

HOW SERIOUS IS WILDLIFE CRIME?

The involvement of organized crime

Whilst there is little specific data demonstrating the involvement of organized crime groups in wildlife crime (i.e. known members of such groups who have been convicted of wildlife crime offences), there is a considerable number of indicators of such involvement.



For example:

- Organized structure to poaching;
- use of gangs, supply of vehicles, weapons and ammunition;
- Provision of high-quality lawyers; Corruption of judicial processes;
- Violence against law enforcement personnel;
- Corruption of law enforcement personnel;
- Exploitation of civil unrest;
- Financial investment in the start-up phase and in the technology needed for processing and marketing;
- Attitude of “inviolability” displayed by those involved;
- Sophistication of smuggling techniques and routes;
- Use of “mules” and couriers;
- Use of persons of high political or social status;
- Sophisticated forgery and counterfeiting of documents;
- Use of monetary and sexual bribes, blackmail and other means to corrupt officials;
- Use of fake or “front” companies;
- Fraudulent advertising of wildlife and widespread use of the Internet;
- Previous convictions for other types of crime;
- Use or ownership of wildlife by organized crime group members;
- Huge profits.

The last indicator is probably the most relevant, since the history of organized crime tells us that it is invariably attracted to criminal activities that generate substantial profits in a relatively short time.

Are there links between wildlife crime and terrorism?

Whilst it is relatively easy to demonstrate links between wildlife crime and organized crime, identifying any

links to terrorism is more complex. Much depends upon what is regarded as “terrorism” or how one defines a “terrorist.” after all, today’s terrorist can be viewed as tomorrow’s freedom fighter. In a similar vein, today’s terrorist can be a democratically-elected politician tomorrow. It has long been recognized that rebels in some African countries are engaged in the poaching of elephants and illegal trade in ivory in order to fund their activities or to buy weapons and ammunition. In one central African country, a rebel group went so far as to threaten to kill highly-endangered gorillas unless government forces withdrew from rebel-held areas. Consequently, although they were not in the rebels’ physical possession, the gorillas were almost hostages of the guerrillas. In areas bordering the Caspian Sea, rebel groups are suspected of engaging in illicit trade in caviar, although it is not clear whether some of these groups have been truly politically-motivated or simply organized crime posing as freedom-fighters.

Much like organized crime, terrorist groups and cells have historically turned to crime to fund their activities, particularly for their purchases of arms and explosives. This was evident in organizations such as Action Directe, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion). It does not seem unreasonable to therefore forecast that several of today’s terrorist groups may be attracted to the relatively easily-acquired profits of wildlife crime. A great extent will probably depend upon the availability of such wildlife and their access to markets. PIRA, for example, in illicitly trading in tax-free diesel fuel (intended for tractors and other farm machinery) exploited the large agricultural communities in Northern Ireland. Action Directe used to rob banks. Nevertheless, if banks are few and far between, but caviar, elephants, rhinoceroses or tigers are in the neighbourhood, there could be an incentive to resort to poaching to fund their initiatives, thereby potentially establishing plausible connections between wildlife crime and terrorism.

How to respond?

It is regrettable that for wildlife crime to be taken seriously or to become a law enforcement priority, it is first crucial to establish links between that wildlife transgression and organized crime or terrorism. Banks are covered by insurances and the money stolen can therefore be replaced. But once the last snow leopard is poached, it is gone forever. The illegal harvesting, the cross-border smuggling and the illegal trade in natural resources involves substantial levels of criminality. To those involved, it can bring profits that greatly exceed those acquired by criminals engaged in trafficking narcotics, humans or firearms. It involves the exploitation of men and women in some of the world’s poorest communities. Every year, law enforcement officials combating such crimes lose their lives, are seriously injured, and face harassment and corruption attempts. Yet illegal activities targeting fauna and flora continue to be viewed outside of the realm of mainstream crime. Wildlife crime threatens food, bio- and national-security; it weakens the governance of many States, it raises the risks of spreading virulent diseases, and it shows no signs of declining. When one species is depleted or brought to the brink of extinction, attention shifts to another one.

When the demand for tiger bones could no longer be easily supplied because of the animals’ increasing rarity in Asia, leopards were killed instead. When leopards became harder and harder to locate, the focus shifted to lion bones acquired in Africa. Illegal logging accrues profits ranging in the several billion US dollars each year, with a correspondingly severe loss of revenue to national governments. Unregulated and unreported fishing takes place at similar levels but, despite affecting most nations in the world, it is less noticeable than other types of wildlife crime. Combating such crimes is, to a significant extent, uncoordinated, underfunded, under resourced, and under appreciated.

The war against trafficking in drugs, humans, firearms, diamonds and other illegally-traded commodities with high profiles among the enforcement communities and the general public will inevitably be a long term one, with many individual battles along the way. Several of the world’s rarest animals and plants, however, cannot afford such a long-term war, as they face extinction now. The international coordination of the efforts to protect the wildlife and to support national authorities is woefully inadequate and often overwhelmed by the demands placed upon the very few individuals involved. At the national level, the front-line staff suffers from a lack of legal authority, equipment, training, inter-agency cooperation and access to modern policing methods. Attempts to plug the gaps and to deliver assistance have tended to be haphazard and have often not been harmonized, well-structured or properly evaluated. In November 2009, representatives from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the International

Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Bank and the World Customs Organization came together in recognition of the increasing threat to natural resources posed by wildlife crime. Whilst several of these organizations had previously worked bilaterally on this subject, this was the first occasion that the five agencies had come together to jointly collaborate on this issue and on any other form of related crime. The agencies decided to form the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC) in order to move forward together. The members of this Consortium are currently in the process of designing a programme to assist countries in coordinating their efforts to protect the world's natural resources, to combat wildlife crime and to bring these perpetrators to justice; further details of the programme are expected to be announced in the near future.

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