

LINKS BETWEEN WILDLIFE CRIME¹ AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS AND THE NEED TO INCLUDE ILLEGAL EXPLOITATION IN THE POST-2020 BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK: A SUBMISSION FROM UNODC

- **Purpose:** for consideration under agenda items 9 and 16 at COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity
- **Proponents:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
- **Scope:** consideration of the impact of wildlife crime on biodiversity
- **Focus:** include illegal exploitation in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework

INTRODUCTION

Over a million species are threatened with extinction. Global wildlife populations have declined by 60% since 1970, which has a devastating impact on biodiversity as well as numerous cascading effects, including on livelihoods, public health, the global economy, and on national and regional security. These challenges cannot be addressed without acknowledging the role played by transnational organized crime and corruption across the entire wildlife trafficking chain. This paper focuses on the impact of wildlife crime on biodiversity and provides guidance on the need to integrate measures to address illegal exploitation in the post-2020 biodiversity framework response and, likewise, on integrating biodiversity into crime prevention and criminal justice agendas.

WILDLIFE CRIME

Wildlife crime can be broadly understood as the illegal exploitation of the world's flora and fauna. Organized criminal groups have long taken advantage of the low risk and highly profitable crimes that affect the environment. Numerous large-scale seizures have taken place in recent years, the size of which require complex logistics and strong networks, suggesting the highly organized nature of these crimes.

Globally, approximately 6,000 different species of fauna and flora were seized between 1999 and 2018, including mammals, reptiles, corals, birds, and fish.¹ Illegal logging is estimated to account for between ten and thirty per cent of the global timber trade. Crimes in the fisheries sector undermine fisheries management and conservation efforts and contribute to overfishing and depletion of fish stocks. UNODC research suggests that nearly every country in the world plays a role in the illicit wildlife trade.

Wildlife crime impacts socio-economic development and poses security risks to people and states. Wildlife trafficking, which by definition does not go through proper sanitary and phytosanitary controls, can lead to the spread of zoonoses, such as SARS-CoV-2, which the global community is experiencing as the COVID-19 pandemic. Wildlife trafficking also has significant environmental impacts, contributing to the global extinction crisis and loss of biodiversity. Poaching of keystone species, for example, can have incalculable ecological repercussions. Wildlife crime amplifies climate

¹ UNODC World Wildlife Crime Report 2020

change by destroying important carbon sinks like forests, altering ecosystems, and disturbing the balance of the oceans.

IMPACT OF WILDLIFE CRIME ON BIODIVERSITY

Trafficking of wild fauna and flora has grown in importance in the public consciousness and on the political agenda in recent years. Since 2015, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted four resolutions on trafficking in wildlife,² demonstrating the continued and strengthened commitment of the international community to address this issue. Each resolution recognizes the impact of this crime type on the environment, conservation and biodiversity. The 2019 UN General Assembly resolution 73/343 on tackling illicit wildlife trafficking reconfirmed the increasing scale of poaching and illegal trade globally and its direct contribution to the extinction of many species.³

Keystone species play a critical role in maintaining ecological frameworks, which in turn affects many other organisms in the ecosystem. Without these species, the structure of the ecosystem could collapse, dramatically changing the balance of life and in some instances, making it cease to exist altogether. The poaching of keystone species can have incalculable ecological impacts. Some examples are outlined to illustrate the impact of wildlife crime on biodiversity:

- African elephants are described as ‘ecosystem engineers’, shaping the natural environment in which they are found. Eating trees and shrubs, elephants clear space for smaller species to thrive in the savanna. Seeds are transported and the ground fertilized by elephant dung. 157,000 African elephants were poached between 2010 and 2018 - an average of about 17,000 elephants per year.⁴ While the trend in elephant poaching appears to be in decline, it is still a major concern for population numbers and related ecosystems.
- The present range of jaguars spans 18 countries from Mexico to Argentina. As an apex predator, jaguars are an integral part of their ecosystem, controlling population levels of prey such as herbivorous and granivorous mammals, thus maintaining the structural integrity of forest systems. Although jaguars are mainly killed in retaliation for conflict with humans and their livestock, poaching for jaguar parts is of increasing concern across the range states of Latin America including Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, Peru and Suriname. Seizures of jaguar canines en route to Asia began in 2012-2014. From January 2012 to March 2018, over 1,900 jaguar canines were reported seized.⁵
- Eels play an important part in marine and freshwater ecosystems. Eels are considered to be a keystone species with roles as both predators and prey. They contribute to maintaining a balanced riverine ecology and also provide an important source of food for fish, mammals, turtles and birds. Since eel populations are in steep decline, some of the multi-billion-dollar eel industry appears to have become reliant on poaching. Most of the critically endangered European eels are illicitly exported for the Asian market and are fed into the commercial eel

² A/RES/69/314, A/RES/70/301, A/RES/71/326 and A/RES/73/343

³ <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/343>

⁴ UNODC World Wildlife Crime Report 2020

⁵ Morcatty et al (2020). Illegal trade in wild cats and its link to Chinese-led development in Central and South America. Conservation Biology, doi: 10.1111/cobi.13498.

farming industry. For example, in 2019, French customs officials at Charles de Gaulle airport arrested two people en route to China with 300,000 live glass eels in their luggage.⁶ This seizure represents a small portion of a large-scale illicit flow of live, critically endangered European eels smuggled from Europe to Asia every year.⁷

The impact of wildlife crime on these keystone species alone could have far-reaching consequences for ecosystems and biological diversity as well as cascading effects more broadly.

THE WAY FORWARD

Efforts to conserve biodiversity are undermined by criminality and unlawful activities. The United Nations system must address all major threats to biodiversity in order to be effective in safeguarding nature and people. To succeed in protecting the Earth's biodiversity, the traditional conservation approach must be complemented by a criminal justice approach. UNODC recommends integrating measures to address wildlife crime and broader crimes that affect the environment in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework response.

UNODC has made recommendations to the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity that the post-2020 global biodiversity monitoring framework include the assessment of the extent of illegal activities that pose threats to biodiversity. Similar to SDG Indicator 15.7.1/15.c.1 (*Proportion of traded wildlife that was poached or illicitly trafficked*), UNODC recommended that other metrics are envisaged to monitor the risks to biodiversity posed by illegal activities and/or organized criminal groups. Monitoring activities that infringe on national and/or international legal instruments are necessary for a number of reasons:

- Illegal activities impacting the environment can be very damaging to biodiversity and can undermine the efforts to regulate environmental activities; for this reason, they need to be monitored together with other activities that define biodiversity targets, thus ensuring that all key threats to biodiversity are addressed;
- By focusing also on illegal actions, the monitoring framework conveys the important message that legal and regulatory frameworks to preserve biodiversity need to be accompanied by appropriate capacities and institutional arrangements to ensure that they are not misused or bypassed. This is particularly relevant for countries in which forest cover loss and species losses are often linked to corruption and illegal activities;
- Monitoring illegal activities threatening biodiversity highlights that law enforcement and criminal justice activities also have an important role to play in preserving biodiversity.

From a statistical standpoint, the measurement of illegal activities can be a challenging undertaking, as such activities are by nature hidden and complex to detect. Building on the experience of monitoring illegal activities related to wildlife and other crimes, a number of preliminary proposals were made by UNODC to initiate a process of technical discussion for further refinement, in view of establishing adequate arrangements for continuous data gathering and monitoring.

⁶ <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3035646/chinese-man-and-woman-caught-france-smuggling-60kg-live-baby-eels>

⁷ UNODC World Wildlife Crime Report 2020

UNODC has recently reviewed the following documents:

- First draft of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD/WG2020/3/3)
- Proposed Headline Indicators of the Monitoring Framework for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD/WG2020/3/3/Add.1)
- Proposed Monitoring Approach and Headline, Component and Complementary Indicators for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD/WG2020/3/INF/2)

Annex 1 outlines comments from UNODC and further suggested revisions to the indicators of the Monitoring Framework, referring to illegal mining, illegal logging, trafficking of protected wildlife, illegal waste disposal, illicit trafficking of pesticides, and capacity of the criminal justice system to address offences against the environment.

In order to address the biodiversity crisis and effectively drive the transformation of our relationship with nature, the strength of multilateralism must be applied. UNODC is committed to integrating measures to address wildlife crime in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework response and likewise to integrate biodiversity into crime prevention and criminal justice agendas.

Annex 1: Recommended updates to the Proposed Monitoring Approach and Headline, Component and Complementary Indicators for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework

Regarding Target 5: *Ensure that the harvesting, trade, and use of wild species is sustainable, legal and safe for human health*

- Add complementary indicators:
 - Ratio between wildlife that was trafficked and estimated wildlife population size
 - Surface area of protected areas destroyed as a consequence of illegal logging or other criminal land clearing activities
 - Ratio of persons convicted to persons arrested for crimes against the environment (as defined in the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes, ICCS)

Regarding Target 7: *Reduce pollution from all sources to levels that are not harmful to biodiversity and ecosystem functions and human health, including by reducing nutrients lost to the environment by at least half, and pesticides by at least two thirds and eliminating the discharge of plastic waste*

- Add complementary indicators:
 - Surface area of illegal dumping sites and/or number of illegal dumping sites
 - Surface area of illegal/irregular mining sites in protected areas/in the country
 - Number of illegal/irregular mining sites in protected areas/in the country