

Battling the illegal wildlife trade

To the Editor — The illegal wildlife trade is one of the most profitable organized crime networks globally. Millions of live animals, billions of kilograms of bushmeat, and large quantities of ivory and furs are traded annually worldwide¹. With an estimated worth in excess of US\$20 billion in criminally obtained proceeds and consequent losses to biodiversity², it should be an issue that has high priority with significant investment. Sadly, this is not the case and the critical question remains: Why? Here, we argue that the fundamental failure in controlling this criminal activity has been in identifying conservation as the primary motivation and reward for improved controls. Conservation remains a topic of limited concern and value across most government institutions and generally of low priority in national budgets, particularly in developing economies where corruption continues to be a contributor. A consequent lack of priority and funding has contributed to weak border controls

allowing wildlife products to be moved through international criminal networks³. However, wildlife can serve as hosts to many emerging animal and human pathogens with movement of infected animals or products providing a conduit for transmission of infectious diseases that can have catastrophic impacts⁴. Recent outbreaks of infectious diseases, such as Ebola⁵, sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)⁶, and foot and mouth disease (FMD)⁷ have dramatically highlighted the critical threat zoonotic disease can present to global health, precipitating critical impacts on regional populations, economies and security. If we frame illegal wildlife trade as an issue of both conservation and global health concern, we are likely to mobilize greater support and priority across nations. Here, border control effectiveness becomes a central activity necessary to secure the safety of citizens and economies, motivating political will, partnerships, and the finance

necessary to prevent both disease outbreaks of wildlife origin and the illegal movement of wildlife products. □

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Kathleen A. Alexander^{1,2*} and
Claire E. Sanderson^{1,2}

¹Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061, USA. ²Center for African Resources: Animals, Communities and Land use (CARACAL), Kasane, Botswana.

*e-mail: kathyalx@vt.edu