



TRAFFIC



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HIGH FLYING

INSIGHT INTO WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING
THROUGH INDIA'S AIRPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

THE ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE IS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT THREATS TO WILDLIFE TODAY

Wildlife and forest crime is a serious and growing problem, posing a significant threat to the environment and negatively impacting economic and social development, security and governance. It comprises the fourth largest illegal trade worldwide after arms, drugs and human trafficking, and frequently links with other forms of serious crime such as fraud, money laundering, and corruption.

The wildlife trafficking networks operate globally, encompassing different countries as sources, origin, transit, and destination locations. Live animals, plants, and derivatives are illegally traded for food, traditional medicines, artifacts, fashion, and exotic pets.

WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING THROUGH AIRPORTS

While the unprecedented growth of the airline sectors has facilitated the smooth transit of individuals and goods across the globe, it is also being exploited by traffickers to move illegal wildlife products speedily and with significantly fewer transit losses.

India's aviation sector is growing rapidly, and as per IATA (International Air Transport Association), it is expected to become the world's third-largest by 2024. According to ROUTES (Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species), India also finds itself among the top 10 countries globally where the airline sector is being used at the highest levels for trafficking of wildlife and their products.

To assess the role of the Indian airline sector in trafficking prohibited wildlife and products, an analysis was conducted by compiling data of reported seizures made at the Indian airports between 2011-2020. This analysis is based entirely on the data available in the public domain and hence is only a subset of the actual scale. However, it does give indications about the trends, dynamics, and scale of the activity.

WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING THROUGH INDIA'S AIRPORTS (2011-2020)

The analysis of reported seizures made at the Indian airports between 2011-2020 found that several native wildlife species ranging from Indian Star Tortoise *Geochelone elegans* to Common Leopard *Panthera pardus* cubs were seized. It also found many exotic species such as Red-eared Slider Turtle *Trachemys scripta elegans*, iguana, python, spider, marmoset, Tamarin Monkey *Saguinus* spp., Tricolour Squirrel *Callosciurus prevostii*, and exotic birds were seized from check-in and hand baggage at various Indian airports during the study period.

Similarly, several flora species, including Agarwood *Aquilaria malaccensis*, Red Sanders *Pterocarpus santalinus*, Sandalwood *Santalum album*, and medicinal and aromatic plants (MAP) like Kuth *Saussurea costus* roots were seized at the airports.

CRUCIAL FINDINGS

PERIOD 2011 - 2020

18 airports in India

reported 141 wildlife seizure incidents involving 146 wildlife species during 2011-2020.

over 70,000 wild animals

including their body parts or derivatives, were found during the study period. Wildlife derivatives weighing over 4000 kg were also seized at airports in India.

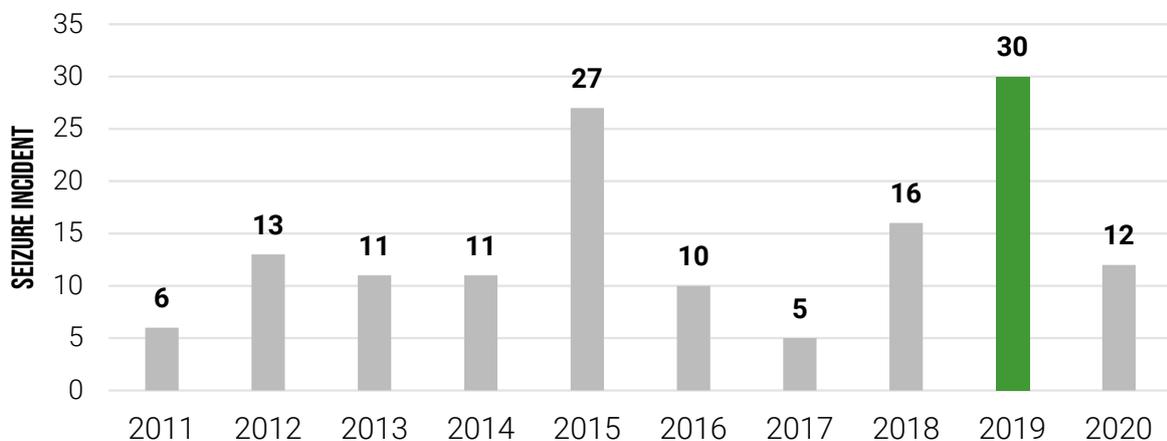


FIGURE 1

Number of seizure incidents reported each year between 2011-2020

Chennai International Airport in Tamil Nadu

recorded the highest number of wildlife seizure incidents (36.1% of total cases), followed by Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, Mumbai, Maharashtra (14.8%) and Indira Gandhi Airport, New Delhi (11.3%).

Reptiles were the most encountered group among the species seized

during the study period (46%), followed by mammals (18%), timber (13%), and species from the marine environment (10%).

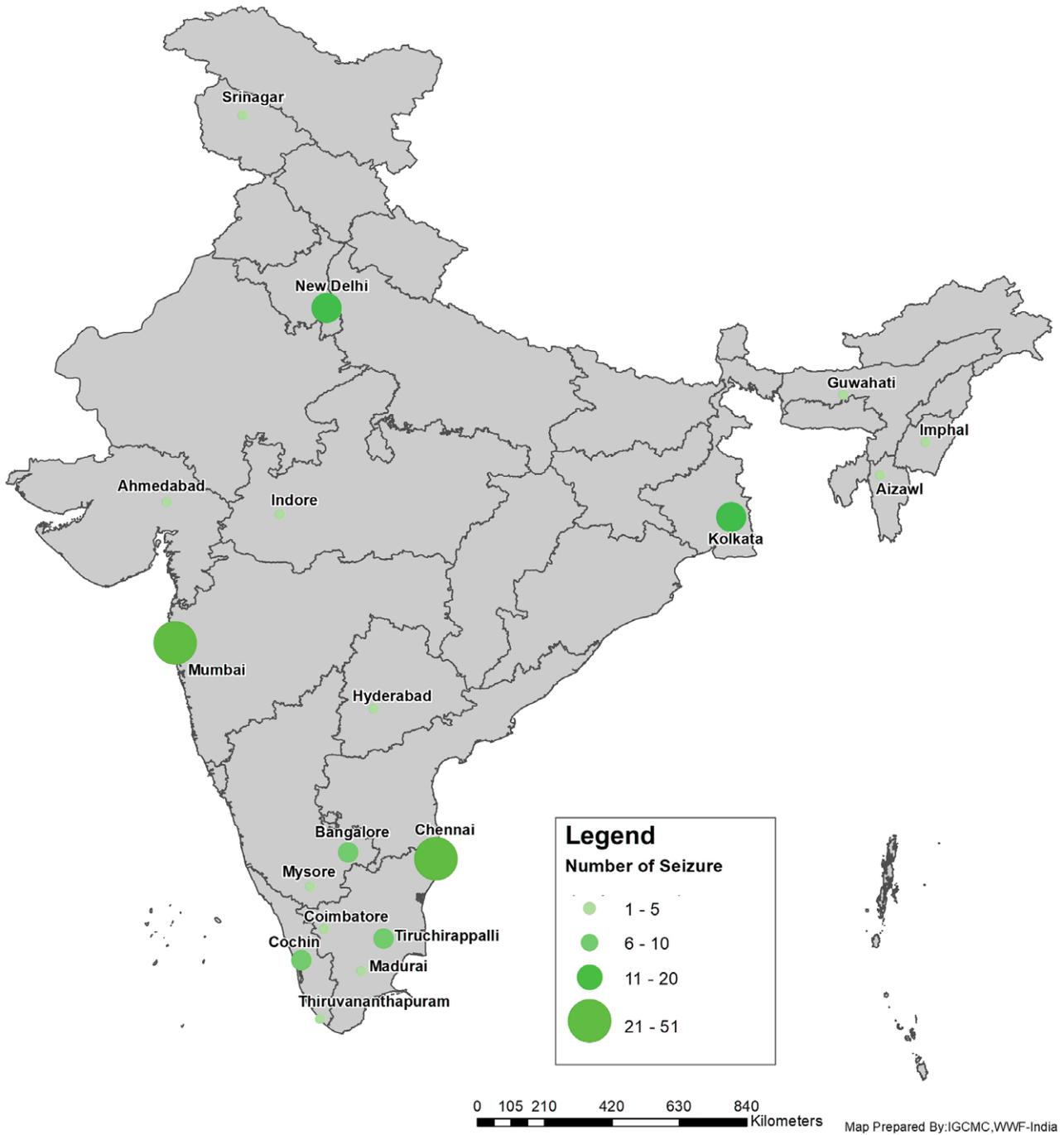


FIGURE 2
Number of seizure incidents reported by airport

SEIZURE INCIDENTS FROM EACH SPECIES CATEGORY

Approximately half of the individual/products seized could not be identified up to the species levels due to identification issues or insufficient information available in the open-source reports.

Though seizure incidents reported both native and non-native wildlife species, the number of seizure incidents of native wildlife species were more than three times that those involving non-native/exotic wildlife.

Native species

In terms of seizure incidents, reptiles were the most common group seized, followed by timber, mammals, species from the marine environment, birds, and insects. In terms of species seized at the airport, most were mammals, followed by species from the marine environment, reptiles, timber, insects, and birds.

Exotic species

In terms of seizure incidents, most seizures reported reptiles, followed by mammals, birds, insects, species from the marine environment, and amphibians. In terms of species seized at the airport, most were birds, followed by reptiles, mammals, insects, species from the marine environment, and amphibians.

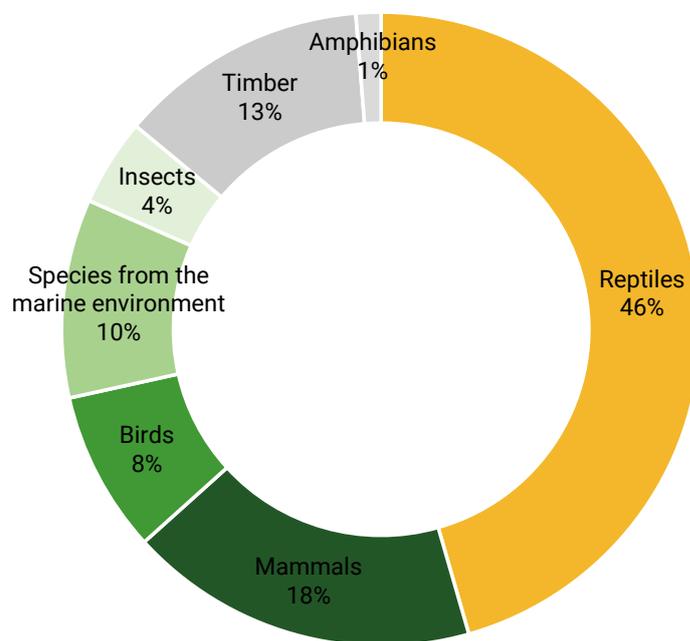


FIGURE 3
Seizure incidents from each species category

SEIZURE INCIDENTS OF NATIVE, EXOTIC AND UNIDENTIFIED SPECIES

Among the various categories of items seized, viz., live animals, their body parts, products and derivatives, live wild animals (both native and non-native species) were most frequently

reported in trade, both in seizure incidences and in terms of the number of animals seized. Of these, reptiles' seizures were the highest.

Native species

The highest number of seizure incidences in the category of native species seized included the Indian Star Tortoise, seized in over 19.8% of seizure incidences. The highest number of live animals of native origin reported during the study period was also the Indian Star Tortoise. The Black Pond Turtle *Geoclemys hamiltonii* was second, both in terms of number of seizures (12% of seizure incidences) and number of live animals seized.

Exotic species

In the category of non-native species seized, Red-Eared Slider Turtle was reported in the highest number of seizure incidents, seized in more than 6% of the seizure incidences. They were also the most number of live animals of exotic origin reported in seizure incidences, with 65% of the total number of wildlife and derivatives seized during the observed period. Chinese Pond Turtle *Mauremys reevesii* were reported as the second-highest number of live animals of exotic origin seized.

GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The species identified in the wildlife seizure incidents during the study period had their native range throughout the world, reflecting on the international scale of the trade with a majority of these species being native to Asia, of which more than half are found in India.

Species with their native range in South America, Africa, Australia, North America, and Europe have also been recorded in seizure incidents at India's airports during the study period.

THREATENED SPECIES SEIZED AT THE AIRPORT

Species reported in wildlife trafficking through India's airports during the study period included six species under the Critically Endangered (CR), 14 species under Endangered (EN), six species under Vulnerable (VU) and six species under Near Threatened (NT) categories of the IUCN Red List.

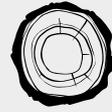
MODE OF SMUGGLING

The analysis of seizure incidents reported during the observed period showed the following transit methods being used to evade enforcement agencies while trafficking wildlife:

- Trafficking through checked luggage and personal baggage.
- Trafficking by concealment of wildlife contraband within passenger clothing, footwear, and other wearables.
- Wrong declaration of protected species.

WILDLIFE DERIVATIVES SEIZED AT THE AIRPORTS IN INDIA:

Among the derivatives seized, timber represented the highest quantity (by weight) seized with over 3,000 kg of timber and its products.



All seized timber and their products belonged to the species native to India, including Red Sanders, *Aquilaria* (Agarwood), and *Santalum* (Sandalwood).



Red Sanders, a species endemic to the Eastern Ghats of India, was the most seized variety of timber, both in quantity and number of seizures with more than 2700 kg of the timber seized.



Among the seized derivatives of wild animals, approx. 550 kg were scales of Pangolins *Manis* spp., a highly threatened and one of the most trafficked mammal species protected in India and under CITES.



Products from marine ecosystems included 373 pieces and 122 kg of Sea Cucumbers, 114 kg of Organ Pipe Coral *Tubipora musica*, 36.3 kg of Sea Horses *Hippocampus* spp. and 532 kg of Green Turban *Turbo marmoratus*, all protected under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act.



Shark fins weighing 123.5 kg, a highly-priced wildlife product in the food market of Southeast Asia, and export of which has been prohibited under the EXIM policy, was also seized.



Three skins of the Tiger *Panthera tigris*, four tusks of Elephant *Elephas maximus*, 49 kg of feathers of Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, all protected under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act were also seized.



Bag manufactured from the skin of monitor lizard and shawls from Tibetan Antelope *Pantholops hodgsonii*, also known as Chiru, were seized during the study period.

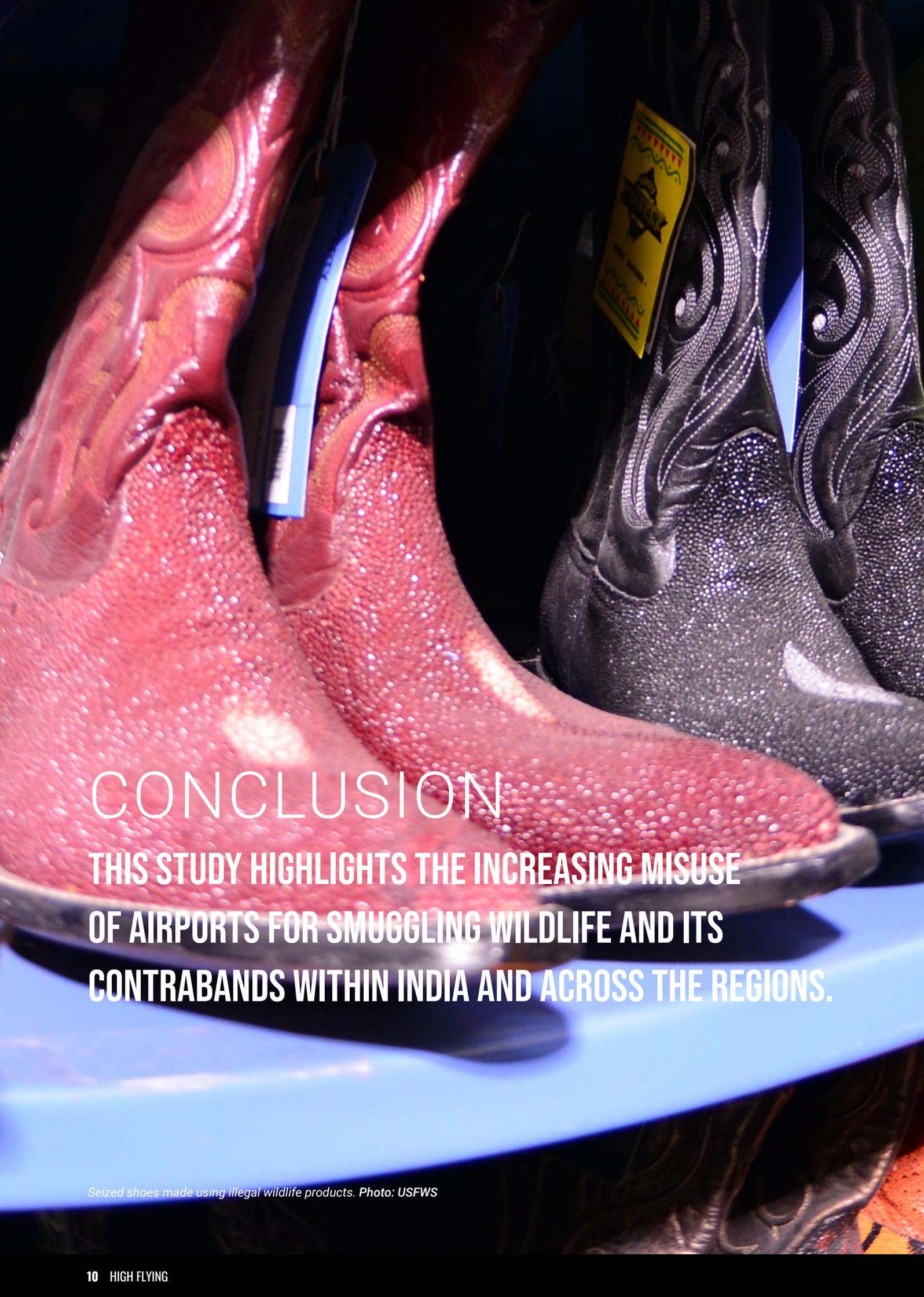


Canines of big cat species, antlers of ungulate species, bird eggs, and meat from mammals were also found in the reported wildlife seizures.





Indian Star Tortoise. Photo: Kuribo / flickr



CONCLUSION

THIS STUDY HIGHLIGHTS THE INCREASING MISUSE OF AIRPORTS FOR SMUGGLING WILDLIFE AND ITS CONTRABANDS WITHIN INDIA AND ACROSS THE REGIONS.

Seized shoes made using illegal wildlife products. Photo: USFWS

In India, wildlife is protected against hunting, trade, and other forms of exploitation through the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 of India. The Act enlists wildlife species native to India under its different Schedules.

The CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) enlists species in three Appendices depending on the degrees of protection they need and subjecting their international trade to certain conditions. Thus, it protects native species and their parts and derivatives from being traded to extinction and, similarly, regulates the trade of exotic species and their parts and products into other countries.

The import and export of wildlife is further regulated through India's Export-Import (EXIM) Policy. The policy prohibits the import and export of several wild animals, including their

parts and products. It also subjects the import and export of CITES-listed species to the provisions of CITES.

Despite the restrictions, wildlife trafficking continues. TRAFFIC's study highlights the increasing misuse of airports for smuggling wildlife and its contrabands within India and across the regions. The study's findings reflect the ongoing trafficking and not an actual representation as most of the illegal wildlife trade goes unchecked and unreported.

Since air transport has established itself as one of the lucrative modes of trafficking wildlife for criminals, building capacities of enforcement officials to detect and deter wildlife trafficking through airports, and awareness generation is crucial for ending wildlife trafficking through the airports.

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Data used:

Open-source media and publications (TRAFFIC Bulletin, TRAFFIC Post and reports), information on Wildlife Trade Information System (WITIS), USAID Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership (<http://www.routesdashboard.org/>) and the Global Environmental Crime Tracker from Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). We acknowledge the information and the support provided by these organisations for this study and thank them for their help.

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MARCH 2022

WORKING TO ENSURE THE TRADE IN
WILD PLANTS AND ANIMALS IS NOT
A THREAT TO THE CONSERVATION
OF NATURE



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