Another turn for the worse for endangered species
High environmental, social and economic costs
Illegal Trade in Wildlife

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Illegal Trade in Wildlife
The high environmental, social and economic costs

At the start of the 20th century Africa was home to an estimated million black rhinos belonging to four sub-species. By 2007 there were fears that the Western black rhino, with its distinctive dexterous upper lip, had become extinct, while the number of wild northern white rhino had never been lower. Levels of poaching and illegal trade in ivory, which had fallen in the 1990s, began to rise again with an unprecedented spike in illegal trade of elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns.

Demand for illegal wildlife products is based on their use in traditional East Asian medicine, the international trade in commercial goods (e.g. timber) and exotic pets, and a desire for status symbols, among other factors. Illegal trade in animals, plants (including timber and charcoal) and fish is one of the largest sources of criminal earnings in the world – ranking alongside trafficking of drugs, people and arms. Today illegal wildlife trade is estimated to be worth US$50-150 billion per year. The global illegal fisheries catch is valued at US$10-23.5 billion a year and illegal logging, including processing, at US$30-100 billion.

Numbers like these do not even begin to capture the environmental, social and economic costs of illegal wildlife trade, which hinder investments in tourism and other types of development as well as threatening the ecosystems and biodiversity on which economic development often depends. Widespread failure of forest governance, characterized by illegal logging, associated illegal trade, and corruption, undermines attempts to achieve sustainable economic growth, social balance and environmental protection.

Profits from the illegal wildlife trade are often used to finance further illegal activity, including other forms of transnational organized crime. Loss of species can have devastating consequences. As an example, elephants are ‘ecological engineers’. They change the landscape by uprooting grasses and trees, stripping bark and dispersing the seeds of the forage they eat, helping to create rich and diverse environments. The resulting biodiverse ecosystems not only support humans with food and other resources – and make environmentally sustainable tourism activities possible – they are also more resilient in the face of threats from e.g. diseases or extreme weather.

While the resurgence of illegal wildlife trade has become more evident, there is also better understanding of the impact of globalization, with illegal trade connecting producers and consumers around the world. The expansion of economies, international commerce, transportation, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) help fuel demands for illegal wildlife products. To control such environmental crime, strong, international and coordinated governance is essential. The UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice adopted in 2007 a resolution on international cooperation in preventing and combatting illicit international trafficking in forest products, including timber, wildlife and other forest biological resources.

Read more about globalization and the environment in the 2007 Year Book.

Transnational organized crime

Illegal wildlife trade is often carried out by criminal groups operating across borders. They are attracted by high profits and low risks associated with weak governance and lax penalties. International cooperation and mutual legal assistance among countries can help prevent, combat and eradicate such trafficking. National law enforcement and legal frameworks, and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (which entered into force in 2003) and its protocols, all have an important role to play in this regard.
Recognition of illegal wildlife trade as a serious crime

Illegal wildlife trade is no longer an emerging issue: the numbers tell the story. Today more elephants are being slaughtered than at any time in the past 20 years. Officials have estimated that close to 25,000 elephants were killed in 2013 to supply the illegal ivory trade, with ivory reportedly priced at over US$2200 per kg on the streets of Beijing, China. Over the past few years, the number of elephants killed annually has doubled compared to 2007. For the rhinoceros, the statistics are even more bleak. Over 1000 were slaughtered in 2013 in South Africa, more than any other single year. Between 2007 and 2013, rhino poaching increased by 7000% in South Africa. Rhino horn, with its supposed but unproven medicinal qualities, can bring over US$66,000 per kg on the black market. About 20,000 white rhinos and 4880 black rhinos remained in the wild as of February 2013.

Organized crime is attracted by the possibility of huge profits with little risk, and penalties that are both disproportionately small and not always enforced. However, local communities may suffer most from the presence of violent gangs as well as the deterioration of the environment. Two iconic species, rhino and elephant, are threatened with extinction because of the illegal wildlife trade, driven by growing demand primarily from South East Asia and China.

Trends in illegal logging are also rising. Illegally logged timber from East Asia and the Pacific, which ends up in furniture and homes around the world, accounts for a staggering US$17 billion a year – an amount equal to the value of illegal trafficking of people, drugs and counterfeit goods in this region. In Africa, evidence is growing that illegal charcoal trade is linked to threat finance.

Encouraged by poverty, poorly monitored borders, corruption, and weak regulations and enforcement, wildlife poaching and trafficking continue to grow. The supply chain from producer to consumer involves more people in more countries (including some police, customs officers, and legal and political figures) as illegal products are transported using sophisticated smuggling techniques and routes. Reports that rebel armies use money obtained through the illegal ivory trade to buy guns and ammunition illustrate the impact this activity can have on both local stability within countries and international security. In January 2014, the UN Security Council adopted two resolutions sanctioning wildlife trafficking, primarily designed to target armed rebel groups that use the illegal ivory trade as a way to generate finances.

While the problem continues to worsen, the international community is becoming increasingly focused on wildlife crime, recognizing the seriousness of its environmental, social and economic impacts. The fundamental institution regulating wildlife trade, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), was strengthened at its last Conference of the Parties in 2013, when over 200 timber species and a variety of marine animals (e.g. sharks, manta rays, turtles) were added to the protected species list. In April 2013, the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice sought to toughen existing laws by declaring wildlife trafficking a ‘serious crime’ with offences carrying a minimum penalty of four years of imprisonment.
Are we turning a corner? Small steps towards success

The crisis is real, but there are hopeful signs that with cooperative efforts and planning innovative solutions can be found to disrupt the illegal wildlife trade. The international community is coming together to make a stronger, more unified effort to fight back.

However, the supply chain is highly complex, crossing many borders. There are links connecting poachers in source countries, transnational criminal syndicates, and traders and consumers in East Asia, Europe, North America and elsewhere. The international police organization INTERPOL and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have begun to assess patterns and cross-overs between illegal wildlife trade and other serious crime, such as drug smuggling and money laundering, and to apply lessons learned in these areas.

Although weak laws and local corruption give criminals escape routes, emerging international law and policing efforts – in partnership with communities and countries – are producing some exciting results. Early in 2014, 28 countries and environmental and law enforcement agencies worked together for a month on a sting operation known as ‘Cobra Two’. It netted 36 rhino horns, more than three tonnes of ivory, over a thousand skins of endangered animals, and hundreds of tonnes of logs from protected trees. This groundbreaking operation also resulted in more than 400 arrests in Asia and Africa.

Customs officials play a vital role in apprehending illegal material at borders. The World Customs Organization (WCO) works to ensure that customs enforcement operations act to determine the legitimacy of all goods being declared for entry or exit. Rigorous and increased inspection and border control along with increased sharing of communication and co-operation between regions, countries and organizations involved in fighting illegal wildlife trade could help pick up illegal products as they move from source to purchaser.

Collaboration between international organizations has resulted in another major advance in the fight against illegal wildlife trade, with the formation of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC). Composed of the CITES Secretariat, INTERPOL, UNODC, the World Bank and WCO, the ICCWC was created to ensure a strong and co-ordinated response to wildlife crime. In 2012 it developed the Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytical Toolkit to assist governments in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their criminal justice responses to wildlife and forest crime. Today the ICCWC is recognized as the world’s leading intergovernmental initiative in the fight against wildlife crime.

 Enforcement efforts are taking advantage of the latest technology for detection, analysis and communication. Monitoring and data collection through the Wildlife Enforcement Monitoring System (WEMS), for example, helps African countries to track illegal wildlife trade, monitor legal enforcement, capture trends, and share the information among participants. In pilot projects, drones equipped with video cameras are being used to keep a ‘virtual eye’ on rhinos and Bengal tigers in inaccessible areas of Chitwan National Park in Nepal. The volume of internationally traded products such as timber and fish from certified sources is small but growing. The latest technology, such as DNA and isotope analyses, can be used to increase and improve monitoring of wildlife products, their origins, destinations and transboundary movements.

Awareness raising campaigns, social media and marketing are being used to address the final link in the supply chain – consumer demand. The majority of ivory and rhino horn consumers reside in Asia, where a wealthier middle class now sees ivory as affordable. In the case of timber products and fish, consumers may live almost anywhere in the world. Misinformation and lack of understanding about the scale of illegal wildlife trade, how these products are obtained and the trade’s impacts, lead to poorly informed decisions. Therefore, education is of key importance. Many awareness-raising initiatives have been launched by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and others to profile the issues. The use of social media is building momentum as an effective and efficient global way to educate and reduce the demand for illegal wildlife products. Celebrities are particularly influential in their ability to break through the clutter and reach large and diverse audiences.
Combatting illegal wildlife trade through international collaboration

Illegal wildlife trade must be controlled. It threatens the environment, deprives communities of their livelihoods, decreases revenues for governments and businesses, and increases the probability of conflicts creating security risks – in addition to jeopardizing the survival of some species.

The key to success in the fight against illegal wildlife trade is collaboration among countries and international agencies. Efficient control of transboundary movements of wildlife products requires good information exchange and cooperation, involving importing, exporting and transit countries. Mechanisms need to be enhanced to facilitate rapid exchanges of intelligence between enforcement agencies.

Illegal wildlife trade still has a relatively low priority compared to other transnational crimes such as drug smuggling, human trafficking or counterfeit products. As the routes used to transport illegal wildlife products are the same as those used for drugs, people and weapons, successful approaches in these areas need to be considered to combat illegal wildlife. A protocol on environmental crime under the Convention on Transboundary Crime might provide a regulatory framework for doing this.

As regulations are only as good as their enforcement, provisions for enforcement need to be strengthened, with clear mandates and roles, sufficient resources, and effective penalties to discourage illegal wildlife trade. Enforcement could be incorporated and strengthened as an integral part of the implementation of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). In addition, more support needs to be given to enforcement agencies in countries, including inspectors, customs officers, police and the judiciary, such as training of personnel, promotion of cooperation to control transboundary movements of environmental goods, and investigation and prosecution of criminals.

Above all, educating communities in which there is a demand for illegal wildlife products is essential. Campaigns to change the public opinion are powerful tools for reducing this demand. Targeting communities where supplies originate, by providing increased training and education and offering alternative livelihoods, also needs to be part of the strategy. Ensuring the exchange of information, the traceability of goods and widespread knowledge in society of the scale and impact of illegal wildlife trade is paramount.

For video links please go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0hgJnE5T1Y
Further information about illegal wildlife trade


