Introduction

Profiting in almost $6 billion per year on an international scale, illegal wildlife trade has come to be known as the third most lucrative business on the black market, the first and second being drugs and weapons trade. Illicit wildlife trafficking threatens a third of the world’s species, some of the most serious cases being that of rhinoceroses, pangolins, elephants, and tigers. These exotic creatures are sold for their assets, often for exorbitant prices that are disproportionate to their actual utilities. During the process of trade, live flora and fauna are forced into cramped spaces, often suffering in grim environments without proper care. Many are sedated with pills that harm their internal systems and disrupt their living cycles. Other cases in which animals are sold purely for their assets results in the excessive slaughter of wildlife. In 2016, a rhino was killed for its horn every 8 hours, and an elephant was slaughtered every 20 minutes. Not only are illegal markets profiting off of the inhumane treatment of animals, but much of this issue is also propelled by un-scientifically proven beliefs. Asian traditional medicine, for example, often requires materials only retrievable by illegal markets. In other places, organs of specific animals are considered a delicacy and symbol of wealth. This points to one especially crucial call to action: the reform of misguided education.

Although reports published by reputable organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have slightly mitigated the growing crisis, poaching and illicit trafficking rates are not declining fast enough. Moreover, current legal consequences have proven unsuccessful due to the innumerable black market businesses developing due to stricter government regulations. Such aspects of the problem call for more effective means of control and monitoring. Although poaching mortality rates have fallen from an all-time high of 10% in 2011 to less than 4% in 2017, experts from the science journal Nature Communications still believe that current levels are “unsustainable and could spell trouble for the future of the animals.”

Definition of Key Terms
Wildlife Crime

Wildlife crime, as defined by the Criminal Justice Research and Reference, is a subset of environmental crime that encompasses “any violation of a criminal law expressly designed to protect wildlife.” Although wildlife policies differ within each country, violations generally cover a wide variety of actions including poaching, live capturing, and the unlawful trading of animals or plants. Activities that destroy natural habitats, such as excessive deforestation and water contamination, are also considered types of wildlife crime. Additionally, trespassing into protected territories, hunting out of season, and disturbing endangered, rare, or protected species are also actions that countries typically condemn and monitor.

Poaching

Poaching is a form of wildlife crime that involves the illegal killing or capturing of wildlife for their assets. Poachers sell valuable animal organs for short term monetary benefits while decimating resources and populations that sustain the ecosystem in the long run.

Animal Trafficking

Sentient Media, a nonprofit organization reporting on animal rights and welfare issues, defines animal trafficking as “the transport of animals from one place to another for the purposes of commercial enterprise.” Although the mere definition of animal trafficking does not specify the legality of such trade, the term is now mostly associated with the black market and illicit transactions that violate wildlife policies aimed towards protecting animal rights. Wildlife is trafficked in much the same way as guns and drugs. They are often forced into cramped spaces such as toilet paper rolls, clothing, and in extreme incidents pockets of their perpetrators. To make matters worse, most animals are quelled with alcohol or drugs that disrupt their internal systems and could be lethal in many cases.

Background Information

Wildlife crimes are often considered “victimless crimes” because a party or victim in the form of a human being is not present or filing a complaint. This has created obstacles for countries aiming to ensure healthy wildlife interaction as the actions of perpetrators often go unnoticed. However, it has recently been argued that “society-at-large” is the true victim of wildlife policy violations due to the significant damage, if not complete decimation of entire species and populations. Excessive animal poaching and trafficking could lead to a lack of biodiversity as well as an economically unsustainable source of income for large portions of the world.

Poaching and trafficking for assets
Elephant Tusks

The International Union for Conservation of Nature reported that poachers were the single biggest threat to elephant survival, with more than 100,000 elephant tusks retrieved illegally between 2016 and 2015. At this rate, African elephants, the species most susceptible to poaching, will be extinct within 10 years. Only about 400,000 elephants remain in their natural habitats, and this number is rapidly declining. Luckily, the 2017 ivory trade ban in China and joint efforts of African countries within the past six years have resulted in a 60% decrease in the global elephant poaching rate.

Rhinoceros Horns

The use of rhinoceros horns in Asia for medical purposes dates back to more than 2,000 years ago in China. It was believed that it could treat fever, gout, rheumatism, and other diseases that plagued the Chinese community at the time. Although many regard rhino horns as an effective antidote for lethal conditions like cancer, the exorbitant prices that the product command far outweigh any of the rhino horn’s possible medical utilities. Moreover, a survey from 2013 carried out by wildlife monitoring network Traffic listed emotional benefit rather than medicinal remedies as the most prominent motivation for consumers, as traditional beliefs point to “magical [healing] properties” that are still not scientifically proven to this day. Additionally, demand for rhino horn jewelry has skyrocketed, further motivating illegal markets and poachers. According to the World Wildlife Crime Report published by the UNODC, the largest African black rhinoceros population of 100,000 has declined immensely, with less than 5,000 surviving black rhinoceroses in 2016.

![Figure 1: Rhino poaching rates have increased despite conservation efforts](https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/624/media/images/72836000/jpg/_72836754_rhino_poaching_chart464.jpg)
As the demand for luxurious decoration items escalates, endangered species such as the Indian Bengal tigers have become even more desirable in the eyes of the wealthy. As of 2014, Bengal tiger hide was priced at 20,000 USD per pelt, and “tiger wine” brewed from tiger bones at 30,000 USD per case. Reports have shown that poaching accounts for an estimated frequency of one tiger death every day, and only 3,200 wild tigers, 3% of its population a century ago, remain. The Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary predicts that wild tigers could potentially become extinct by the year 2022 if measures are not taken to mitigate the rate of poaching mortality and habitat loss.

Pangolin Skins, Scales, and Meat

BBC (The British Broadcasting Corporation) reported just this February that pangolins are the most trafficked mammal in the world, shedding light on the human threat that the animal faces. A large portion of this illegal trade takes place in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, where demand for traditional medical supplies are high. According to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), pangolins are primarily hunted for three of their assets:

1. Their skins for exotic leather trade,
2. their scales for traditional medicine,
3. and their meat, which is regarded as a delicacy in some countries

Due to frequent trafficking around the world, numbers of all 8 pangolin species are dwindling. Extreme cases include that of the Palawan pangolin, which has experienced a startling 95% population decline over the past 40 years.

![Figure 2: The infographic above depicts the unconscionable prices of pangolins and an estimate amount of wildlife trafficking per year (as of 2014).](https://www.asiliaafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/pangolinnumbers.jpg)
Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Uganda

In 2012, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) revealed that Uganda was one of the top eight countries of “primary concern” due to the amount of ivory smuggling in the country. If poaching and other wildlife crimes are not effectively controlled, Uganda’s GDP is predicted to suffer a 10% decline within the next decade. “This is because the country depends on wildlife-based tourism, and tourists support many sectors including transport, hotels and agriculture,” and the tourism industry is Uganda’s biggest source of foreign income, executive director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) Dr. Andrew Seguya tells Ugandan news channel New Vision. UWA partnered with the Uganda Conservation Foundation (UCF) in 2017 to organize mass awareness campaigns under the slogan “poaching steals from us all.” So far, Uganda has been effective in its efforts to bring attention to the effects of poaching. The project’s ubiquitous influence is demonstrated by the numerous campaigns found on billboards, TV documentaries, events, and other forms of media. Fortunately, elephant populations in Uganda are gradually recovering due to better protection of its national parks. The elephant population has increased by about 1000, from 3,944 in 2005 to an estimated number of 4,923 in 2015. Due to the government’s attention and acknowledgement of wildlife crime’s seriousness, local wildlife organizations have been able to obtain cameras, vehicles, and helicopters to support their cause. As of now, Ugandan legislators are pushing to impose stricter penalties on wildlife crimes. Future consequences may amount to “around $21,000 for an elephant, and jail time up to 20 years.”

Vietnam

A recent surge in rhino horn demand in Vietnam and other southeast Asian countries has shaped the traditional medicine field of the country. Such exotic remedies that were often unaffordable to the general population are now readily accessible to consumers through a myriad of criminal networks, ranging from black markets to illegal dealers. Rhino horns in Vietnam are regarded as a symbol of power and also commonly associated with success, high social status, and affluence. Local experts have also shed light on the horn’s mannerly characteristics, explaining that “for us, the surprising trend is that horn is increasingly being used as a symbolic gesture to console terminally ill family members. [They] are intended to provide the ill with a final source of pleasure and to demonstrate that their families have done everything possible to help them” (Science Daily). As a result, wealthy Vietnamese individuals splurge large sums of money that fuel the poaching industry. According to Dr Ha Cong Tuan, Chairman of Vietnam’s National Steering Committee for Wildlife Law Enforcement Network, the government firmly stands against wildlife crime and declared its willingness to cooperate with CITES member states to develop a “long-term and comprehensive vision to eradicate cross-border illegal wildlife trade via appropriate measures that ensure the harmonization between conservation and sustainable
development with the active engagement of all sectors.” In 2014, Vietnam’s prime minister confirmed his government’s stance against any illegal wildlife trade in endangered species. Most countries, even those with exorbitant wildlife crime and trafficking rates, have implemented laws in an attempt to alleviate environmental consequences. In 2017, the Vietnamese government updated its penal code laws to enhance efforts to combat wildlife trafficking by implementing stricter consequences for perpetrators who violate Vietnamese wildlife policies.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

For more than 10 years, the UNODC has been active in its plans to tackle wildlife crime and animal trafficking. In 2016, the office published its first wildlife crime report including case studies and an in-depth analysis on the causes and effects of excessive wildlife crime. Over the years, the group has defined terms, supervised wildlife crime heavy countries, and garnered information about endangered populations. Most importantly, the UNODC works in tandem with countries to ensure fair prosecution and effective prevention. It strives to strengthen the legislative and regulatory frameworks of member states, promote skills for investigating and prosecuting criminal activities, and “enhance cooperation on national, bilateral, regional and international levels.”

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is a non-governmental and non-profit organization that works to assist endangered species and also campaigns for wildlife conservation. The group firmly stands against wildlife crime and has released numerous online articles to raise awareness amongst the general public. WWF provides “technical and scientific advice” to the CITES, carrying out research projects and examining international trade laws in collaboration with TRAFFIC. Due to a lack of strict legislation in areas with high trafficking rates, the WWF “helps countries comply with CITES regulations by helping to develop programmes, create regulations, runs workshops, assists enforcement efforts and funds anti-poaching brigades.” The WWF also actively discourages the use of unsustainable wildlife products and introduces countries to goods certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). By working in tandem with less developed communities, the WWF assists individuals overcome poverty and promotes the sustainable treatment of wildlife.

Timeline of Events

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<td>May 25, 1900</td>
<td>Former US president William McKinley signs the Lacey Act, prohibiting any profitable wildlife commerce within the United States.</td>
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January 1918 (approx.)

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which protects birds from being killed, poached, trafficked, and sold for profit, is implemented in the United States, United Kingdom, Mexico, Russia, Canada, and Japan.

July 1, 1975

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a legal multilateral treaty and framework aimed towards tackling illicit wildlife activity, is implemented in over 80 countries. This number of signatories has steadily increased over the years.

May 22, 2008

The United States implements the world’s first ban on illegally retrieved wood products by amending the 1900 Lacey Act to include plants.

April 16, 2013

Inspections of a Chinese fishing vessel reveal more than 2,000 slaughtered pangolins hidden in 400 boxes. This incident marks the largest pangolin poaching incident ever encountered thus far.

December 20, 2013

UN Resolution A/RES/68/205 is adopted by the General Assembly, proclaiming March 3rd as the annual World Wildlife Day.

May 24, 2016

The UNODC launches World Wildlife Crime Report, providing insight on the plight of endangered species such as elephants and pangolins.

March 31, 2017

Following an official announcement from the Chinese government declaring its decision to ban all domestic ivory trade, China closes all ivory factories and works toward shutting down retail outlets by December.

October 2018

Chinese president Xi Jinping reverses existing domestic ban on rhino horn and tiger bone trafficking and reopens exotic wildlife trade for research purposes.

May 28, 2019

Teams from the University of York and the University of Freiburg observe a decline in the annual poaching mortality rate in Africa likely due to China’s domestic ivory trade ban.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Tackling Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife, 5 September 2017 (A/71/L.88)
- Tackling Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife, 19 August 2015 (A/RES/69/314)
- Tackling Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife, 23 September 2016 (A/RES/70/301)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue
One of the most notable attempts to mitigate the issue of animal trafficking and wildlife crime was the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), first published in 1975. The CITES is an international treaty that aims to prevent the extinction of endangered species due to animal trafficking. This framework protects over 35,000 species of animals and plants and was drafted in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Not only did this treaty set the basic standards and criteria for wildlife crime, but countries were also provided guidelines towards consequences and general policy enforcement. However, one of the key issues with CITES is that it fails to sufficiently grasp the complex nature of wildlife crime. Illegal markets, significant rises in demand, and economic motives are some significant areas of contention that were overlooked by the treaty. Though thorough in its plan to monitor animal trafficking, the CITES rarely addresses the economic reality and socio-economic aspects of illicit wildlife trade. Over time, this has resulted in a lack of intrinsic public resentment towards exotic goods, as well as an increase in economically appealing black markets. Although the CITES framework was established several decades ago, many of its signatories, some of which the largest importers and exporters of endangered species, have yet to strictly implement the standards and reform existing yet inadequate policies. This detracts from the CITES's otherwise comprehensive approach.

Possible Solutions

**Stricter policies and enforcement**

Illicit trade is still prevalent today due to lenient laws that permit perpetrators to commit heinous crimes without having to suffer a reasonable consequence. Oftentimes, the punishments for poaching or trafficking wildlife include a relatively small fine and short prison period. Moreover, criminals in many regions are acquitted due to corruption and poor prosecution. Therefore, stricter policies and enforcement are necessary in order to decrease the number of poaching deaths and prosecute poachers for their actions. Having a UN-authorized third party oversee the prosecution and investigation processes of wildlife crime cases would help prevent corruption. Although a bit idealistic, another way to ensure adequate penalties in all countries would be to implement a binding international law or standard regarding the legal consequences.

Although 182 countries in addition to the European Union have signed the CITES as of 2019 and implemented the legal framework in their government policies, these laws are not regulated enough. One solution to this could be urging countries to enforce harsher legal consequences for violations according to this treaty, revisit its contents, and implement the articles more strictly. Furthermore, countries could allocate more resources towards monitoring of black market activity in order to mitigate the demand for illegally retrieved goods. However,
delegates should consider their country’s economic backgrounds, as such commitments are exhausts a substantial amount of resources.

Reforming traditional values

Although legal measures in most countries are present, the demand for exotic goods remains high due to traditional medical and social beliefs. This continuous cycle of greed, power, and ritual fuels the industry and supports millions of individuals who live off of illegal trading profits. Due to myths and social norms, poachers and dealers are able to make large sums of money through illicit wildlife trade. In order to tackle the issue of high demand, governments could work in tandem with the ministries of education from each country to reform school curriculums and notify the general public of wildlife crimes’ serious future consequences. Additionally, campaigns and news stations could work to raise awareness and reach out to those still adhering to their traditional beliefs. Whereas enforcing policies and consequences could act as an immediate solution to wildlife crime, reforming traditional values would be a long term solution requiring cooperation among governments and organizations.

Research

As of now, very little research on the actual medical utilities of items such as rhinoceros horns has been done. This is mainly due to the fact that trafficked assets are costly and illegal to purchase. However, fully understanding the wildlife crime issue and its causes, effects, and aspects would shed light on more possible solutions in the future. Not only does hard scientific evidence contribute to the overall development of the issue, organizations promoting conservation efforts could benefit from additional information. Countries could cooperate to form a research committee to ethically examine the properties of highly trafficked goods and find hard evidence regarding each product’s actual efficacy in curing disease. Governments could also assist research developments by subsidizing projects initiated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). If given adequate funding, NGOs could hire experts, scientists, and other professionals in certain fields of study to publish comprehensive research reports. However, delegates must acknowledge that the idea of legalizing or even strictly importing wildlife for research could potentially backfire, as it could provide perpetrators with an additional excuse for their wrongdoings and an opportunity to suffer fewer consequences for their actions. When considering the feasibility of ethical research, it is important to weigh the possible benefits and repercussions of funding or assisting research.

Bibliography


Appendix or Appendices

I. This link provides extensive statistics on illegally trafficked animals:
   A. https://www.havocscope.com/tag/wildlife-trafficking/

II. This link contains WWF reported recent news and events:

III. This provides an in depth analysis on wildlife crime in 5 EU member states:
    A. https://www.ecologic.eu/13643

IV. This includes a brief description of the term wildlife crime as well as the possible implications that it might have on humans
V. This link contains the course of action taken by the NGO TRAFFIC and case studies about key species impacted by wildlife crime