

**Forum:** United Nations Environment Programme

**Issue #22-01:** Measures to regulate unsustainable wildlife trade

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## Introduction

Wildlife trade is defined as the domestic and international exchange of animals and plants for economic gain. This can be beneficial to a society and contributes to its development, but unsustainability caused by the deleterious trade of animals leads to their endangerment as a species and can exacerbate illicit economies. According to the World Wildlife Fund, unsustainable wildlife trade is the second-largest threat to the survival of specific species, and, as found in the Oxford Dictionary, the ecological definition of unsustainability is: ‘Upsetting the ecological balance by depleting natural resources’. This word can be applied to the context of wildlife trafficking when the continuity of these practices does not allow for the population of a species to stay at consistent numbers and even exponentially decreases them. Many of the nations being classified as the most involved in this type of trade are known for their diverse wildlife. Examples of such nations seen as pivotal to the exportation route of unsustainable wildlife include Thailand, Malaysia, China, Kenya, South Africa, Vietnam, and more. This does not mean that those nations of other continents such as the Americas and Europe lack involvement since many of them are also responsible by being primary destinations for the exportations. The involvement of each country in the issue can vary, and so can the types of animals and plants being exported and the reasoning behind it. Although many nations have increased regulations in an effort to decelerate the trade, other nations have yet to do so.

Different species of animals and plants are poached during the process of this trade; many of them are either endangered or nearing endangerment. A world wildlife crime report, issued by

the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), stated that 30% of the animals being trafficked are mammals and 28% are reptiles. The purpose of the products produced from these animals is sometimes ornamental, but some are also used for purposes such as traditional medications. This also makes the issue a matter of the controversial allowance of such traditional practices. There is much reason as to why this type of commerce has always been popular. Monetary gain is the primary rationale. The illicit merchandise is difficult to export to many countries and has also been labeled as laborious to obtain due to the rarity of some animals, which is why it is seen as a luxury to obtain such products or pets. The African Wildlife Foundation has approximated the annual revenue for the global unsustainable wildlife trade to be USD 7-23 billion.

Policies and regulations have been established both domestically, by governments themselves, and internationally, by the United Nations. Many NGOs, such as Greenpeace, have stated how the regulatory agreements established are not sufficiently capable of preventing this. These organizations have tried to expose distinct unsustainable wildlife markets in order to de-escalate the situation. A lack of domestic policies in many nations has raised the question of how the changes will come into effect most competently. It is each country's sovereign decision to come up with a specific opinion on the issue, but it is optimal for all countries to collaborate to make sure that their international policies in relation to wildlife trafficking are coordinated.

## Definition of Key Terms

### **Wildlife:**

It is known as all of the flora and fauna that grow, develop, and live in the wild. This means that they are not domesticated by humans and lack a thorough interaction with them. It relates to the trade because these are the animals that are being traded the most in such unsustainable manners.

### **Poaching**

Poaching is the illegal capturing and hunting of animals. It consists of people breaking

into a property that isn't theirs, such as nature reserves, zoos, forms of public property, and then poaching the animals in said property. Poaching is what is done in most cases to obtain the animals to trade. It can become exploitative and harmful to animal populations. Due to its illegal denotation, it can harm economies and further reduce the maintainable profits of low-income populations.

### **Unsustainability**

Unsustainability is defined as something not capable of staying at consistent rates. The ecological definition consists of having something damage the balance of the environment. Exploitation found in the wildlife trade is unsustainable. This is because the constant hunting of animals without care for the species can lead to large decreases in the population count.

### **Species Endangerment**

Endangered species are species that are nearing extinction. This means that their population has reached numbers that are considered dangerously low. In the modern day, the exploitative hunting of animals is one of the most common ways in which they become endangered. Since the wildlife trade relies on the hunting of endangered animals, it can be extremely detrimental to animal populations.

### **Underground Economy**

An underground economy is a term for illegal transactions that occur without a government's knowledge in order to evade taxes. The criminal organizations behind the wildlife trade opt to use underground economies because the products behind the unsustainable wildlife trade are more than often illegal. This means that underground economies are able to grow more as the unsustainable wildlife trade does too.

### **Trophy Hunting**

Trophy hunting is the killing of animals for the purpose of using their body for decorative purposes. The animal parts are often kept and displayed. The animals to which this is usually done are endangered or rare. This might be because the scarcity of the animal increases its price,

which would make it a mark of wealthiness.

## General Overview

### Poaching

As mentioned previously, poaching is the illegal capturing and killing of wild animals. The matter of whether it is illegal or not depends on the nation where the action is committed. Many nations have implemented regulations and restrictions on poaching in order to protect endangered or vulnerable species, ergo it has been made illegal in most territories to poach specific, mostly endangered, species, but this has not prevented the illicit wildlife trade from flourishing. According to National Geographic, the most poached animal is the pangolin, with approximately one million instances in the past decade. Pangolins are mammals covered in keratin scales, and they are mostly found in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Reports indicate that the reason as to why the poaching has increased is due to people coveting those scales for purposes such as traditional medicines and fashion as well as cuisine. Another animal critical to the poaching industry would be the different classifications of the African elephant. They are poached for the ivory they contain in their tusks. This has caused elephant populations to diminish exponentially. In response to this, the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) instituted a ban on the global ivory trade, but it has not completely worked. The World Wildlife Fund explains that issues such as these are not a matter of only protecting an individual species, but also the positive impacts that species may have on its environment. Up to 30% of tree species require elephant-aided germination.

Although a myriad of other endangered species are being threatened and this presenting similar environmental risks, the aforementioned animals, in conjunction to the rhinoceros, have been considered the most important animals in the trade. Rhinoceroses have been known to increase economic development through tourism, but their populations have been quickly decreasing due to poaching for their horns, which are made of keratin. As rhinoceros horns become more scarce, the price they can be sold for increases, and therefore more rhinoceroses are being poached. Another consequence of this is that more people are incentivized to become

complicit in the trade since the monetary gain increases. The global trade of the rhinoceros horn has also been banned by CITES, but in a similar fashion to the ivory trade, the market for the horns has not slowed down as originally anticipated.

Trespassing is linked to poaching since the hunters often have to go through a property that is not theirs to gain access to these animals. It has been stated that some of the poachers are wealthy citizens simply hunting for sport, but the majority of poachers are participating in the trade to get out of poverty. These people find poaching to be an easier way for them to obtain money. Poaching is also a matter of transnational crime. Criminal organizations are often the ones behind the different people poaching animals that coveted by wealthier people in different nations. Nations have deemed it difficult to track these groups due to the fact that there are so many. The reason as to why there are so many of these criminal organizations focusing on the unsustainable wildlife trade is on account of the fact that it grants a high level of profit with a lower degree of risk. The low-risk level is attributed to a lack of law-enforcement found in many nations where practices like these are popular.

### **Methods of exportation**

Different schemes are used by traffickers in order to effectively and successfully export the wildlife both internationally and domestically. The criminal organizations are able to obtain considerably high monetary gain through the process of poaching and distributing. With that money, they are able to hire smugglers to expand their businesses and distribute the animals at a larger scale. A difficulty that these groups face is that many regulations and bans in nations are set in order to prevent the unsustainable trade of wildlife, therefore the groups use different illegal methods to export them. Forgery is one of the most common methods of the criminal organizations that are responsible for trafficking the animals. The nations that ratified the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species are entrusted to regulate the trade of the animals listed in the convention. This means that part of the process to export a certain animal requires a physical permit from CITES. According to a report from the European Union Action to Fight Environmental Crime (EFFACE), these permits have been repeatedly forged in order to delude any security forces attempting to enforce regulations on the traffic of animals.

That same report also stated that when the forged permits were identified as false or when there was a lack of a permit, bribery was commonly used to be able to traffic them. This also brings up the issue of corruption and being able to further control the trade.

### **Underground economies**

After the imports reach domestic markets where the wildlife being smuggled is illegal, they are usually not distributed or sold normally. They are traded in underground economies so that the smugglers are not caught with the unlawful items. The profit gained from these underground economies are illicit and therefore not taxed. Since they are not taxed, the sale of them can harm economic development. These transactions are deliberately hidden from governments as to not expose the level of influence that these markets have on the economies. This can cause misrepresentations in calculations concerning each government's economy. This means that the calculations of the unsustainable wildlife market are not accurately depicted, which is why there are merely approximations made through investigations of cases that were discovered by the government. The transactions cannot be traced at all times, and this makes regulation more difficult. There have been estimations made for nations where the issue is more relevant. These estimations have been made by the governments themselves and non-governmental organizations. The expansion of the unsustainable wildlife market has partly occurred because of difficulty found in trading other illicit products such as drugs or arms.

### **Consumer demand**

Consumer demand is what is driving the unsustainable wildlife trade. It is the desire that different populations of people have to obtain endangered animals or their parts. The animals are sometimes used for fashion. The fashion includes the skins of endangered reptiles for belts, the fur of endangered mammals for coats or hats, and more. The animals being traded are also sought out as pets by some of the wealthier populations. There have been regulations implemented against this in some nations. Most of the endangered pets are not taken care of properly, which can cause larger decreases in population. An example of this would be the increasing domestication of lemurs as pets in Madagascar. Although it is illegal to own

endangered species as pets in Madagascar, it is hardly ever enforced. A lot of the populations have reported having owned lemurs before, and the lemur population has fallen to approximately 2,000. Asia is one of the most popular destinations where the endangered species are being trafficked. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has stated that in Africa, a pair of rhinoceroses horns cost approximately USD 167, while in China the prices are inflated to approximately USD 66,139, and USD 33,000 in Vietnam. This means that the animals that are poached in Africa, are most likely to be exported elsewhere due to the demand being higher and the supply being lower in those regions.

### **Cultural and traditional practices**

The use of wildlife can be pivotal to certain cultural and traditional practices. There are many populations of people that hold ideologies that contain cultural aspects from the past. Organizations such as Greenpeace and the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species find these practices to be antiquated; some believe that the practices should be eradicated and made illegal. On the other hand, the people that come from these cultures believe that it is their right to use such animals and plants. A common example, especially in China, of the practices that include the use of wildlife would be traditional medicine. Body parts from animals such as tigers, rhinoceroses, bulls, and pangolins are being used. These animals are quickly becoming more endangered as the exploitation of them increases. A lot of this medicine derived from these animals has been proven to be false and that no actual medicinal value comes from ingesting these animals' body parts, but it still brings up the point of whether such practices should be allowed in nations. The populations that use these medicines often find it important that they are used as they believe that it will enhance their health. Another traditional aspect would be ivory carving, which used to be very popular in China until ivory was banned. In this case, the government was able to reduce the use of ivory greatly. The prohibition of the cultural practices could also be seen as a prohibition of their culture, which makes this aspect controversial. The Chinese government has worked to ban the use of animals being exploited for these practices, and although the rate of usage has decreased, the market is still relatively popular.

## International inaction

There has been a lot of criticism from governments and organizations caused by international inaction. A recent example of this would include a dispute Japan had with China's government. The World Wildlife Fund stated that approximately 95% of the ivory being exported from Japan went into China. China asked Japan to do more in order to reduce the flow of the exports, but nothing was done, and, although this did lead to China implementing an ivory ban, it harmed diplomatic relations with Japan in relation to trade. There has also been a lot of reprimand against many nations in Sub-Saharan Africa that seek to re-establish the unsustainable wildlife trade as it did before global regulation was implemented. Such countries include, but are not limited to, South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. They have appealed to the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species to eradicate the global ban on the trade of ivory. This appeal was rejected. The United States has also been criticised for their recent change in legislation which permits the importation of trophy hunts. Greenpeace, a non-governmental organization focusing on environmental issues, has repeatedly been advocating against unsustainable wildlife trade. It has criticized many of the aforementioned nations for their involvement in the trade. It also seeks to get more nations to implement regulations preventing the wildlife trade from becoming more profitable and popular.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### People's Republic of China

China has long been classified as a nation with one of the largest trade hubs for ivory and other products deriving from poaching. In 2008, China was given permission by the UN to import approximately 62 tons of ivory from Central Africa. It was meant to decrease the demand and popularity of it in the illegal market. The original intentions were not successful and it made it easier to smuggle ivory into China. For 10 years the ivory market thrived, until, in January 2018, China began enforcing a ban on ivory, and it has been working auspiciously since. Ivory has been a part of the culture of specific groups in China, as it is sought out for carving and decorative purposes. Traditional medicine has caused an excessive demand for scanty animal



parts. Authorities have been reportedly unable to prevent the market for these parts from developing.

### **Republic of India**

India is a nation popular for its diversity in animal species. With this and a societal interest in rare animal parts, its market for unsustainable wildlife products has flourished. India's government has made legislative decisions with the intent to decrease this. An example of this would be its decision to criminalize shark finning when it was the second-largest distributor of shark fins. It has also enforced stricter regulations to prevent both domestic and international trade of illegal animal products. It received commendation from CITES (Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species). Even though previous efforts have been effective, India is still a major contributor to the international trade.

### **Republic of South Africa**

South Africa is a nation with clear views supporting most types of wildlife trade. According to the World Wildlife Trade, between 2007 and 2013 the number of poached rhinoceroses in South Africa has increased over 7700%. It has also recently made the domestic trade of rhinoceros horns legal. The government has been advocating, along with other sub-Saharan nations such as Namibia and Zimbabwe, to legalize the international ivory trade.

### **The United States of America**

The United States is important to this issue as it is a popular place for primary destinations of such products and animals. This can be attributed to consumer demand within wealthier citizens and trade patterns. As of 2018, the government has also lifted bans on the exportation of elephants and lions trophies from specific African nations.

### **Federative Republic of Brazil**

The Amazon Rainforest, mostly located in Brazil, is home to over hundreds of thousands of species. Due to the variety of species, many of them are sought out by wealthier citizens of other nations. A large market for different animals and their parts has been created in Brazil

because of this. There has been some success since there has been more focus on preventing drug trafficking, which has led some drug traffickers to start trafficking wildlife. The legal industry in the Amazon Rainforest, which includes many native species being exploited, is approximately worth USD 128 million and traffics over 14 million animals per year.

### **Kingdom of Thailand**

Thailand is one of the most popular hotspots for wildlife trafficking in the world. The government of Thailand has faced issues with detecting the trafficking of native animals within its borders. Its most popular animals include tigers, elephants, and pangolins. Populations of these animals have decreased severely throughout the years, but the government is trying to enforce more regulations to prevent their extinction.

### **Republic of Kenya**

Kenya is one of the countries key to the exportation of the aforementioned animals. Regulations have been implemented in attempts to decrease its involvement, but they have not been as successful as they were initially intended to be.

### **Japan**

Japan has been reprimanded multiple times by international organizations and other countries for its lack of action on the issue. Reportedly, 2.42 tons of ivory have been exported out of Japan between 2011-2016. Japan is also known for its unregulated domestic ivory trade market, which is a contributor to the international ivory trade.

### **Traffic**

Traffic is a non-governmental organization with the aim to control international wildlife trade. It was created by the World Wildlife Fund and IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). It relies on reporting specific aspects of the trade including newly instated policies and current crises. It has been using real examples to provide solutions for specific aspects of the issue. It has offices and workers that monitor patterns internationally.

## Timeline

Date	Description of event
16th - 19th Century	Beavers are excessively poached by European settlers in America and are traded for their pelts. Most beavers become extirpated from their natural territory due to the constant poaching. This forced other animals that relied on the beavers to migrate to other areas.
18th Century	The poaching of animals becomes more popular in poorer populations in Europe as they face difficulty in obtaining food.
20th Century	A decrease in populations of animals such as the Siberian tiger, beavers, and many migratory birds was recorded. Most instances of endangerment during this time were mammals. This can be attributed to the demand for their fur.
January 1918	The enactment of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act solidifies initial international action to prevent decreasing animal populations. This Treaty was signed by Great Britain, the United States, Japan, Russia, and Mexico. It prohibited the poaching, sale, or distribution of migratory birds.
1 July 1975	The Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) comes into force. It is currently signed by 183 parties.
1988	Elephant populations decreased by almost 50% since 1975.
March 1989	A global ivory ban was initiated by CITES. It barred the international trade of ivory.

1997	CITES allowed an export of 49 metric tons of ivory from Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe to Japan.
2002	CITES allowed another 60 metric tons of ivory from Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia to trading partners.
2008	CITES agreed not to approve ivory trade requests for nine years.
2013	As the poaching of animals continues, China is named the largest destination for ivory.
2013	2000 poached pangolins are seized as they were unsuccessfully smuggled into China.
2013	The pangolin becomes the most illegally traded animal in the world.
3 October 2016	CITES rejects a proposal from Namibia and Zimbabwe to reopen the global ivory trade.
December 2017	China announces a domestic ivory trade ban that begins on 1 January 2018.

### **UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events**

The UN has acknowledged the issue and tried to work towards solving it. This has proven to be difficult as the issue is still present despite the many resolutions that have been implemented. However, the resolutions are responsible for mostly monitoring and controlling what is being exported internationally. Another aspect important for solving the issue are assessments that report global statistics. On 24 May 2015, the UNODC released its first

assessment on wildlife crime. Since this report analyzes different aspects, including that of illegal markets, people creating strategies will benefit from this information in order to become more effective at solving the issue. In 2014, the UNODC has also created the Global Programme on Wildlife and Forest Crime. This four-year programme focuses on issues relating to wildlife crime and is also responsible for reporting trends occurring within illicit markets or trading in relation to wildlife crime. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also plays an important role, as it is meant to protect populations from the harm caused by unsustainable trade. This includes a lack of tourism, farming, and more. Resolutions have been more commonly approved during the 21st century as an increase in the risks caused by environmental mismanagement is occurring. Although some progress has been incentivized by the UN, nations have relied on amendments done to domestic policies to minimize faults found in trafficking regulation.

- Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES): Although this convention is not officially part of the UN, it is backed by the UN and has received regular involvement from them. The UN has also used this convention in resolutions multiple times in order to state its support of it or set examples of possible strategies. It was adopted on 1 July 1975, and it has 183 signatories. It is responsible for setting and changing international regulations concerning the wildlife trade. It is also responsible for maintaining a list of endangered species and categorizes them based on their level of endangerment.
- Letter (A/68/553): This letter, dated 28 October 2013, was presented by the permanent representatives of Gabon and Germany to the UN. It calls for the UN to commit to regulating unsustainable wildlife trade. It also asks for wildlife crime to be taken more seriously and regulated at an international level. This letter encouraged more discussion of the issue, which eventually led to more resolutions. It also served as a framework for many resolutions as it proposes many different strategies to combat the issue.
- Resolution 68/205 (A/RES/68/205): This resolution is stating the creation of World Wildlife Day on March 3rd of every year. It was adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 2013. This was meant to advocate for education on the issue. It is important

since poorer populations with less access to education are more prone to joining criminal organizations focusing on trading wildlife unsustainably. Trafficking can be viewed as an easier way to obtain money, but, because there is a lack of education on the issue, many of the people contributing to the trade stay oblivious to its repercussions.

- Resolution 69/314 (A/RES/69/314): This resolution maintains its focus on the economic aspect of the wildlife trade. It was adopted by the General Assembly on 30 July 2015. It states the need for countries to provide changes in legislation in order to prevent illicit economies from growing. It calls for international cooperation, which is necessary to solve this issue but also recognizes the importance of changing domestic policies. It has been regarded as impactful, especially since it is the first official UN resolution dedicated solely to combating illicit wildlife trafficking through a strategic and composed manner. This resolution has not solved the issue, nor has it impacted it enough to change the sense of it.

### **Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

Multiple different strategies have been implemented in order to solve the issue, but not all of them have been effective. Some of the attempts worked towards beneficially attacking the issue, but the criminal organizations and individuals responsible for the trade have found other ways to continue it. The most popular strategy used to solve the issue is to ban the specific endangered species and their products from being traded. This can be effective as it ensures that no endangered species can be trafficked internationally or domestically since it criminalizes the trade. It helps to reduce the numbers of species being trafficked, but the organizations are able to successfully smuggle them through different ways. This can include hiding them, or the previously mentioned bribery and forgery. When countries implement laws and regulations, inadequate enforcement can cause failure in their attempt to control the trade. There must be an effort to standardize a level of enforcement in order to prevent instances where the trafficking is able to occur because of corruption. Also, if all countries do not cooperate, then the trade would not be stopped. Through the banning, scarcity of endangered species is found in the wildlife markets. This can increase demand, which would then increase how much is illegally obtained and sold.

International cooperation on this issue has been a focus found in the UN. This is something that is necessary when solving this issue but can be hard to achieve. This is why resolutions should not entirely rely on international cooperation, but should also focus on what can be done domestically. This can ensure that the countries being most affected by the issue have ways in which they can limit the issue even if there are nations that believe that the issue should not be regulated.

Many of the solutions are also short-term and don't seek change. This can stunt the effect the resolution has since the markets can develop to deal with the regulations imposed by the UN. Therefore, something that must also be taken into account would be how the resolution can solve the issue as the markets develop and as the trade becomes more complex due to regulations.

## Possible Solutions

There are multiple ways to approach the issue. Education is important, and this is because many of the people involved in the trade come from low-income populations, and some live in poverty. These people are less likely to have access to education. Education can be useful in allowing people to obtain jobs that serve economies in a beneficial manner. It can also deter people from becoming involved since they could learn about the effects it has both on the environment and economies. More active regulation of the trade would be beneficial towards further ensuring that the international trade co-aligns with regulations set forth by CITES. Enforcement of these regulations is also necessary. Corruption can be found in some instances when regulating the trade, and this could lead to the trade continuing because of instances of bribery. Resolutions that focus on international cooperation must ensure that all influential nations and nations important to the issue agree with it, since, if the main focus is cooperation, a lack of it could render the resolution useless.

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## Appendix or Appendices

- I. Comprehensive source detailing involvement in the issue and the international flow of the animals being traded

[www.time.com/3921138/illegal-wildlife-trade-countries/](https://www.time.com/3921138/illegal-wildlife-trade-countries/)

- II. Information on nations opposed to more regulation on the wildlife trade

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/press-releases/international-ban-in-ivory-trade-remains-intact-at-cites>

- III. The connection between organized crime and animal poaching

<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/05/150526-wildlife-crime-elephant-rhino-poac>

[hing-organized-crime/](#)

- IV. Statistics on poached animals being traded

<https://www.havocscope.com/tag/wildlife-trafficking/>

- V. 2016 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on the wildlife trade

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/World\\_Wildlife\\_Crime\\_Report\\_2016\\_final.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/World_Wildlife_Crime_Report_2016_final.pdf)

- VI. Examples of previous solutions that were attempted by governments and private companies

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/09/fighting-illegal-wildlife-and-forest-trade/>