

Facing extinction

Law enforcement and conservation agencies are increasingly working together to tackle wildlife trafficking. **Chris Jagger** examines the trade, and evaluates the international response.

Key points

- The illegal trade in wildlife is more intricate than other forms of transnational organised crime and has become one of the world's most profitable illicit enterprises.
- The source, transit, and supply of protected wildlife spans the globe, with instances recorded of connections to transnational terrorism.
- As law enforcement and conservation agencies increase their efforts and effectiveness against wildlife trafficking, the risk of a negative reaction from organised crime groups will also increase.

The illegal trade in wildlife, a multifaceted global threat, has attracted increasing attention from governmental security, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies. This was demonstrated by Operation Thunderstorm – reported by Interpol on 20 June – in which law enforcement and environmental agency officials from 92 countries worked to counter the illegal trade in animals and timber. During the month-long operation, 1,974 seizures were made, including 1.3 tonnes of elephant ivory, and approximately 1,400 suspected criminals identified. Interpol Secretary-General Jürgen Stock stated, “Operation Thunderstorm sends

a clear message to wildlife criminals that the world's law enforcement community is homing in on them.”

This new focus has moved the illegal wildlife trade from being a peripheral issue in the mid-2000s to becoming a mainstream and urgent challenge. On 13 October 2016, the European Parliament voted on a series of actions that place wildlife crime near the top of the EU's security agenda. The details of these initiatives are laid out in the EU 2020 Action Plan, officially the EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking (SWD (2016) 38).

For many EU policymakers, wildlife crime now sits in the top tier of security threats alongside drugs, terrorism, human trafficking, and arms smuggling. The EU's heightened concern has played an important part in encouraging member states to review their own responses, with the UK apparently positioning to lead the debate. Alongside similar actions around the world, on 3 April 2018, the UK government announced that a proposed ban on ivory sales would go ahead, pledging that the action associated with the ban would be the toughest in Europe, if not the world.

Additionally, on 10–11 October 2018, the UK government will host the second in a series of international conferences on the illegal wildlife trade. The conference is designed to bring together global leaders to raise awareness and to strengthen partnerships to protect endangered species.

Rising priority

The conservation community has long demanded immediate action, raising the question of why wildlife protection has taken so long to become a government



Diverse demand: drivers of wildlife trafficking



priority. In part, the complexity of the phenomenon disguised its urgency: the illegal trade in wildlife is more intricate than other forms of transnational organised crime, and consequently challenges analysts’ ability to understand it and to develop responses. Such analytical understanding is built on the three cornerstones of value, scale, and harm, as well as the premises of ‘source-transit-demand’ and criminal methodologies.

In terms of value, according to the European Commission’s EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking (2016), the illegal trade in wildlife has become one of the world’s most profitable organised crimes. A 2011 Europol press release stated that “global revenue generated by trafficking in endangered species is estimated to be over 4.4 billion euros [USD5.5 billion] per year”.

Multiple sources – including Europol and

Left: Kenya Wildlife Services Director General Kitili Mbatia poses in a secure ivory stock room in Nairobi on 21 March 2016.

Carl De Souza/AFP/Getty Images: 1726337

Interpol – have delivered a spectrum of estimates for the value of the illegal wildlife trade, many reaching tens of billions of dollars annually. This indicates how – in a simple balance of price per kilo – many illegal wildlife products hold greater value than illegal drugs. An exact value for the trade is incalculable, but quantitative research projects led by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, Europol, and several conservation agencies – such as wildlife monitoring network TRAFFIC, established in 1976, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) – aim to reach a more refined approximation.

The illegal trade in wildlife is deeply interconnected with the wider theme of environmental crime, which encompasses forestry and fishery crimes, illegal dumping of waste, the smuggling of ozone-depleting substances, and illegal mining. According to a 4 June 2016 joint report by Interpol and the United Nations Environment Programme, the totality of environmental crime may be worth between USD91–258 billion.

As for scale, the variety of ‘commodities’ involved in the trade is dauntingly high. A single internationally agreed list of endangered species does not exist, but the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the authority on the subject and lists more than 79,000 species on its ‘Red List of Threatened Species’.

This number only covers animals that the IUCN is able to monitor and document; the total number of threatened species may reach into the hundreds of thousands. Approximately 5,800 species of animals and 30,000 species of plants are protected from over-exploitation through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

From the perspective of law enforcement, it is unrealistic to train officers to identify this vast number of species. Moreover, the issue of scale is more complex than the practical difficulties of identifying single animals. For example, the Malayan tiger – of which there are only 250 remaining, according to



Rare cubs rescued by Indonesian police officers from illegal wildlife traders are displayed in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 18 November 2015. The trade in wildlife offers criminal gangs minimal risk and high rewards.

TRAFFIC – will be broken down into smaller body parts before being smuggled.

The harm from the trade in wildlife manifests itself in many ways, varying in severity and impact from country to country. For example, aside from the risk of extinction of species and erosion of ecosystems, there is evidence that wildlife crime has undermined the prosperity of emerging economies and has funded conflicts. In the foreword to the first Wildlife Crime Report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, its executive director Yury Fedotov declared, “There is increasing recognition of the dangers wildlife and forest crime pose not only to the environment, but to the rule of law and stability, and of the potential for the criminal proceeds to fuel conflict and terrorism.”

Regarding the connection between wildlife crime and terrorism, according to the website of the WWF’s project office in Kenya, “Wildlife products have become a substantial source of income for terrorist organizations in Africa, mainly due to the low risk and high reward associated with the wildlife crime compared to other crimes.”

According to the Elephant Action League (EAL)’s website, the Somali Islamist militant group Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen has funded up to 40% of its militant operations with funds from the illegal wildlife trade. An 18-month long EAL undercover research project conducted between 2010 and 2012, and reported in a *New York Times* op-ed in

July 2016, concluded that the money raised was used to purchase explosives, bullets, and weapons, and to pay soldiers’ wages.

The source, transit, and supply of protected wildlife spans the entire globe, with Ecuador listed by the IUCN as the country with the most threatened species on the planet, followed by the US. The willingness to stop the illegal trade in wildlife varies considerably by country and region, and in some cases ancient traditions and spiritual beliefs have to be taken into account; in Madagascar, for example, the aye-aye lemur is believed to possess an evil spirit and its capture and killing is culturally sanctioned.

An ineffectual law enforcement response may be caused by a lack of knowledge, skill, resources, and co-ordination, or undermined by corruption and active participation in the crime. Based on logistics and trends in other illegal trafficking, *Jane’s* judges that the number of transit countries involved in the smuggling of illegal wildlife is likely to be greater than for other forms of organised crime.

The driving forces behind demand are similarly complex. The reason for demand in the case of illegal drugs or the exploitation of human beings is relatively straightforward, but motives for the acquisition of wildlife are far more varied. In the case of the Malayan tiger, each body part has its own unique value: the skin may be used as a rug, the teeth as jewellery, or the organs as a supposed aphrodisiac.

Criminal methodologies

The sophistication of those involved in the illegal wildlife trade covers a spectrum, from poor opportunistic poachers through to wealthy criminal gang leaders. Aside from certain ‘hot-spot’ locations where law enforcement has improved its abilities to detect smuggling, the illegal trade in wildlife generally offers criminal gangs a minimal risk, but a high reward. Between June 2010 and June 2012, the WWF launched its ‘Wildlife Crime Scorecard’, assessing the compliance of 23 countries against CITES commitments, with both India and Nepal classed in 2012 as being global leaders.

However, despite a low risk of detection, every commodity or species comes with its own set of logistical challenges for the smuggler, who must also move the consignment undetected. There are multiple recorded techniques for smuggling, including such innovations as parrots concealed in drain pipes and rhinoceros horn carved into bracelets. Many other techniques are unknown, presenting significant challenges to law enforcement.

Julian Rademeyer, a project leader for TRAFFIC based in South Africa, explained to *Jane’s* on 13 June how “the methods used by smugglers make it difficult for law enforcement agencies and border guards to identify illegal species. For example, it is unrealistic to expect border officials to be able to identify smugglers passing through an airport wearing a rhino-horn bracelet or bangle or beads, or carrying them in a bag. It’s not [what] law enforcement agencies and customs officials are trained to search for”.

In common with other forms of transnational criminality, wildlife traffickers use cyberspace with varying degrees of ingenuity. The internet offers opportunities to advertise and reach potential buyers; to communicate with criminal counterparts; and to network, organise, and facilitate smuggling.

Attempting to estimate the scale of online markets, the International Fund for Animal Welfare conducted a research project over six weeks in 2017. It found 11,772 endangered and threatened wildlife species for sale online in France, Germany, Russia, and the UK, with protected species shown via 5,381 advertisements and posts on 106 online marketplaces on the open and dark webs. Four social media platforms were also used to reach potential buyers, with the total advertised cost of these species worth approximately USD3,942,329.

National and international responses

The first major international policy initiative to protect wildlife was the creation of the IUCN in 1948, which has become the world's largest and most diverse environmental network. The WWF, founded in 1961, was one of the first agencies to be born from the IUCN, and the next milestone was the formation of CITES in 1963.

These three global initiatives drove thousands of wildlife protection initiatives, wildlife intelligence and investigation units, and the creation of multiple conservation agencies. Many of these have overlapping agendas: conservation agencies are often funded through grants and donations, and consequently compete with sub-optimal co-ordination.

Nevertheless, there have been important steps towards collaboration. In 2005, the EU TWIX wildlife crime database was established to share law enforcement data on wildlife seizures and offences. Since its launch by the Belgian Federal Police and TRAFFIC, the database has supported knowledge sharing between the 28 EU member states. In 2010, the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC) was launched by the UNODC under the stewardship of CITES, aiming to strengthen criminal justice systems and to provide co-ordinated support at national, regional, and international level to combat wildlife and forestry crime. Also in 2010, Interpol's Environmental Compliance and Enforcement Committee was created. A series of UN resolutions then built towards the 2015 General Assembly resolution on tackling illicit trafficking in wildlife.

The largest international law enforcement operation to date against wildlife traffickers was Operation Cobra III, between 16 March and 31 May 2015. The operation recovered 12 tonnes of elephant ivory and more than 100 rhinoceros horns.

The Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC), founded in March 2015, is affecting how conservation agencies impact on organised crime. The WJC is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that is comprised of a team of lawyers, law enforcement officials, and wildlife experts. This combined expertise enables the WJC to launch investigations and to gather evidence to the same standards as international law enforcement, collecting sufficient intelligence and evidence. The WJC's innovative approach has led to significant successes, with 55 traffickers arrested and nine major networks disrupted.

In 2016, the UNODC published its first *World Wildlife Crime Report (Trafficking in Protected Species)*, which was the first authoritative global assessment focused on law enforcement. Europol's Intelligence Project on Environmental Crime, launched in 2014, enabled the inclusion of an assessment about the illegal trade in wildlife in Europol's annual *Serious Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA)*.

Finally, the EU 2020 *Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking* – divided into three broad priority areas and multiple objectives – directs and encourages governments to invest in strategies to counter wildlife crime. Many countries in Europe already have wildlife crime units, but most are mandated and focused on nationally protected species.

‘Conservation agencies are also professionalising their approach to become more intelligence-centric and security conscious’

Outlook

Operation Cobra III set a precedent for international multilateral co-operation between agencies that had otherwise worked bilaterally. This collaborative approach proved extremely successful, and an increase in similar operations is likely in the coming years. However, work remains to better harness the collective skills and knowledge of conservation and law enforcement communities. Initiatives since 2010 provide indicators of what may be on the horizon.

A policy momentum towards executive action – achieved through closer co-operation between law enforcement and conservation agencies – is building pace. The culmination of high-level policy developments, international consortiums, and law enforcement intelligence assessments will provide firm foundations for national law enforcement agencies to design tactics and strategies.

The nature of the future relationship between conservation agencies and law enforcement will develop in coming years. However, to achieve improvements in co-operation, conservation agencies will be required to invest in building information management systems that meet international standards on information sharing.

Conservation agencies are also professionalising their approach to become more

intelligence-centric and security-conscious. Organisations such as TRAFFIC and the WJC have started to hire and train staff as professional intelligence researchers and analysts, and information assessed to be of value to law enforcement is recorded and databased in accordance with international best practice.

Building capacity to work internationally will require additional resources and knowledge, and a trend will be for law enforcement agencies to collaborate with wildlife conservation agencies to form coherent strategies. Agencies such as TRAFFIC have substantial global networks of conservation experts spread out across the globe who are a potential intelligence resource for law enforcement to identify species and trends.

As governments, law enforcement, and

conservation agencies increase their efforts and effectiveness against wildlife trafficking, the risk of a negative reaction from organised crime groups will also increase. A likely increase in arrests, seizures, and disruptions will lead criminals to employ new measures to protect their operations, using secure communications, improving their operational security, and increasing the corruption or intimidation of individuals working against them. Field workers in high-profile conservation agencies will be particularly vulnerable, as they are usually easily identifiable by criminals and lack the protection, training, and security culture of government officials. ■

This is an abridged version of a feature first published online: 22/06/2018

On the web [ihsonline.com/janes](https://www.ihsonline.com/janes)

- Social network analysis offers tool for law enforcement
- Italy cracks down on environmental crime

Author

Chris Jagger is founder of the consultancy 2creatEffects, and formerly worked for the UK government, NATO, and the UN.