

World Wildlife Crime Report 2020

Questions & Answers

How did UNODC respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19 on combating wildlife crime?

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the day-to-day operations of UNODC as it has for almost everyone else. The pandemic has also increased our awareness of the linkages between the trafficking of wild species and infectious diseases. Given the crime element in the latter, UNODC has been exploring how it can best use its knowledge, expertise and networks to better understand the vulnerabilities in legal value chains with a view to supporting Member States.

As soon as we recognized that in-person technical assistance was not going to be possible, the Office began re-formulating its training packages to fit the format and style of virtual trainings.

Perhaps a bit more to the point, UNODC is exploring opportunities to provide support to countries to regulate their wildlife and pet markets, wet markets and other wildlife/animal facilities. This work aims to better understand the connection between human health and crime and the potential risks associated with the management of wildlife facilities, especially in Asia.

Do you expect wildlife crime to increase in the next few years because of the COVID-related economic crisis?

There is no simple answer for this question. One key driver of the illegal trade in wildlife is wealth. Many illegal wildlife products are purchased as luxury items and status symbols. In times of economic crisis or constraint, investments in luxury items may shrink.

However, increased poverty can have a negative impact and drive poaching. The tourism sector is disproportionately affected by the outbreak, which is reflected in a lower number of visitors to national parks and protected areas. In countries where tourism is an important contributor to the GDP and where revenue generated by visitors largely contribute to the operational budget of wildlife authorities in charge of protecting those areas, the loss of revenue from parks is especially noticeable.

The pandemic is also having a significant impact on the livelihoods of communities in and around protected areas where wildlife and forest crime can occur. This may well lead to increased poaching for bush meat for subsistence as well as poaching of protected species driven by criminal syndicates who exploit decreased enforcement efforts and take advantage of poor and vulnerable communities.

As traffickers have had to find alternative routes due to limited or not-available flights during lockdown, and are instead looking to move product via routes such as by sea, is there an expectation that this COVID-19 crisis will see a new way of transporting goods or do you anticipate that traffickers will go back to transporting via flights when the crisis comes to an end?

Organized criminal groups employ a variety of modes of transportation and the modus operandi for wildlife trafficking are dynamic and quick to adapt to the detection capacity and efforts of governments. Given that traditional methods and routes used to move products of differing value chains have been interrupted, there is no reason to believe that criminals have been immune from this. We are certain that they too have had to adapt. Let's not forget that criminals will take advantage of any opportunity to smuggle. Although some criminal groups might turn to stockpiling during this time of crisis, others are surely still making use of routes that are still open. This is demonstrated by the recent seizure of 41 Rhino horns at the OR Tambo Airport in South Africa on 14 July 2020.

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, passengers trafficking wildlife on commercial flights were more exposed to interdiction due to increasing awareness of airport customs authorities. A significant decrease in commercial flights certainly further impacts trafficking modes. Transport by sea, road and air cargo will likely represent preferred options for future illegal trade, which means that enforcement efforts to detect illegal consignments via these transport modes need to be increased.

Very impressive report as far as it goes, but especially in the midst of a zoonotic pandemic, disappointing that the trade in primates and bats, live and as meat or 'medicine', seems to be excluded.

The species discussed were selected on the seizure valuation analysis, and neither primates nor bats were prominent in that analysis. We will explore the possibility of looking into these species in the next report, most likely as a special case study. Of course, all will depend on the availability of data.

Is there a specific reason that the report does not include the most endangered group of species – the sturgeon?

The WWCR focuses on wildlife crime and does not evaluate the impact of the illegal trade on specific species. The choice of species is based on a valuation of seizures, which indicates which species are most trafficked, not most endangered. Sturgeons were covered in the 2016 World Wildlife Crime Report, and the trafficking trend was a declining one. Please see the box at the beginning of the European eel chapter for an explanation.

How is demand approached in the report?

We largely rely on work by academics and NGOs for our data on demand, although we would like to gather some indicators (such as price data) directly from our Member States in the future.

The report suggests downward trends in elephant ivory seizures, but a recent report in Nature suggests elephant poaching has not decreased except in Eastern Africa. How do you account for these differing interpretations?

The Nature report is based exclusively on modelled poaching data. We performed two different supply modelling exercises (one by George Wittemeyer using poaching data and one by Rowan Martin using population data) and we triangulated this with other data, including World WISE and ETIS trafficking data and price data from both East Africa and Asia (China and Viet Nam). The overall picture shows a decline.

Do we know if the number of seizures are dropping in elephants and rhino products because their populations are declining?

Rhino seizures are not declining, but given the decline in poaching, the source is likely stockpiles (including private stockpiles). Price declines for rhino also suggests declining demand. Elephant seizures are dropping until 2019, which should show an increase (our data are incomplete). Also given the overall drop in poaching since 2011, this 2019 surge may also be coming from stocks. Declines in poaching in some areas (particular Central African forest elephants) may be due to local population declines. This is unlikely to be a factor in places like northern Botswana, for example.

Is that data from the report available?

Much of these data are open source. The World WISE data are from law enforcement sources that demand the data not be made public. Since the UN advocates data transparency, we are working toward making these data public in the future. Data on the main report findings are available at the aggregated level on the dataUNODC web application (<https://dataunodc.un.org/>). It does not include data on individual events but will provide information on trends and main countries of origin and destination of the species in focus.

The data in the report can clearly inform policy decisions. How can we channel similar trafficking data into informing law enforcement more effectively on the ground?

Ideally, we would like these data to be mapped and available in a manner similar to our drugs data, but we need the consent of the agencies supplying the data before doing so.

Does UNODC have a strategy to steer capacity building of customs officers to detect illegal wildlife trade?

UNODC through the Container Control Programme (CCP), a joint initiative between the World Customs Organization and UNODC, supports countries in establishing multi-agency units to enhance enforcement efforts to minimize the risk of shipping containers and air-cargo being exploited for illicit trafficking, including wildlife and timber. Through the programme, customs officers at Port Control Units (PCU) and Air-cargo Control Units (ACCU) are trained on risk management to detect illegal trafficking through the containerised supply chain, which includes advanced modules dealing with the trafficking of wildlife and timber products with specific case studies dealing with source, transit and destination countries.

What upskilling is being done to address the difficult process of identifying legal and illegal products when they are being moved at the same time?

UNODC and the WCO are supporting risk profiling work under the enforcement structures in the countries supported under the Container Control Programme. This include capacity building on:

- Advanced training on CITES: identification of species (both wildlife and timber species); authentication and identification of discrepancies of CITES documents (certificates, permits, invoices);
- PCU/ACCU officers have direct and real-time access to UNODC/WCO trainers through a secure communication platform, for further assistance if needed.
- CCP has delivered training sessions of timber identification in South East Asia, and induction training sessions East and Southern Africa which will be followed in 2020-2021 by advanced practical training sessions.
- Profiling techniques provided to the PCU/ACCU teams equip them to analyse maritime/air cargo shipping documents and to determine what risk indicators are present within consignments and what cover-loads are used to hide and move illegal products.
- CCP technical experts are regularly updating PCUs with current trafficking trends and modus operandi through ContainerComm and Environet alerts or sending such information directly to the teams. These alerts include current risk indicators, cover-loads used to move illegal consignments, etc.

What powers does UNODC and others have to sanction Governments that turn a blind eye to crimes committed within their borders?

UNODC does not have the power to levy sanctions, but the Parties to the CITES convention can exclude non-compliant Parties from trade in a particular species or across species.

Can wildlife trafficking become something that may create an interest of Asian and African countries to exchange MARITIME information at international and interregional level?

Some marine species are CITES listed and so covered by the Report, but there is no formal exchange of these data brokered by UNODC.

Have you registered an increased level of multilateral cooperation and information sharing among law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia in the domain of wildlife trafficking?

In 2016 the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime recognized the “Illicit trade in wildlife and timber” as a security threat alongside nine other forms of transnational crime. As a result, in 2017, a working group on “Illicit trade in wildlife and timber” was established under the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime with the objective of promoting the exchange of information and joint operations. This mechanism is still relatively new and not yet fully utilized. A few countries in the region share more information than they used to in the past, especially with countries outside of ASEAN, such as China. However, while political support to tackle the issue is growing, the actual operational results on the ground are lagging behind.

What is wildlife crime’s role in climate change?

Illegality, crime and corruption are drivers of deforestation and the loss of multiple species of wild fauna and flora and marine resources, affecting entire ecosystems, which in turn contribute to climate change, and negatively impact trade, economic development and security.

Forests make up some of the world’s most important carbon sinks, absorbing overwhelming amounts of greenhouse gas. This is particularly true for tropical primary forests of which we are losing vast areas each year. We would suggest you take a look at the recent research published by Global Forest Watch (<https://blog.globalforestwatch.org/data-and-research/global-tree-cover-loss-data-2019/>). Clearing such forests diminishes those sinks and at the same time releases previously stored carbon into the atmosphere.

Climate change impacts all species and makes those species already in decline or close to extinction even more vulnerable. This can in turn affect which species will be targeted by organized criminal groups. In addition, climate change can lead to an increase in human-wildlife conflicts. With climate change already putting a strain on agricultural productivity, conflicts with wildlife encroaching on human settlements could increase, which in turn may lead to increased wildlife killings and poaching.

What strategies have UNODC and others adopted towards climate change resilience, as affected communities may turn to poaching or taking their cattle into protected areas or parks?

Addressing climate change is probably the most complex global governance issue, demanding radical transformation of multiple sectors, unprecedented action and cooperation based on accountability and strong governance. To ensure a holistic response to climate change and biodiversity loss, it is crucial to address the illegal exploitation of natural resources and to approach the climate issue holistically from the social, economic development, environmental protection and security perspectives.

UNODC continues to work to promote a strong prevention and criminal justice response as part of a comprehensive, global approach to address this problem. Aligning climate change, biodiversity and security agendas at both national and regional levels is crucial to address the complexities of the issue.

UNODC will continue to strongly advocate for the mainstreaming of criminal justice and preventive response into the climate change and biodiversity agendas. We recognize that without strong governance, the rule of law, and strong institutions the likelihood that we all meet the goals and objectives of the SDGs and the environment/nature agendas will be significantly reduced.