



Illegal Wildlife Trade



Definition and scope

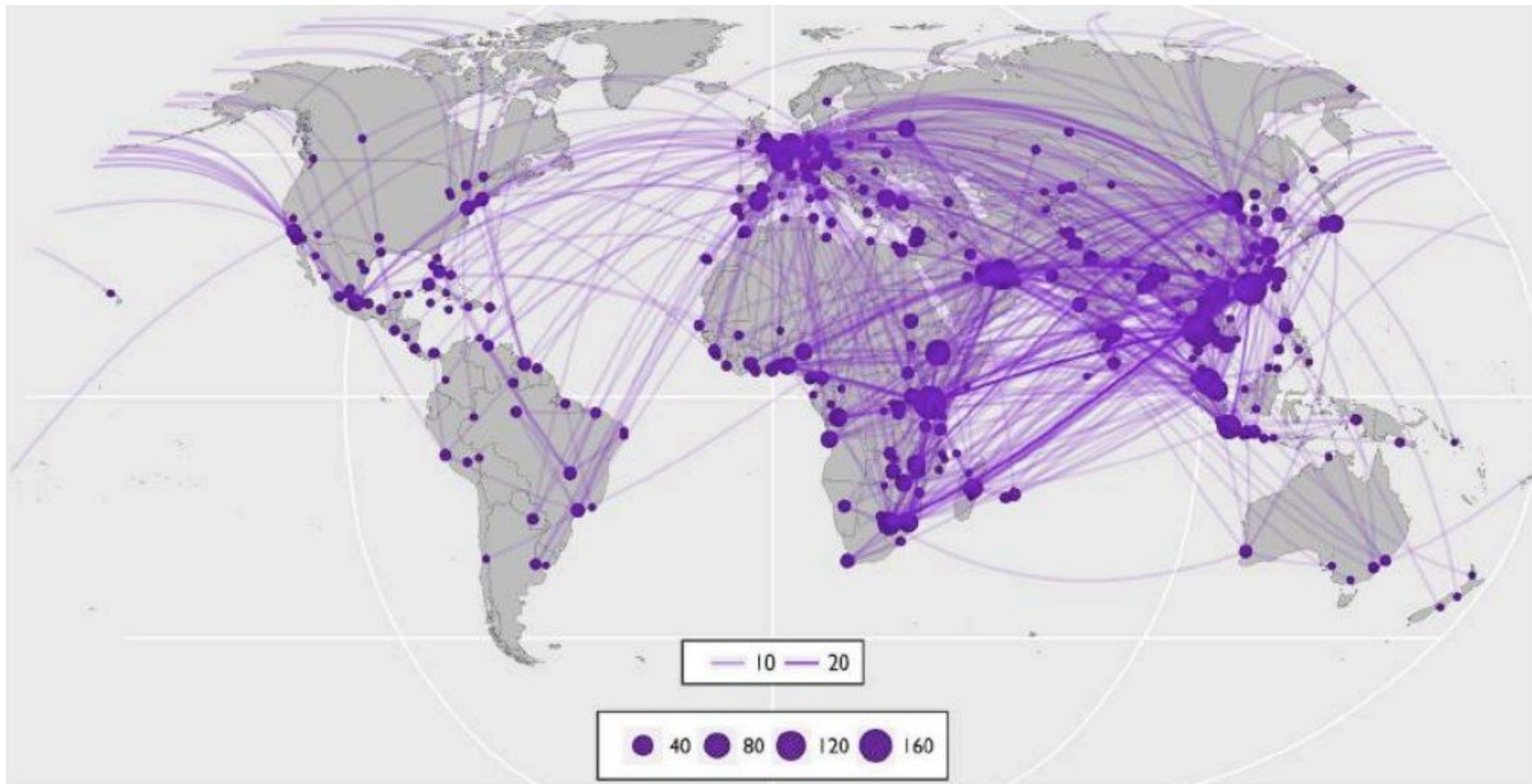
Illegal wildlife trade is one of the most profitable forms of illicit trade. It involves the unsanctioned poaching and international trafficking of wildlife and their parts. Some of the most lucrative illicit wildlife commodities include tiger parts, caviar, elephant ivory, rhino horn, and exotic birds and reptiles. According to a range of international organizations, this illicit activity is one of the five major types of environmental crime and the fifth most profitable criminal activity, after the global trade in narcotics, arms, counterfeits and humans ([UNODC](#)).

According to the United Nations' estimations, poaching, and illegal wildlife trade's annual value is approximately between USD 7 to 23 billion – excluding fishing and logging ([UNEP-INTERPOL](#)). Wildlife trafficking primarily feeds illicit retail markets; however, several flows feed into the licit trade. When illegally traded wildlife is introduced into legal markets, criminals have access to a much larger source of demand than they would have had on the black market alone. However, wildlife trafficking involves goods that can be legal or illegal, depending on where, and how they were acquired. Their legality is demonstrated through paperwork provided by fraud, forgery, and corruption ([UNODC](#)).

Most affected areas and industries

The largest consumers of illegal wildlife products are mostly Asian countries who are also source and transit markets: Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and China – with the

highest demand. Africa is also a key region for this illicit activity. Two of the highest-value and most consistently sought-after wildlife products, ivory and rhino horns, come from Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique ([OECD](#)). These products are usually sorted by large industrial sectors that make use of them, including medicine, food, zoos, art, jewelry, cosmetics and perfume, fashion, and furniture.



All air trafficking routes used for trafficking wildlife products between 2009-2017.

Source: [USAID ROUTES](#)

Country	Trafficking Instances
China	387
Thailand	150
UAE	117
Vietnam	108
Indonesia	97
Kenya	94
India	90
South Africa	88
Malaysia	80
USA	61

Top ten countries by number of trafficking instances (2009–2017).

Source: [USAID ROUTES](#)

FURNITURE	ART, DÉCOR, JEWELRY (INVESTMENT)	FASHION	COSMETICS AND PERFUME	FOOD, MEDICINE, TONICS	PETS, ZOOS, BREEDING	SEAFOOD
Rosewood	Ivory	Reptile skins	Agarwood	Pangolin	Parrots	Caviar
		Big cat skins		Rhino horn	Freshwater turtles and tortoises	Marine turtles
				Bear bile	Great apes	

Wildlife trade sectors, case study species-products and additional markets

Source: [UNODC](#)

Impacts of illegal wildlife trade

The relatively low risk of punishment has attracted organized crime groups to take advantage of gaps in legislation, weak law enforcement and criminal justice systems. The complex web of local poachers, transporters and traders constitutes an organized environmental crime industry which is facilitated primarily through corruption (Wittig, 2016). As such, poaching

and illicit wildlife trafficking has become a transnational organized crime, posing a serious threat to national and international security ([UNODC](#)):

- As a form of organized crime, it threatens stability and governance by undermining the credibility of politicians and political systems.
- It is linked to political violence or even terrorism: certain criminal groups tend to act like a surrogate state in many respects, taxing all economic activity, including illegal wildlife trafficking.
- It is strongly associated with development: poverty can provide incentives for poaching; at the same time, economic development means that more people can afford luxury wildlife products.
- Illicit wildlife trade and poaching have severe impacts on sustainability: it can lead to the extinction of whole species and the reduction, deterioration of biodiversity ([UNEP-INTERPOL](#); [UNODC](#); Van Uhm, 2016).

Poaching and illicit wildlife trade are serious environmental crimes committed by transnationally operating criminal groups with severe consequences. These activities can not only threaten peace and development but also can escalate into the destruction of the Earth's ecosystem, causing irreversible harms to the planet. The unsustainable trade in wildlife cannot be considered only an issue of conservation and animal welfare anymore but also a "national and global security challenge" (Ratchford et al., 2013).

"The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that wildlife crime is a threat not only to the environment and biodiversity, but also to human health."

References

Ratchford, M et al. (2013). *Criminal Nature: The Global Security Implications of the Illegal Wildlife Trade*, Yarmouth Port, MA: International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Van Uhm, D (2016). *The Illegal Wildlife Trade: Inside the World of Poachers, Smugglers and Traders*, Studies of Organized Crime, Volume 15. Switzerland: Springer.

Wittig, T (2016). *Poaching, Wildlife Trafficking and Organized Crime* in: Haenlein, C and M. L. R. Smith, M L R (eds) (2016): *Poaching, wildlife trafficking and security in Africa: myths and realities*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security, Whitehall papers, volume 86.

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