**Wildlife Trafficking**

Introduction

Wildlife trafficking is the illegal trade in endangered or protected flora and fauna . The wildlife trafficking chain includes the collecting, harvesting, possessing, processing, acquiring, and transporting of the wildlife in question.[1](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-1-47). This entry focuses primarily on the trafficking of animals and animal products. Timber trafficking is addressed in its own entry elsewhere on this site.

The trade in wildlife and wildlife products is regulated by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES lists 36,000 species that are subject to varying degrees of protection, according to a schedule outlined in the convention’s appendices [2](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-2-47). Category 1 species includes animals at risk of extinction, where trade is banned except under very rare circumstacnes. Category 2 specifics are limited to trade within established quotas to ensure a species’ survival is not threatened. Category 3 covers species protected in at least one country, and where that country as requested assistance in monitoring the trade.

72–90% of illicit wildlife products by volume are trafficked by sea.[3](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-3-47) The International Maritime Organization (IMO) suggests that maritime transport is the preferred method to smuggle bulky, non-perishable items such as ivory or pangolin scales.[4](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-4-47) Much of this trafficking takes place through legitimate container shipping , with illegal wildlife products being concealed with other goods or otherwise disguised by falsified or misleading customs declarations and/or facilitated by bribery and corruption.[5](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-5-47)

Maritime trafficking of wildlife occurs globally, though the primary route of focus has been the movement of wildlife derivatives from Africa to Asia due to large scale seizures of goods such as rhino horns and pangolin scales.[6](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-6-47) The trade is driven by the demand for processed commodities, such as fur, collector’s items, traditional medicines, and food.[7](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-7-47)

Men in orange vests sorting elephant tusks

Description automatically generated*NAIROBI, KENYA – FEBRUARY 2013. Inspectors sort Ivory confiscated in January 2013 during a transregional operation to counter wildlife trafficking. Photo by Operation Cobra. Publications: Biodiversity Policy | FY13 Report to Congress* *Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC 2.0)*

Characteristics

Wildlife trafficking in the maritime sector takes place at scale, and in ways that imply significant levels of organisation and criminality. By contrast, small-scale traffickers tend to favour aviation or land routes.[8](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-8-47)

The networks involved in maritime trafficking are generally highly organised, and involved in other forms of criminality including smuggling, corruption, and even terrorism.[9](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-9-47) The illegal wildlife trade is attractive to pre-existing criminal networks because it has a low risk of detection, minimal punishment, and high profits compared to other forms of trafficking.[10](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-10-47) Rhino horn can retail for as much as $30,000-$65,000 a kilo in the consumer market in Asia, for example.[11](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-11-47)

Wildlife trafficking can have a corrosive effects on state governance.[12](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-12-47) The bribery of law enforcement and other public officials is common in those areas where the trade is prevalent. [13](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-13-47) In some cases, states themselves may be involved in the trade. North Korea, for example, is a perpetrator of wildlife trafficking, providing it with a means to evade the effects of sanctions.[14](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-14-47)

Scope

CITES estimate that hundreds of millions of animals and plants are trafficked each year, with the trade itself worth ‘billions of dollars.’[15](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-15-47) The World Bank estimates the trade to be worth 15 billion dollars per annum,[16](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-16-47)

However, as with most forms of criminality, it is difficult to assess the exact scope of the crime with any certainty. Instead, seizure date is used to make best guess estimates.[17](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-17-47) The UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) World Wildlife Seizures (World WISE) database contains data on more than 180,000 seizures of wildlife and wildlife products.[18](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-18-47) These are often large in scale. In 2019 alone, over 90 tonnes of pangolin scales and 15 tonnes of elephant ivory were seized from containerised cargo on Africa to Asia routes.[19](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-19-47) UNODC recognises however that these incidents represent ‘only a fraction of the true scale of the problem’.[20](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-20-47)

Some forms of wildlife trafficking can be measured by their impact on populations of animal species. While Kenya banned the trade in rhino horn in 1975, for example, poaching still reduced the number of rhinos in Kenya from 20,000 in 1970 to just 500 in 1990.[21](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-21-47) In neighbouring Zimbabwe, rhino numbers plunged from 5000 in the 1960’s to fewer than 300 by 1997.[22](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-22-47)

Impact

Wildlife trafficking has multiple pathological impacts. First is the impact on the environment itself. The trade causes a loss of biodiversity through contributing the extinction or endangerment of targeted species.[23](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-23-47) Our World in Data figures suggest that one fifth of the endangered species of birds and mammals are threatened because of direct human exploitation.[24](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-24-47) Biodiversity is threatened by the loss of species, by disruption to wider eco-systems, and by the introduction of alien species and diseases when live animals are moved for sale in foreign markets.[25](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-25-47)

Wildlife trafficking often takes place in ways that threaten animal welfare . Methods of trapping can be inhumane,[26](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-26-47) while live animals may be kept under poor conditions in captivity so their derivatives can later be harvested. An example is the keep of bears for their bile.[27](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-27-47) Animals are often packed for transportation in inhumane ways, such as being bound tightly, drugged, or frozen.[28](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-28-47)

Wildlife trafficking also has human impacts. The trade carries the risk that novel animal diseases will be passed to humans through the movement and exploitation of species in conditions that circumvent veterinarian inspections or food safety standards.[29](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-29-47) Monkeys were the original source of the Ebola virus for example, and both pangolins and bats have been linked to the outbreak of COVID-19.[30](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-30-47)

At a national level, corruption and criminality associated with the trade can undermine state governance contribute to significant instability and continuing poverty.[31](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-31-47) The trade can also damage other sectors such as tourism, especially in the safari sector [32](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-32-47)

Linkages & Synergies

Wildlife trafficking is perpetrated by organised criminal groups with links to other forms of crime, and especially other forms of trafficking. Indicative cases include the role of the Japanese Triads in the trafficking of whale meat,[33](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-33-47) and the role of the Russian Mafia in the trafficking of caviar.[34](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-34-47) Often, criminal networks can utilise the same means that are used for the trafficking of other types of illegal goods. There are also clear links to IUU fishing, where restricted species such as abalone are targeted for subsequent sale.

Responses

There are several key international and regional regulations in place to control the trade in wildlife. However, there are also significant national asymmetries in the enforcement of wildlife trafficking restrictions, with particular weaknesses in addressing the shipment of products (as opposed to their harvesting) and the demand side of the trade.

The trade in wildlife is regulated by the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The Conventions works to conserve endangered species through the operation of trade controls, ranging from controlling quotas to outright bans.[35](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-35-47) Even so,  some species that are vulnerable and illicitly traded are excluded from CITES, for example many of the traded reptiles.[36](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-36-47)

Trade suspensions are the highest recourse available under CITES,[37](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-37-47) but there is no real focus on enforcement, which is delegated to the national level and can be uneven.[38](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-38-47) This is problematic when Appendix I or II species can be traded with export permits, but where there is little oversight or guidance on how and then these permits are issued.[39](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-39-47) As a result, there is a general consensus that the impact of CITES on the monitoring and control the illegal wildlife trade has been quite limited.[40](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-40-47)

The World Customs Organization (WCO) is also active in the fight against wildlife trafficking.[41](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-41-47) It has introduced several tools and instruments to combat the trade. These include ENVIRONET, a real-time communication tool for information exchange among competent national authorities, international organizations and regional networks, and CLiKC!, the WCO e-learning facility containing courses on environmental crime.[42](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-42-47) The WCO also engages in capacity building activities. In 2014 it introduced the Inama Project (‘inama’ means wild animals in the language of the Zambian Bemba tribe), a multi-donor funded endeavour to strengthen Customs enforcement capacity related to CITES in selected countries of the Sub-Saharan Africa.[43](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-43-47)

The IMO has begun to develop guidelines for the prevention and suppression of wildlife trafficking, though as of yet these are incomplete.[44](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-44-47) It does participate in the United for Wildlife Transport Taskforce, which is a network of private, public and third sector partners working individually and cooperatively to reveal, disrupt and prevent illegal wildlife traffic.[45](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-45-47) In 2018, a Financial Taskforce was also created to address the role of financial institutions in the fight against illegal wildlife trade.[46](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-46-47)

Enforcement is a particularly problematic issue at a national level. Customs enforcement at ports is often weak because it focuses mostly on CITES breaches or ‘paperwork checks.’[47](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-47-47) Customs authorities often lack the capability or expertise to identify different forms of wildlife.[48](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-48-47) Exports are also often viewed as low priority compared to imports and revenue collection, which means the containerised cargo used to traffic wildlife may slip under the radar. Wildlife is also generally not a priority for law enforcement in destination countries, compared to illict cargoes such as drugs.

A further issue concerns asymmetry in law enforcement capacity, particularly in source countries. Many source countries have little capacity to effectively monitor habitats or enforce penalties for illegal harvesting of wildlife, suffer from endemic corruption, or do not prioritise wildlife trafficking as a significant issue.[49](https://www.safeseas.net/evidence/2020/02/10/wildlife-trafficking/#easy-footnote-bottom-49-47)

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