Chapter 1

Introduction
This third edition of the *World Wildlife Crime Report* probes recent trends in the illicit trafficking of protected species of wild fauna and flora and provides a broad assessment of current knowledge about the causes and implications of associated crime at a global level.

As with the first two editions, published in 2016 and 2020 respectively, research carried out for this report included quantitative market assessment and a series of in-depth case studies. The findings inform an overview of recent characteristics and trends in global wildlife crime and provide insights into the dynamics of how it is affecting selected wildlife species. Additional emphasis for this edition is on systematic analysis of wildlife crime harms and impacts, factors driving crime trends, and the evidence for what remedial interventions work best.

The report was prepared in response to the United Nations General Assembly resolution on Tackling Illegal Trafficking in Wildlife adopted in 2021.\(^1\) This resolution requested the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in close cooperation and in collaboration with Member States, to continue and strengthen the collection of information on patterns and flows of illicit trafficking in wildlife and to report thereon biennially.

The report has been prepared in coordination with partners of the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC).\(^2\)
Wildlife crime in a changing world

The second edition of the *World Wildlife Crime Report* was published in May 2020, largely based on data available up to the end of 2018. Since that time the global economy and human societies in general have experienced considerable disruption caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. This included restrictions on the movement of and interactions between people, while shifts in business and consumption patterns changed global trade patterns. They also transformed the environment of opportunity and threat within which criminal activities are organized and performed. During the pandemic wildlife crime received special attention owing to claims that wild animal trade may have played a role in the emergence of COVID-19. Despite uncertainty about this theory, the concern put a spotlight on wider concerns that wildlife trade and trafficking could contribute to the spread of zoonotic diseases.

These developments were just coming into focus around the time of publication of the 2020 edition of the *World Wildlife Crime Report* when UNODC identified several potential impacts of the pandemic on wildlife crime. These included the possibility that illicit markets would move even deeper underground to avoid scrutiny related to disease risk management. It was also speculated that there may be greater risks of corruption to avoid health-related market restrictions. Additional considerations included the likelihood of sustained shifts in mode and routing of transportation, particularly due to increased use of parcel shipments, and accelerated development of online trading. It was noted at the time that it was far too early to observe clear trends and changes in wildlife trafficking owing to the pandemic and to some extent this may still be the case now.

Since the 2020 edition of the *World Wildlife Crime Report* there have been some significant developments in international policy and actions that have kept wildlife trafficking in the spotlight.

Global legal framework and response

In May 2022, the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) adopted a resolution on Strengthening the International Legal Framework for International Cooperation to Prevent and Combat Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife. The CCPCJ invited Member States to provide UNODC with their views on ways to address any perceived gaps in the current international legal framework to prevent and combat illicit trafficking in wildlife, including the possibility of an additional protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC). Furthermore, Member States were invited to share their relevant national legislation, experiences, good practices and challenges in terms of preventing and combatting illicit trafficking in wildlife. An initial compilation of Member States’ responses was made available for the 32nd Session of the CCPCJ in May 2023, and an updated version was presented at the 33rd session in May 2024. These included reports of a wide variety of actions taken and suggestions for further remedial measures, including views on the merits of an additional protocol to UNTOC addressing wildlife crime. Additionally, UNODC submitted a summary report to CCPCJ analysing the 76 responses provided by the Member States.

International wildlife trade regulation

The nineteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which took place in Panama in November 2022, took stock of progress with multilateral efforts to regulate international wildlife trade to ensure it does not threaten the survival of wild animal and plant species. Subjects under consideration included analysis of compliance problems, the impacts of ongoing illegal trade on selected wildlife species including some addressed by case studies in the current report, and efforts to enforce the provisions of the Convention. Decisions were taken to introduce or amend trade restrictions for a number of species.
Introduction

Gender mainstreaming

International policy statements related to wildlife crime have adopted greater emphasis on social factors, including attention to gender-related concerns. In 2022, CITES Parties adopted a resolution urging greater efforts to understand how gender issues relate to other factors in legal and illegal international trade in wild species of fauna and flora, with a view to taking these into account when designing responses and interventions. The United Nations General Assembly resolutions on Tackling Illegal Trafficking in Wildlife called upon Member States to ensure the full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership of women in the development and implementation of relevant policies and programmes addressing illicit wildlife trafficking.

Nature conservation policy

After a four-year consultation and negotiation process, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework was adopted in December 2022 during the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Global Biodiversity Framework, which supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sets out an ambitious pathway to reach the global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050. This includes a specific ambition set under Global Biodiversity Framework Target 5 to take action to ensure that use, harvesting and trade of wild species is sustainable and safe.

Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2023 the midterm review of the implementation of the SDGs took place at a summit in New York. A UNODC review of crime-related indicators under SDG goal 16, through which countries aspire to establish more peaceful, just and inclusive societies, concluded that progress is worryingly slow and called for recognition that the current pace of change is insufficient to address some of the most significant challenges relating to violence, trafficking, access to justice, and corruption.

Mobilizing global enforcement efforts

Global wildlife crime enforcement efforts continue to be mobilized through Operation Thunder joint initiatives coordinated annually by INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization with the backing of International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC) partners. The most recent month-long operation in October 2023 involved police, customs, border control, environment, wildlife and forestry officials in 133 countries, with over 2,000 seizures resulting.

Quantitative market assessment

The quantitative analysis in this third edition of the World Wildlife Crime Report draws from two complementary sources of data on wildlife seizures made by government enforcement authorities: the CITES Illegal Trade Database; and the UNODC World Wildlife Seizure Database (World WISE). Hereafter this is referred to as the “WWCR3 analytical dataset”.

The CITES Illegal Trade Database

This database incorporates seizure records submitted by designated government focal points to the CITES Secretariat under the terms of a CITES resolution on national reporting. Each CITES Party is required to submit an Annual Illegal Trade Report (AITR) on all seizures for violations involving CITES-listed species irrespective of whether the seizure was made at an international border or at a domestic level, for example during the search of a private or business property or during inspections at domestic markets. The database is managed by UNODC on behalf of the CITES Secretariat. Submission of AITRs is mandatory but not subject to compliance procedures. The first year for which such reports were required was 2016 and the extent of submission up to 2021 is illustrated in Map 1.
The UNODC World Wildlife Seizure Database

World WISE was originally developed to inform quantitative market assessment for the first edition of the World Wildlife Crime Report, published in 2016 before the introduction of CITES AITRs. Data compilation at that time drew from a wide range of sources including: World Customs Organization seizure records; the former CITES Biennial Reports and other CITES-related sources; and national records such as those from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Law Enforcement Management Information System (LEMIS), the European Union Trade in Wildlife Information eXchange (EU-TWIX), and the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) databases.20 After 2016, World WISE data collection has focused on collating records from sources that supplement the CITES Illegal Trade Database, including those filling geographic gaps in CITES data submissions.21 UNODC employs a range of methods to verify such records and avoid duplication that could result from use of data from multiple sources. As with earlier editions, sources and details of data handling procedures are provided in the methodological annex to this report.

At the time of writing, the CITES and UNODC data- bases included approximately 336,000 records of seizures from 1999–2021 (Figure 1.1). As is usual practice for UNODC research reports, all data were circulated to Member States for verification in September 2023 and reviewed in line with feedback received.

Most of the analysis in this report was based on data from 2015–2021, which includes over 140,000 records of seizures reported to have taken place in 162 countries and territories. Reported seizures for this period in the two databases involved illegal trade in around 4,000 wildlife species, approximately 3,250 of them species listed in the CITES Appendices. Approximately 1,000 additional World WISE records for 2022 were included in the WWCR3 analytical dataset because
they help inform preliminary insights into recent developments for species included in some of the case studies.

Seizure data represent a powerful source of information for analysis of wildlife crime, providing insights into the species and commodities in illegal trade, volumes and routing of trade flows, and indications of other factors that shed light on crime patterns, such as means of transport and concealment. Supplementary data provided with many seizure records also provide insights into seizure locations, the reason for seizure, seizing agency, and applicable legislation.

However, in interpreting seizure data it is critical to keep in mind that incidents are as much a representation of the enforcement action taken as they are evidence of the occurrence of illegal trade itself. An absence of seizures of a particular commodity or at a certain location could reflect lack of enforcement, rather than evidence that illegal trade was not taking place. Similarly, the fact that a seizure was made shows first and foremost that an agency in a particular country had the legal authority, capacity and motivation to make an enforcement intervention. The goods involved may have passed through or been destined for other countries and the incident may or may not be indicative of a larger flow of illegal trade.

Analysis of seizure data also needs to be cognisant of reporting biases, both in terms of geographical gaps in data provision and availability, and in terms of the commodities involved. Generally, reporting is weaker for illegal trade involving plant and aquatic species than it is for trade involving terrestrial animals. This may be a consequence of a variety of factors, including the division of responsibility for different commodities between specialized government agencies, varying levels of familiarity with or technical capacity to identify different species, or simply a matter of enforcement prioritization. Other potential biases in terms of geographical representativeness are that enforcement effort may be concentrated at certain locations, particularly at international border crossings and transport hubs.

It is also important to bear in mind that details of individual wildlife seizure records are often incomplete because important information such as accurate species identification, origin of goods, and trade routing is not available to the agency reporting the event. Some seizures are made at storage locations, breeding facilities or markets, rather than during shipment of goods. In such cases, past and intended trade routing may genuinely be unknown. However, even for the large proportion of seizures made during shipment, routing information is often incomplete. Partial reporting of shipment routing is particularly challenging because it limits insights into illegal wildlife trade flows from points of origin, where animals or plants were taken from nature or bred in captivity, to end market countries (Figure 1.2). Trade flow patterns tend to become clearer as multiple records for a particular commodity are analysed together.

**FIG. 1.1 Number of wildlife seizure records in the CITES and UNODC databases 1999–2021**

Seizure data interpretation is also complicated because some seizure reports summarize multiple individual incidents under an enforcement operation, while others itemize each incident separately. There are also methodological challenges in converting variously reported seizures to common units of volume, weight or value for analysis.

UNODC strengthens its use of seizure data through triangulation with other indicators, such as evidence of poaching trends for species covered by case studies and insights into market trends from complementary sources.
Several case studies and other research outputs were produced by UNODC during development of this report. They were selected in consultation with a broad range of experts and were aimed to be diverse in terms of species, commodity and geographical coverage. Some were designed to gain insights from local, on the ground research of specific illegal wildlife trade challenges. Typically, these focused on early upstream parts of the trade chain for which knowledge about crime structures and motivations was lacking. Other research efforts were selected to update analyses of some of the high-profile illegal wildlife trade issues examined in depth in earlier editions of the report to inform overall insights into recent wildlife crime trends. These drew on in-depth seizure analysis, collation of new information such as market price data, and review of newly published analyses developed in response to CITES decisions.

Data-related challenges and analytical approaches by UNODC to interpretation of seizure data are explored in greater depth and explained in the online methodological annex to this report.

Case studies and other research

Like earlier editions of the World Wildlife Crime Report, this report draws from additional fieldwork, data gathering and review of the growing academic literature in this field. It also benefits from consultation with a wide range of experts working on related topics, including the members of the Scientific Advisory Committee convened for this report.}\(^\text{22}\)
UNODC also carried out an expert qualitative survey of emerging illegal wildlife trade issues in early 2023 with the intention of identifying important aspects of the issue that might otherwise be missed. Finally, UNODC commissioned a case review and expert interviews on the relationship between wildlife crime and corruption and a research brief on the connections between illegal wildlife trade and climate change. The results of the emerging issues and corruption research have been integrated into relevant chapters of this report.

A subset of the case studies, principally those focused on species-specific analysis, are summarized as annexes in Chapter 6. These and other studies, including some for which research is ongoing, provided important reference sources for the analytical chapters. The main research activities are summarized in Table 1.1. More information on the methods employed is provided in case study annexes and the methodological annex to this report.

Please note that this selection of case studies and other research themes does not signify in any way that UNODC considers these topics to be more important or of greater concern than other wildlife crime themes.23

---

**TAB. 1.1 Research activities carried out during preparation of this edition of the World Wildlife Crime Report**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Research content</th>
<th>Case study in Chapter 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in live orchids with emphasis on the European market</td>
<td>Trader and other stakeholder interviews</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in dried seahorses</td>
<td>Global overview and field research in Peru</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in rosewood timber</td>
<td>Global overview and field research in Nigeria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife trafficking in Indonesia: participant motivations</td>
<td>Wildlife crime offender interviews in Indonesia</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender dimensions of wildlife crime in South America</td>
<td>Field research in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in elephant ivory</td>
<td>Global trade trend review</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in rhinoceros horn</td>
<td>Global trade trend review</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in pangolin scales</td>
<td>Global trade trend review</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal trade in big cat bones</td>
<td>Global trade trend review</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How this report is organized

The structure of this report diverges from the first two editions, in which the thematic case studies comprised the bulk of the reports. After publication of the second edition, UNODC sought feedback from a variety of report users and relevant experts, including members of the Scientific Advisory Committee established to support report development. Based on these consultations, it was decided to produce both an overview of the characteristics of recent wildlife trafficking and a series of systematic analyses of key questions associated with the development of effective responses to this global challenge.

The report chapters are organized as follows:

» **Summary, conclusions and policy implications**
  Providing an overview of the report findings and implications for public and private sector policymakers and practitioners.

» **Chapter 2: Characterizing wildlife trafficking and associated crime**
  Taking stock of contemporary developments in illegal wildlife trade based on analysis of seizure data, case studies and other research sources.

» **Chapter 3: The impacts and harms of wildlife crime**
  Exploring the different types of harm caused by wildlife crime and the available evidence on the extent of them.

» **Chapter 4: What is driving wildlife crime patterns and trends?**
  Examining evidence of the factors motivating and influencing criminal activity that drives illegal wildlife trade, including the role of corruption.

» **Chapter 5: What works to decrease wildlife crime?**
  Reviewing evidence of the effectiveness of different interventions taken to reduce criminality and illegal trade.

» **Chapter 6: Case studies**
  Case study annexes presenting research findings for the topics highlighted in Table 1.1 above.