

The political economy of the illegal wildlife trade

Ed Laws

University of Birmingham

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Question

What is the available political economy analysis of the illegal wildlife trade and the criminal networks involved?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Overview

There is increasing recognition that the illegal wildlife trade (IWT)¹ involves wide and complex networks, engages a diverse range of actors, and has far-reaching political and economic effects. It encompasses poachers, armed non-state actors from source nations, international crime groups and legitimate (albeit often corrupt) authorities. However, few studies explicitly use political economy analysis (PEA)² to analyse IWT and the criminal networks involved, and there is only a limited number of case studies in the literature that explore the underlying drivers, networks and power relations involved.

IWT has grown to become a massive global industry. Various organisations and reports estimate that the trade is worth at least US\$19 billion per year and rank IWT as the fourth largest global illegal activity (IFAW 2013). The emerging picture of IWT is that organised criminal syndicates provide the trafficking routes and methods to join together source countries with increasingly wealthy end-user markets, primarily in Asia. As with other forms of transnational crime, those involved use corrupt officials and politicians to evade enforcement and control mechanisms and to protect the illegal chains of custody.

This review is based on a rapid assessment of academic, donor and grey literature. A large part of recent scholarship in this area has been produced by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), or else can be found in peer-reviewed academic journals. Authors do not appear to have engaged with the gender implications of IWT in the context of PEA.

Key findings

- Most recent literature on IWT acknowledges the importance of political economy issues such as the prevalence of governance failings in source countries. There is also a common recognition in much of the literature that political, economic, cultural and social factors drive both demand and supply sides of IWT, and that any effort to address the trade needs to be cognisant of these drivers.
- However, it is very rare to find PEA tools or methods being used to analyse the drivers of the trade or to shape policy recommendations or interventions.
- Despite consensus in the literature that IWT involves complex networks between transnational crime syndicates, poachers, armed non-state actors, traders and consumers, this review found little evidence of attempts to map the links between these actors or to look in detail at their operating practices. This may be a consequence of the fact that the trade is clandestine and therefore empirical evidence is limited.

¹ Following a frequently-cited definition, this report uses the term 'illegal wildlife trade' to refer to the trade in animals and plants that have been poached, captured, collected or processed in contravention of national, regional or international laws (McLellan et al 2014).

² This report uses PEA to refer to "the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time" (DFID 2009).

2. Political economy drivers of illegal wildlife trade

The following underlying conditions have been identified as factors that enable IWT (WWF 2012). Although not explicitly identified as part of a PEA, these factors do refer to the way in which power, interests and incentives are structured, and the interaction between political and economic processes in societies.

- As discussed in more detail below, poaching tends to thrive in places where there is widespread corruption, weak enforcement by government and limited economic opportunities.
- Organised criminal groups are attracted to the availability of huge profits and the low-risk nature of wildlife crime, including the absence of credible law enforcement, prosecution, penalties and other deterrents.
- Demand for illegal wildlife products has risen in step with economic growth in consumer countries, which is exacerbated by the increased accessibility of illegal wildlife products through the internet.
- Internationally, blame for the issue is passed back and forth between source and consumer countries, and there is a lack of collaboration, coordination and accountability between them.

Poverty and affluence

A study by TRAFFIC (2008) explores the relative importance of poverty, livelihoods, resource management, awareness, legislation, and markets as possible drivers of IWT. The authors note that rising affluence and increasing disposable income in consumer countries are major drivers of demand for wildlife. They also note that a variety of factors associated with economic growth, trade expansion and the development of infrastructure are believed to be the primary drivers of the market availability of wildlife. The study notes, for example, the influence of the economic growth of India and China both in terms of their growing domination of regional markets and the changing demands, aspirations and purchasing power of increasingly affluent sectors of the population. A recent review of evidence looking at the trafficking of ivory and rhino horn also concluded that wealth rather than poverty was the ultimate driver, in that individuals from poor communities would not engage in the poaching of commercially valuable species unless there was demand from wealthier communities (Duffy and St John 2013). Analysis for the African Elephant Summit in December 2013 highlighted the interplay of poverty, weak governance and consumer demands as the strongest factors associated with the escalation of elephant poaching (CITES Secretariat *et al.* 2013). There is consensus across a number of studies that wealth in demand countries is a stronger driver of IWT than poverty in source countries (TRAFFIC 2008; IFAW 2008; Duffy 2010: 155-187; Duffy and St John 2013).

Duffy (2016) argues that a fine-grained understanding of the political economy dynamics of poaching is required to understand the drivers of IWT. For example, it has been assumed that individuals engaged in rhino poaching in Kruger National Park in South Africa were recruited from economically deprived communities in Mozambique (Humphreys and Smith 2014: 802). However, the argument that poverty alone drives Mozambicans to poach in South Africa ignores the complex dynamics that encourage individuals to engage in illegal hunting. Duffy (2016) points out that the legislative framework in Mozambique has also contributed indirectly to poaching across the border in South Africa. Until recently,

rhino-related offences were only considered as misdemeanours rather than crimes under Mozambique's legislative framework. Therefore if individuals were found to have rhino horn in their possession on their return to Mozambique, they would not face significant penalties. In addition, many of the communities on the Mozambican side of the border have a history of alienation from the parks, and they regard poaching as a form of resistance to their dispossession and exclusion from resources they once enjoyed (Duffy 2016).

Duffy (2016) also puts forward the example of pseudo-hunting in South Africa as an example which disrupts the neat categorisations of wealth and poverty as drivers of IWT, and illustrates the wider political economy dynamics at play. In 2013, one quarter of South Africa's white rhinos were found on private conservation land. South Africa expanded the role of private reserves by creating financial incentives for stocking rhinos based on income generation from tourism, trophy hunting and live sales. This helped increase the country's rhino population. However, between 2007 and 2012, legally obtained sport hunting permits were used as a cover for the export of illegally hunted rhino horn (Emslie et al. 2012). This pseudo-hunting industry relied on collusion by ranch owners and veterinarians. As the value of live rhinos at legal auctions dropped, the illegal demand for rhino horn increased and the black market price rose. As a result, there was an economic incentive for ranch owners to 'allow' their rhinos to be poached, take a portion of the profits from the illegal sale of the horn and then buy another, cheaper live rhino via the Kwazulu-Natal parks service auctions. South Africa's Threatened or Protected Species Regulations created fear in emerging markets in Vietnam and Thailand that the supply of rhino horn would dry up as the state began to restrict access to hunting permits. This in turn prompted more aggressive poaching. In 2012, the South African state clamped down on pseudo hunting and banned sport hunting by Asian nationals. However, by 2013 there had been a significant increase in permits given to Czech nationals, who were being used in place of Asian nationals to obtain rhino horn (CITES 2013, p. 6).

3. Governance, corruption and political interference

Countries that experience high levels of IWT are often characterised by poor governance and corruption (Biggs et al 2016; Weru 2016). Conversely, the most successful reformer countries with respect to wildlife governance have been Southern African nations that exhibit low levels of overall institutional corruption: Namibia, Botswana and South Africa (Nelson 2009). In these countries the overall governance context reduces the opportunities for public officials to privately capture and control the economic value of natural resources such as wildlife (Ibid). Elite capture (where resources designated for benefit of the larger population are claimed by a few individuals in privileged positions) at village through to national levels is widely recognised as a political economy challenge facing community-based conservation and community-based interventions against IWT (Biggs et al 2016).

There is evidence in the literature that efforts to curb wildlife crime can be hindered by political interference. For example, according to a recent peer-reviewed article by Kideghesho (2016), Tanzanian politicians have been known to frustrate interventions targeted at IWT in order to protect the interests of their constituents who earn a living through the trade. The author also claims that in a survey of staff working in Tanzania's national parks, 75% of respondents described local politicians as a constraint to conservation efforts. Evidence of political interference in the war against wildlife crime in Tanzania has also been reported in an inquiry conducted by the Parliamentary Committee on Land, Environment and Natural Resources, which found some members of parliament and government officials guilty of

protecting poachers with whom they had close personal ties (Ibid).

4. Transnational criminal networks and IWT

Wildlife crime has historically been seen and treated as a low-level offence, primarily carried out in an *ad-hoc* manner by subsistence hunters and the occasional small player looking for supplemental income. However, numerous sources have reported the increasing involvement of transnational organised crime networks in illegally sourcing and trading wildlife (Bennett 2011; Felbab-Brown 2011). The involvement of organised criminals in the illegal ivory trade, for example, is evidenced by the increasing trend in seizures of large-scale ivory shipments between Africa and Asia (Milliken et al 2012). Consumer demand for illegal wildlife goods and the prevalence of unregulated or insufficiently supervised markets have opened up opportunities for large profits by these networks.

Moving large quantities of illegal wildlife products across international borders requires substantial resources, organisation and financial means for funding operations and logistics. The illegal trade in elephant tusks from Africa into Asia, for example, is reported to involve interlocking webs of shell companies, Southeast Asian and African nationals, and a smuggling route that runs from Africa across multiple borders and through several Asian ports before reaching its final destination (Banks et al 2007).

The literature often outlines the structure of the criminal networks involved in IWT in broad terms. For example, a 2016 report from TRAFFIC (Weru 2016) states that poaching networks typically follow roughly the same pattern: a middleman connects the poacher to a local transporter who delivers the wildlife contraband to another middleman for onward delivery to a trafficking kingpin or patron. The kingpin finances the poaching network and uses corrupt connections in the public and private sector to move the contraband across county and country borders.

However, whilst it is commonly stated in the literature that IWT often involves highly complex transnational networks of actors and a diverse range of social, political and economic drivers, it is rare to find any case studies that look at these networks and drivers in detail. The following sub-sections discuss three exceptions, which include a study on elephant poaching in Tanzania, illegal ivory seized in Singapore, and illegal abalone farming in South Africa.

Case study 1: Elephant poaching in Tanzania

According to data from the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), East Africa is the biggest source region of illegal ivory, especially Kenya and Tanzania (EIA 2014). Tanzania's elephants continue to be poached to supply the growing demand in an unregulated illegal ivory market, predominantly in China. Seizure data implicates Tanzania in more large flows of ivory than any other country. It is also consistently linked to criminal cases featuring exceptionally large consignments of ivory recovered in places as diverse as Hong Kong, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Taiwan (Ibid).

The poaching crisis in Tanzania involves a complex mix of criminal syndicates, often led by Chinese nationals, and corruption among some Tanzanian government officials. Collusion between corrupt officials and criminal enterprises explains the unprecedented scale of poaching and ivory smuggling in the country (Ibid). It also compromises enforcement efforts so that few of the main culprits are prosecuted. Corruption is a key enabling factor at every stage of the ivory trafficking chain: from game

rangers who provide information on patrol patterns and the location of elephant herds, to police officers who rent out weapons and transport ivory, to the Tanzanian Revenue Authority (TRA) officers who allow shipping containers of ivory to flow out of the country's ports (Ibid).

At the upper levels, politicians from the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party and well-connected business people use their influence to protect the ivory traffickers. The former Minister for Natural Resources and Tourism, Khamis Kagasheki, in 2013 named four CCM members of parliament for their involvement in elephant poaching. He also alluded to the involvement of other high-level individuals, stating: "This business involves rich people and politicians who have formed a very sophisticated network" (Ibid). In 2008, police searched a truck in southern Tanzania and found a haul of ivory tusks. The vehicle was owned by Usangu Safaris, a hunting company owned by the family of Nawab Mulla, CCM Chairman for the Mbeya region. In 2013, CCM Secretary-General Abdulrahman Kinana was named in Parliament as being involved in the smuggling of ivory tusks from Tanzania to Vietnam in 2009, due to his ownership of one of the shipping companies involved in transporting the consignment (Ibid).

China is the world's largest destination market for illegal ivory. The current surge in illegal ivory trading in China is a consequence of several connected factors: the creation of a parallel legal domestic market for ivory in China by CITES³ decisions; the role of the Chinese government and industry in stimulating demand for ivory products; and failure to stop the flow of smuggled ivory through Hong Kong to mainland China. Investigations in China highlight the role of the government in the trade, particularly state-owned ivory carving factories and stores (EIA 2014).

Case study 2: Illegal ivory seizure in Singapore

In June 2002, over six tonnes of ivory was seized on board a ship arriving in Singapore. The seizure, which disrupted one of the world's most lucrative ivory syndicates, resulted from the coordinated efforts of national enforcement agencies from Zambia, Malawi and Singapore, and the multilateral Lusaka Agreement Task Force (Banks et al 2007). Investigations into the Singapore case revealed a well established syndicate comprised of Southeast Asian and African nationals operating across at least five borders and spanning two continents.

Much of the ivory procured by the Singapore syndicate came from Zambia's South Luangwa National Park (SLNP). A poacher apprehended in SLNP in 2001 revealed that he had been contracted by the warden of the park to poach 100 elephants in order to supply ivory to the Singapore syndicate. Rather than being investigated, the warden was simply transferred to another region (Ibid).

Recovered documentation showed that the syndicate had been active for at least eight years, having dispatched 19 similar sized shipments since 1994. This record of activity represents thousands of poached elephants and black market ivory worth hundreds of millions of dollars (Ibid). Sourced largely from elephants in Zambia, the ivory was transported to Malawi for packing before being taken by road to Mozambique. From there it was shipped to South Africa, and on to Japan via Singapore. The modus

³ The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

operandi employed to avoid detection included the use of personal and company pseudonyms, mis-declaring goods, bribing customs officials, fake documentation and multiple shipments (Banks et al 2007).

Case study 3: Illegal abalone fishing in South Africa

Abalone poaching in South Africa has historically been most common in impoverished fishing communities. A range of organised criminal groups operate higher up in the illicit abalone economy, forming a chain that ultimately links divers with consumers in East Asia. At the start of the decade, illegal abalone poaching in South Africa emerged on a far bigger scale than ever before. De Greef and Raemaekers (2014) (citing Steinberg 2005) attribute this shift to four main factors, which illustrate some of the wider political economy dynamics involved.

First, the South African rand depreciated in value, benefitting both legal and illegal local abalone exporters, who were able to earn proportionally more for their product. At the same time, rapid economic growth in East Asia boosted demand, causing prices for abalone and other high-end goods to rise. This made abalone an exceptionally valuable resource, and one that was both abundant and highly accessible.

Secondly, a sophisticated network of ethnic Chinese criminal syndicates, with connections to mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and which had already been operating in South Africa for over a decade, played a key role in organising the illegal trade when the value of abalone increased. Links were forged with key actors in the Cape Town underworld. In exchange for abalone, the criminal gangs began bartering ingredients for the manufacture of illegal drugs that were popular among poorer residents of the Western Cape, tightly entwining illegal fishing with the broader criminal economy.

The third main factor driving the explosion of organised abalone poaching in South Africa was the lifting of economic sanctions after the end of the country's apartheid era. South Africa's re-integration into the global economy and the concomitant rise in legal cross-border trade made it easier for transnational criminal groups to conduct their operations without being detected; a situation exacerbated by slackened border controls making it easier for contraband to leave the country.

The final factor identified by Steinberg (2005) is the widespread frustration felt by residents of South African fishing communities at slow fisheries reform. With the end of apartheid in 1994 came widespread optimism that South African fisheries would reform for the benefit of the poor. But the transformation process that began shortly afterwards proved cumbersome. As a consequence, the expectations of many formerly disadvantaged fishers were not met, leaving a void for criminal groups to exploit.

The upshot of these developments was that by the end of the 1990s abalone poaching in South Africa had ceased to be an informal, opportunistic activity and had entered the realm of large-scale, highly organised transnational crime.

5. Responses to IWT informed by political economy

This review did not find any literature that explicitly uses or recommends PEA tools to inform policy responses to IWT. However, the following four themes have emerged, which are all informed by an appreciation of the importance of political and economic processes in society and the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals.

Look beyond regulations. Historically, responses to IWT have been predominantly regulatory, involving the introduction of new and stronger legislation, the establishment of trade controls and sanctions, and the use of diplomatic pressure. But with rising demand for high-value species there is increasing recognition of the need for more multifaceted interventions. Going beyond stronger law enforcement and judicial procedures, these encompass engagement with local communities and support for sustainable livelihoods in wildlife source areas (Challender et al 2014).

Address governance failings. Most authors display an appreciation of the fact that laws and regulations stand little chance of success unless wider issues of governance are also tackled. The majority of wildlife products in trade are subject to one or more regulatory controls, but the success of regulatory interventions is highly variable. Low capacity and will to enforce controls on the wildlife trade, which in turn are underpinned by a range of factors associated with weak governance (such as corruption, breakdown of the rule of law and inadequate political will), are regarded as important reasons why IWT interventions fail in practice (TRAFFIC 2008).

Respond to the economic and market drivers. As noted above, there is a general consensus that wealth is a stronger driver of IWT than poverty. Therefore IWT interventions that focus on reducing poverty alone are unlikely to be effective. There is a critical need to ensure that interventions are better targeted to respond to the dynamics of increasing affluence and wealth, rising aspirations and demands, and wider processes of economic growth. Particular efforts need to be made to target interventions to urban consumers, and to richer and more powerful groups (TRAFFIC 2008). Challender et al (2014) add that reducing consumer demand is required, which calls for an intensive research effort into consumer preferences, beliefs, social norms, and lifestyles to inform and develop the most appropriate interventions.

Experiment with decentralisation. According to a brief by Nelson (2009), reforms that decentralise or devolve user rights over wildlife can radically change the attitudes of landholders towards wildlife, shifting incentives away from illegal practices and towards conservation and investment. In parts of Southern Africa, these kinds of reforms have led to wildlife recoveries and dramatic increases in wildlife-based industries. But such reforms are often incompatible with the private interests and motivations of influential political elites and policy-makers. Devolving rights over wildlife to local actors constitutes a shift in control over wildlife's economic value, which involves losing direct access to money and resources. These political-economic factors can create strong incentives for policy-makers to resist such reforms. This has been a central dynamic in the wildlife sector governance in wildlife-rich countries including Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique (Ibid).

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Expert contributors

- Freya St John, Lecturer in Conservation Science, Bangor University

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