

OVERVIEW

The illegal wildlife trade is a vicious, highly-organised and lucrative black market industry, driven first and foremost by global humanity's rapacious appetite for wildlife products.

The dangers posed by our mass consumption of unregulated wildlife products were brought into sharp focus by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Driven by concern to prevent the future spread of new 'zoonotic' (i.e., animal borne) disease, China - the world's largest consumer market for wildlife products - published its updated Wildlife Protection Law at the end of 2022, while both the UN and EU introduced new measures to interdict the trade.

But with the world economy opening up again, hopes of a new chapter in our relationship with wildlife are fast-fading. We are already witnessing unmistakable signs of resurging and rampant consumer demand.

Valued at USD 23 billion annually, Interpol consider the illegal trade in wildlife products to be the third most profitable criminal endeavour globally, only superseded by drugs and arms trafficking. Extremist organisations and organised crime are now the main actors in the industry, dubbed here Extinction Inc. Players can yield massive profits from the illegal trade, including Boko Haram (aka ISWAP), who profit from the sale of ivory, or al-Shabaab, who are financed in part by illegal logging.

With wildlife species now vanishing at a rate estimated at 1000 times the historical average, the world is facing down the barrel of the first ever man-made mass extinction event. IWT is a primary driver of this crisis.

This world wildlife day 2023, Counter Extremism Project is calling on governments worldwide to tackle IWT with a level of urgency befitting a trade which is driving extinction, fuelling criminal and extremism organisations and opening the door to future pandemics.



KEY FACTS & FIGURES

The flow of illegally trafficked wildlife goods continued almost unabated during the pandemic

- A month-long Interpol operation in October 2022 resulted in 2,200 seizures and the identification of 934 suspects and 141 companies involved in IWT.
- A joint operation by European law enforcement in the six months to June 2022 resulted in the seizure of 1,255 kilograms of glass eels and the arrest of 49 individuals.
- Six tonnes of ivory were discovered by Malaysian authorities in a shipping container on 10 July 2022, while 600 kilograms were seized in Vietnamese ports over a single weekend in February 2023.

Poachers and traffickers rapidly adapted to the pandemic - not least by moving elements of their trade online:

- In September 2021, the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online reported removing or blocking 11,631,819 endangered species listings from their platforms.
- A quarter of Garamba National Park Rangers lost their jobs during COVID, preventing them from protecting animals from emboldened poachers.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Many of the problems that this report has analysed are man-made and so are the potential solutions. This report recommends to:

- **Build the knowledge base:** To fight IWT, we must build our knowledge on what is happening and to do this we need international cooperation as well as collaboration with locals.
- **Guard the guardians:** There must be increased support for journalists, activists and other stakeholders in order to broaden our knowledge and keep the pressure on officials.
- **Take on traffickers:** Traffickers must be met head on and park rangers and other defenders of wildlife are on the frontlines in this fight. They must be aided. In addition, the heads of these organisations must be targeted and more robust rules and stronger deterrence must be implemented across the world.
- **Cut off trafficking in transit:** Independent supervision, data utilisation and investment in technology, must all be used to inhibit the transport of illegal wildlife products. There must also be buy-in from the private sector.
- **Take the fight to the international stage:** A new convention should be formed specifically to address the problem of IWT. There must be an increase in the collaboration of intelligence across borders on repeat offenders and expansion on the use of global sanctions.
- **Stamp out demand:** Consumer behaviour must be understood but at the same time consumers should be educated on the negative impacts that illegal wildlife products have for us all.



SIR IVOR
ROBERTS

Principal author



“In the battle to save our planet’s wildlife and safeguard humanity from the many harms caused by illegal wildlife trading, the traffickers are winning and there is very little time left to turn the tide.

“Yet, there is still hope. The Anthropocene extinction is man-made. This means that it is also within our power to avert the catastrophe towards which our planet is presently hurtling.”



DR. HANS-JAKOB
SCHINDLER



“We need tangible and technical solutions to protect our remaining wildlife and a real political will to stand against the traffickers. First, we must protect the guardians who are guarding endangered animals, take on the traffickers and cut off the traffic in transit.

“By halting the supply chain, we can weaken the resources of these extremist traffickers and take the fight to the international stage.”

