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All images used in this issue depict illegal trade of wildlife and may be disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.

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For more information on the Society and its activities, write to the Honorary Secretary, Bombay Natural History Society, Dr Sálim Ali Chowk, S.B. Singh Road, Mumbai 400 001, Maharashtra, India.
Tel.: (91-22) 2282 1811 Fax: (91-22) 2283 7615 E-mail: info@bnhs.org Website: www.bnhs.org

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Tackling Wildlife Crime

RICHARD THOMAS

LARA ZANARINI

African Elephants are poached in tens of thousands each year, to meet the demand for ivory, particularly from consumers in China

In recent years, illegal trade in wildlife and its impacts on wildlife populations has been commanding worldwide attention and is high on the international political agenda. TRAFFIC, the organization for which I work, can take some credit for helping to spread awareness on this pressing issue and bringing it under the spotlight it deserves. In 2012, TRAFFIC, alongside WWF, embarked on an ambitious "Illegal Wildlife Trade Campaign" aimed at raising political awareness about international wildlife trafficking and its associated impacts on wildlife populations. The aim of this campaign was simple: to secure high-level political attention and the will needed to address such crime, putting this burning issue at the forefront of world leaders' thinking and policy aims. Our ultimate goal was to secure a United Nations resolution that would help bring the issue of wildlife crime onto the international agenda.

© WWF

Ivory confiscated by the Cameroon Ministry of Forests and Wildlife

It was a long, hard, and at times frustrating road, but I am happy – and proud – to say that I was part of that momentous campaign. Thanks to the efforts of many individuals and organizations, on July 30, 2015, during the 69th session of the UN General Assembly, a resolution was adopted, committing countries to step up their collective efforts to address wildlife crime and put an end to the global poaching crisis. It was an historic moment. "The world has sent an unequivocal and collective signal at the highest level that ending wildlife crime is a top priority," said Steven Broad, Executive Director of TRAFFIC at the time. In fact, it was the first time that the UN had passed a resolution on wildlife crime, which built on the growing momentum generated through a series of major international declarations on illegal wildlife trade, including the 2013 Paris Declaration, 2014 London Declaration, 2015 Kasane Statement, and the 2015 Brazzaville Declaration. Critically, it also recognized the broader impacts of wildlife crime, including the undermining of good governance, the rule of law, and the well-being of local communities.

Looking back now, I sense that what we had helped to achieve was remarkable, although, as we commented at the time, paper declarations were one thing, but the real hard work of turning words into action had begun. At the same time, I have to admit to feeling a slight sense of disappointment. Three years on from that historic UN resolution, the bottom line is that poaching of iconic wildlife species continues at near record levels. This is despite many fine words and commitments by governments around the world.

Nowhere is this more evident than during presentations and deliberations at the main meetings of Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) – who are trying to change the situation. Countries identified as of real concern over their involvement in illegal ivory trade have been instructed to develop and implement National Ivory Action Plans. Failure to do so could result in penalties being imposed upon them through the legally binding Convention. World governments are undoubtedly getting tougher – at least at talking. In 2016, for the first time at a CITES meeting, corruption and how to address it was openly talked about and placed on the agenda. Recognition of the insidious evil that undermines

ANDREW WALMSLEY

Sellers along roadsides in many parts of Africa frequently offer pangolins as bushmeat. This animal was photographed in Cameroon, where pangolins are protected by legislation

Pangolins are said to be the world's most trafficked mammals, and with numbers plummeting in Asia, African species are increasingly targeted as substitutes. These pangolin scales were seized in Malaysia, en route from Africa to their final destination in Asia

ELIZABETH JOHN

efforts to address wildlife crime has reached the highest political levels. In their July 2017 meeting, leaders of the G20 issued a declaration that read:

> **The poaching crisis is not confined to Africa. In India, particularly in Assam, the Greater One-horned Rhino has felt the force of poachers' bullets ...**

"We will intensify our fight against corruption related to illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products. Wildlife trafficking is a threat to the planet's biodiversity, economic development, and, among others, health and security, and is facilitated by high levels of corruption, which the G20 cannot tolerate." So commitments have been made, and governments have signed up to action, some resources have been committed, yet the crisis continues.

Poaching of African elephants – killed for their ivory tusks which are trafficked to markets in Asia – continues at around 20,000 animals per year, possibly a few less than in 2012, but still unacceptably high. Perhaps most accurately documented has been the poaching of Africa's rhinos, with South Africa bearing the brunt: at least 1,000 rhinos (more than three a day) have been poached each year since 2013, and while 2017 may have seen a slight drop in the tally, it is nowhere near enough to make us feel comfortable. The animals' horns are hacked off and whisked away to be consumed as a health tonic in Vietnam or carved into trinkets for distribution in China.

The poaching crisis is not confined to Africa. In India, particularly in Assam, the Greater One-horned Rhino has felt the force of poachers' bullets. As for other wildlife, TRAFFIC found that an astonishing four leopards per week had been poached for their body parts for at least 10 years in the country. Tigers too, the national animal of India, have not been spared. A comprehensive TRAFFIC analysis of seizure cases in tiger range states found that parts representing a minimum of 1,755 animals were seized from 2000 to 2015, an average of more than two animals per week. Tiger skins are used for decoration, and their bones

used to make tonic wines or boiled to make glue.

The fate of pangolins clearly illustrates the impacts of the illegal trade. Anecdotal reports indicate that the populations of these scaly anteaters have plummeted across Asia, particularly in China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. The meat and scales of the pangolin are destined for consumption as (scientifically unsupported) health tonics, and for use in medical treatments in parts of East and Southeast Asia. With falling supply, yet rising demand, traffickers are searching further afield. Many pangolins are now sourced from Africa. The species found there are different, but their fate is the same as those of Asian pangolins. Aside from the lack of availability, the shift in sourcing reveals the strengthened links between the two continents. With ever increasing numbers of Asian nationals visiting and living in Africa, communications channels – for all forms of commerce – are well and truly open, both to those with legitimate and illicit motives. The criminal elements appear to be attracted to wildlife crime because of the relatively high-profit, low-risk opportunities it presents, while the welcome rise in living standards in many parts of Asia does have a downside in that many can now afford to buy long coveted wildlife products, some of which are sourced illegally.

The above examples are only about impacted wildlife species – humans have also borne the brunt of the illegal wildlife trade. Every year, around 100 forest rangers are killed as they carry out their duties to protect these species. A TRAFFIC study on illegal logging in Madagascar revealed how the sudden influx of hundreds of illegal loggers had led to instances of violence, and sharp rises in prostitution, alcoholism, and even the incidence of truancy in schools among the local communities.

To counteract such impacts, some countries have raised penalties for wildlife crime, but all too often, even if deterrent punishments exist under the current legislation,

ELIZABETH JOHN

ABRAR AHMED

Rhinos are poached for their horns, which are trafficked to supply consumers in Vietnam and increasingly in China, often by circuitous routes to avoid detection. The horns (above) were seized in Malaysia

Although tiger trade is outlawed, the persistent demand for their parts, whether skin, bones, or claws, drives trafficking and poaching of this iconic national animal

OLA JENNERSTEN

Tigers and leopards are poached using leg snares known as "Kharakha"

ABRAR AHMED

they are not imposed, while those facing trial are rarely the kingpins orchestrating and largely profiting from these criminal activities. Mostly, it is low-level poachers or transport mules who are caught, and easily replaced. Furthermore, the efforts to stop poaching at source are often undermined by chronic underfunding and the equipment given to the enforcement staff, in contrast to those of poachers armed with the latest forms of communication and high-powered weapons. It is all too frequently a one-sided conflict, with rangers and the animals they protect becoming the losers. To add to this, the internet has facilitated online trade, with many transactions for illicit wildlife goods carried out anonymously, with buyer and seller never meeting, putting further strain on already overstretched enforcement agencies to detect and deter such activities.

Wildlife crime is a huge problem. Some estimates suggest that it is worth as much as billions of American dollars a year, making it the fourth largest illegal global trade after narcotics, counterfeiting, and human trafficking. It is a big illicit business that needs a big international response to counteract its hugely damaging impact on innocent people, local and national economies, and of course the wild animals and plants it directly affects.

Things may look bleak, but there are some signs of success. Despite the pressures, India has recorded a modest increase in its tiger and One-horned Rhino populations, while neighbouring Nepal has recorded little or zero poaching of its iconic wild animals for several years now.

Technology is also coming to the rescue, with ever more sophisticated techniques being applied to investigate wildlife poaching incidents. In Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, TRAFFIC has recently partnered with TRACE, the Wildlife Forensics Network, in a project supported by players of the People's Postcode Lottery to introduce and teach the techniques needed to carry out forensic examination in wildlife

“Despite pressures, India has recorded a modest increase in its tiger and One-horned Rhino populations, while neighbouring Nepal has recorded little or zero poaching of its iconic wild animals for several years now ...

ABRAR AHMED

Primate babies are collected from the wild to be sold as pets or smuggled for the zoo trade

trafficking incidents. Such techniques will give valuable insights into the methods and *modus operandi* of those carrying out such crimes, providing evidence admissible in court to help bring successful convictions. Another powerful weapon increasingly being used is man's best friend, the dog. A hugely successful sniffer dog programme run by TRAFFIC and WWF-India in conjunction with the National Training Centre for Dogs has seen more than 60 specially trained dogs equipped to detect wildlife products deployed right across India, including recently for the first time ever in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These dogs have helped in the apprehension of wildlife criminals, including traffickers and poachers. Sniffer dogs are in operation elsewhere, including in China, Russia, and some parts of Africa. Their contribution in helping to detect and curb wildlife crime cannot be understated. Despite all this progress, I find myself frustrated by the overall lack of progress in tackling wildlife crime worldwide. Perhaps, I am being impatient as it takes time for the wheels of government to be set in motion.

In October 2018, the UK Government hosted an international conference, bringing governments around the world together to assess their collective actions to address illegal wildlife trade. It was an important opportunity for the international community to reaffirm its commitments to addressing such crime. At this critical London conference, many of the countries affected by wildlife crime – whether as a source, transit, or destination for such products – sent representation. However, despite the fine words and pledges to take action by high-level government delegations, there is currently little evidence of a significant impact on wildlife crime and the associated poaching of wildlife – time is rapidly running out for animals such as elephants, tigers, pangolins, and rhinos: they cannot wait much longer for words to be turned into action.

Richard Thomas

is currently the Global Communications Co-ordinator with TRAFFIC, an international non-governmental organization specializing in wildlife trade issues, with offices worldwide, including in India. He has worked in the conservation sector for almost 20 years: prior to TRAFFIC with BirdLife International, whose partner in India is BNHS.