

GITOC's decision to act against the illegal wildlife trade online

I have the honour to speak as a delegate of the Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and will describe a project implemented by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

We are in the midst of what is called the 'sixth mass extinction'. Since the 1970s, natural ecosystems have lost about half their area and the biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 82%. The illegal wildlife trade is a key part of this damage. For some species, illegal trade is the overriding threat to their continued existence.

National and international law enforcement responses to wildlife crime are improving, but they are still seen to be inadequate and hampered by the cross-border nature of these crimes, even when they involve physical commodity flows. However, when the trade moves online – and markets and communications become virtual – it collides with other major law enforcement challenges in the world: the uncoordinated global response to cybercrime and the jurisdictional challenges presented by the borderless nature of the web.

Almost all cyber-enabled illegal wildlife trade happens on the open web, often on major social media and e-commerce sites which are household names, not on the dark web. It is in the midst of this collision – between the threat of wildlife crime the weak response to cyber enabled crime, and the failure of tech companies to effectively self-regulate on this issue – that civil society organizations have stepped in to monitor online markets and compile evidence against online traders and platforms facilitating trade.

The Market Monitoring and Friction Unit (a team within the GI-TOC) has decided on direct intervention to disrupt online markets. This includes active monitoring, as well as experimental techniques to, for example, decrease trust in traders or get them barred from platforms.

Our database holds over 10k incidents of advertisements promoting endangered and protected species, and we have had over 7000 adverts for endangered parrots removed from only two e-commerce platforms in 2020. Recent work mapping the sale of pangolin-containing medicines online found over 1000 advertisements on Chinese, European, South East Asian and North American e-commerce sites, leading to at least two inquiries, and possible investigations, by law enforcement. Open-source investigation of digital communications has revealed the links between and recruitment of ivory traders on Facebook in Vietnam, and the identity of bird traffickers in Malta and India.

We are mapping how the wildlife trade meets digital technology, creating typologies of trafficking use which include material from digital communications and advertisements, and are sharing them with law enforcement and private sector enforcement actors, along with the identification of trade hubs and dynamics gathered in market monitoring. This allows them to shape and prioritise enforcement effectively. We also provide tools to civil society, law enforcement and the private sector to help identify the laws that might apply to advertisement of endangered species, and also ethical guidance to help organisation navigate data privacy and other concerns when doing monitoring of these sites.

We are also seeking to change the dynamics of online market directly, limiting the ways in which criminal actors and thoughtless illicit traders can feed extinction markets. We are piloting forms of behaviour change work which use digital technology, and intervening in online subculture to introduce messaging that dissuades customers and makes traders feel as though risk has increased. We are also studying rates of formation of groups on social media, to understand how quickly they reform after being taken down, and how to more effectively target administrators and other lynchpins in generating online communities for illegal trade.

In this work, we combine criminological expertise, data science and data engineering expertise, and conservation knowledge. We are innovating and collaborating for the sake of doing our part to limit organised crime and protect the environment from the damage that is wrought through illegal and unsustainable trade.