in the next 10 years if this trend does not stop.
- (ii) **There are more Tigers in American backyards than in the wild :** The illegal wildlife trade also fuels the exotic pet trade. The WWF estimates there are 5,000 tigers being kept in United States backyards and there are only around 3,000 left in the wild.
- (iii) **Three Rhinos are poached everyday :** Despite scientific evidence refuting the efficacy of rhino horn to treat illnesses such as cancer, it still remains a popular ingredient in traditional medicine.
- (iv) **More than one million Pangolins have been traded in the past 10 years :** Pangolins are largely poached for their scales or sold as bush meat.
- (v) **Approximately 28,300 freshwater Turtles are traded each day :** Around 80 percent of Asia’s freshwater turtle species are in danger of extinction. These turtles are used for medicine, food and pets.
- (vi) **Around 30 percent of the Asian Elephant population is in captivity :** Like the African elephant, the Asian elephant is at dire risk of extinction. There are an estimated 32,000 Asian elephants left in the wild. One-third of the remaining population are being held in zoos, circuses, or used in tourist attractions.
- (vii) **The Illegal Wildlife Trade generates between five to 20 billion dollars annually :** The species who fall victim to this cruel trade are quickly becoming endangered and threatened with extinction. As the supply of these animals drops, the price tag for their goods rises.
- (viii) **It is the fourth most lucrative Illegal Trade in the world :** According to *United for Wildlife*, the illegal wildlife trade ranks right after drugs, human trafficking and the arms trade.
- (ix) **Over the past 25 years, the wholesale price of ivory in China has risen from five dollars to 2,100 dollars :** The African elephant population is quickly dwindling, making the price of ivory rise. China is the world’s largest market for ivory and the United States comes in close second.
- (x) **Over 1,000 rangers have been killed in the past 10 years in 35 countries :** In an effort to protect species, many national parks and wildlife reserves have rangers who guard endangered species from harm. Given the high potential pay-off for the sale of wildlife parts, poachers will do whatever it takes to kill wildlife even if that means killing humans as well.

3. DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF WILDLIFE TRADE

There are certain places in the world where wildlife trade is particularly threatening. These areas are called “*wildlife trade hotspots*.” They include China’s international borders, trade hubs in Eastern/Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, the eastern borders of the European Union, some markets in Mexico, parts of the Caribbean, parts of Indonesia and New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. While these hotspots might be trouble areas at present, they also offer opportunities for great conservation success, if action and funds are well-focused. Wildlife trade alone is a major threat to some species, but its impact is frequently made worse by habitat loss and other pressures. Ill effects if this trade includes:

- (i) **Interruption with the Nature :** Overexploitation of plant and animal species affects the living environment and ecological balance in a number of ways. Just as overfishing causes imbalances in the whole marine system, our complex web of life on earth depends on careful and thoughtful use of wildlife species and their habitats.
- (ii) **Damaged Habitats :** Illegal trade also

destroys the natural habitats of animals on whom they rely on. One example we deal with here is that poachers cut down parrots' nesting trees in order to reach the nestlings. In many parrot populations, the nesting site is the most important factor for population growth. Finding a good nesting tree is so difficult that in some species, most of the reproductive adults have to wait for many years for a nest to be available. So when poachers destroy a nesting tree, they are causing more damage than if they just took the nestlings – they are also making it even more difficult for any remaining parrots to reproduce.

- (iii) **Extinction of Species** : Extinction is the greatest threat to animals that are victims of wildlife poaching. In 2011, the *International Union for the Conservation of Nature* (IUNC) declared the Western Black Rhinoceros extinct. This subspecies of the critically endangered Black Rhino was poached due to the belief in the healing properties of its horn.

Poaching is the main cause for extinction of various species. For example: The Sumatran Tiger is a critically endangered species right now. It is poached and sold for its parts (skin, teeth, bones, and claws) which sell for up to \$5,000. Poaching is more lucrative than other jobs that are available in the region; a harsh reality faced by many individuals and communities.

- (iv) **Accidental killing of Non-Target Species** : Like marine species killed through by catch, accidental killing of animals also happens on land. For example, crude traps set for musk deer or duikers cause damage and death to a variety of other animals besides those intended.
- (v) **Damage causing Invasive Species** : The illegal trade can also release exotic invasive species into other countries, and these animals can harm native wildlife, introduce exotic diseases that infect people and livestock, and cause billions of dollars of losses to the

economy. In the U.S. alone, economic losses from invasive species were estimated to be 120 billion in 2005. The effect on biodiversity can also be severe; the release of Burmese pythons into the Everglades in Florida has caused the disappearance of 87 percent to 99 percent of small mammals like rabbits, raccoons, opossums, bobcats, foxes and even deer.

- (vi) **Transmission of Diseases** : The transmission of diseases from wild animals to man through illegal trade is common. Experts estimate that more than 70% of all contagious diseases originating from an animal come from wild animals. Some diseases can be deadly, such as rabies, Ebola, H5N1 avian influenza, SARS, monkey pox and hepatitis B, among many others, all of which cause tens to hundreds of thousands of cases annually. The link between wildlife trade and disease has been clearly illustrated.

For instance, a 1975 ban on the sale of small aquatic turtles in the U.S. has prevented the spread of Salmonella to 100,000 children a year, but millions of turtles are exported annually to the rest of the world where there are no bans or sanitary controls.

- (vii) **Altering livelihoods of indigenous peoples** : Local wildlife is considered an important resource by many communities, often the poorest, in the developing world. Some rural households depend on wild animals for protein, trees for fuel, and both wild animals and plants for natural cures.

The extinction of a species can also have a negative economic effect on a local community's tourism industry. A community that relies on its wildlife to attract tourists is at great risk for economic hardship if the prevalence of poaching is high. Furthermore, a tourist boycott due to local poaching is a real threat. A boycott could have a detrimental effect on a community's economy since restaurants, hotels, rentals, and other attractions would suffer.

4. INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

Illegal trade in forest and wildlife products, as well as the illegal exploitation of natural resources is now widely recognized as a significant threat to the environment, human well-being, food security as well as to sustainable development. This is reflected in a range of decisions from CITES, from the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, INTERPOL and the UN Security Council.

The *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* (CITES) was conceived in the spirit of international cooperation. To date, it confers varying degrees of protection to more than 30,000 species of animals and plants, regardless of whether they traded as live specimens, fur coats or dried herbs.

CITES was drafted following a resolution adopted in 1963 at a meeting of members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The final text of the Convention was agreed at a meeting of representatives of 80 countries in Washington, D.C., the United States of America, on 3 March 1973. CITES entered into force on 1 July 1975.

The *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) emanated from the world community's growing commitment to sustainable development. The CBD entered into force on 29 December 1993. It introduced a new step forward in the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. It has three main objectives: The conservation of biological diversity; The sustainable use of the components of biological diversity; and The fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.

In November 2010, recognizing the importance of international cooperation, the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC) joined forces with four international organizations namely, The Secretariat of CITES, INTERPOL, the *World Customs Organization* (WCO) and the World Bank, to form the *International Consortium on*

Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC). The consortium aims to bring coordinated support to governments, national wildlife and forest law enforcement agencies and sub-regional networks whose objective is to protect the world's natural resources from criminal exploitation. In addition, being cognizant of the drivers of wildlife and forest crime, ICCWC promotes a comprehensive approach that includes addressing sustainable natural resource management and livelihood opportunities. The CITES Secretariat is appointed as chair of the consortium.

In partnership with ICCWC, UNODC developed the *Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytic Toolkit*. The Toolkit aids governments in identifying challenges and strengthen their criminal justice responses to wildlife and forest crime. The Toolkit is a technical resource to assist government officials in wildlife and forestry administration and customs. It also assists other relevant agencies to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of preventive and criminal justice responses and other measures related to the protection and monitoring of wildlife and forest products.

Besides being part of the ICCWC, INTERPOL initiates and leads a number of projects under its *Environmental Crime Programme* to combat the poaching, trafficking, or possession of legally protected flora and fauna. Together with *International Fund for Animal Welfare* (IFAW), INTERPOL has formed a formal framework for cooperation, in particular on combating crime related to the illegal killing and trafficking of elephants, rhinoceroses and tigers through regional and global operations.

The INTERPOL, *Wildlife Crime Working Group* supports the Environmental Compliance and Enforcement Committee in its function. The Working Group provides a platform for specialized criminal investigators worldwide to work on project-based activities on an international level. The objective is to identify ways and develop methods to better the flow and exchange of information amongst wildlife enforcement agencies, INTERPOL National Central Bureaus and the INTERPOL General Secretariat.

Besides the Wildlife Crime Working Group, INTERPOL initiated two important projects to combat illegal wildlife trade: Project Predator and Project Wisdom. The first project aims to support and enhance the governance and law enforcement capacity for the conservation of Asian big cats. The second project intends to improve wildlife law enforcement in Africa, specifically targeting illegal trade in elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn.

5. ADDRESSING ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the current global proportions of illegal trade in wildlife and its impact on sustainable development, environment and national securities, there is a need for further strengthening effective global cooperation to address such trade. Such challenges can only be effectively tackled through the unified efforts of the international community in support of national efforts.

A comprehensive and coordinated world-wide response to improve coherence and collaboration amongst agencies and to support holistic national approaches to address the illegal trade in wildlife will be an important component of the global response. Such a response, with additional support from the enforcement sector, would further strengthen coordinated efforts in relation to coherent legislation, environmental law, poverty alleviation and development support, awareness raising and demand reduction.

- (i) **Strengthen support to International Agencies, Institutions and to the entire enforcement chain** : States shall tender support to CITES, UNODC, WCO, INTERPOL, ICCWC etc. including frontline, investigator, customs, prosecutors and the judiciary, with particular reference to environmental crime to support legal revenues and sustainable development and to reduce the impacts on the environment from environmental crime.
- (ii) **Develop and implement Regional wildlife enforcement strategies** : Regional wildlife enforcement strategies and networks that are

interconnected through a global coordinating mechanism needs to be developed and governments shall carry out research on illegal wildlife trade routes, the effects of wildlife trade on particular species and on deficiencies in wildlife trade laws. This research then be used to create new plans for dealing with the illegal wildlife trade and to promote the inclusion of new species in the CITES appendices or resolutions.

- (iii) **Strengthen Policies and Legal frameworks**: To effectively address wildlife-related offences and to ensure that legal trade is monitored and managed effectively, there is a need to increase law enforcement capacity and develop effective judicial systems at the local, national and international levels. Many countries still lack strict national legislation and/or appropriate penalties for illegal wildlife trade. To address this challenge, assistance shall be provided for supporting program development, organizing workshops, creation of regulations and for enforcement efforts along with funds for anti-poaching brigades.
- (iv) **Identify end-user markets and organize Consumer Awareness campaigns** : One of the most powerful tools for addressing illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade is persuading consumers to make informed choices. Reduce demand for illegal wildlife parts and products by encouraging others to ask questions and get the facts before buying any wildlife or plant product.
Address the growing demand for and availability of wildlife products through targeted consumer awareness and demand-reduction initiatives in key consumer states. Call upon Governments to effectively work with civil society and the private sector in efforts to identify alternatives to consumer demands for traded wildlife species and forest produces.
- (v) **Stop Wildlife Crime** : Encourage the production and purchase of sustainable wildlife goods and to work hand-in-hand with

communities around the world, providing practical support to overcome poverty and help them use local wildlife in a sustainable way. Also pushing governments to protect threatened animal populations by increasing law enforcement, imposing strict deterrents, reducing demand for endangered species products and honoring international commitments made under CITES.

- (vi) **Elevate wildlife crime to the level of other serious crimes :** According priority to wildlife crime at par with other serious inter-national organized crimes such as human trafficking and the drug trade, that pose significant threats to global security and development.
- (vii) **Invest in capacity building and technological support to national environment :** Wildlife and law enforcement agencies to enable them to further protect key populations of iconic endangered species threatened by poaching, such as but not limited to, rhinos, tigers and the African elephant as a necessary response to safeguard these species from poaching, alongside renewed efforts to strengthening habitat protection and management.
- (viii) **Need for paradigm shift in demand reduction strategies :** There needs to be a paradigm shift in the design, planning and execution of demand reduction strategies. Environmentalists and experts from relevant fields should apply more strategic methods,

particularly those based upon better understanding the fundamental factors influencing the behaviour of consumers and how we could influence their behaviour and how we could accomplish behavioural change. Demand reduction efforts should refrain from providing people with vague or over ambitious actions but offer them more concise, “doable” and measurable actions that are applicable to their lifestyles.

6. CONCLUSION

Like any trade, the illegal trade of wildlife is ruled by the laws of economy: supply and demand. Consumers are the motor that puts in motion the whole illegal trade process, and thus they are an integral part of this illegal activity. As long as consumers demand these species of wildlife, traffickers will ensure that there is a supply of it, but if demand decreases so will the supply. To really bring down the demand for wildlife as pets, the single most important thing we can do is to make sure that consumers know about all the negative effects of each step of the illegal wildlife trade.

Strengthened enforcement efforts need to be complemented by broader development and awareness raising efforts. End-user markets need to be further analyzed, and consumer awareness campaigns need to be systematically designed, supported and implemented. There is a central role for civil society and the private sector in such efforts, and also to identify alternatives in some instances to consumer demands for illegally traded wildlife products.

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