



Kuching Declaration Protecting Wildlife Against Illegal Trade and Trafficking in Asia

BACKGROUND

Significant progress is being made in Asia towards reaching Aichi targets for setting aside areas on land and sea for biodiversity conservation. Protected areas and other forest areas are, however, losing this biodiversity at alarming rates due to poaching and illegal and unsustainable harvest driven by commercial market demand for wildlife, which includes animals and plants.

Asia is a source, transit, and consumer region for this illegal wildlife trade, which is facilitated by a myriad of factors, including increasingly well-developed transportation networks that extend across country borders on land and sea.

The 900 participants from more than 65 countries who attended the meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (herein ATBC) held in Kuching Malaysia from 1-5 July, 2018, organized under the main theme of ‘Linking Natural History with the Conservation of Tomorrow’s Tropical Ecosystems’, collectively call for greater protection of wild animals and plants against illegal trade and trafficking in Asia.

THE PROBLEM

Wildlife trade is driven by organised criminality involved in acquiring rare and threatened animal and plant species to supply multiple markets. Species such as tigers, bears, helmeted hornbills, rosewoods, birds, orchids, tortoises and freshwater turtles, langurs/leaf-monkeys, and pangolins are heavily harvested for trade, both for consumption within the region and to supply global demand. Such wildlife trade undermines national and international systems designed to comply with international laws regulating the harvest and movement of protected species.

While trade data gaps exist for some groups, others such as songbirds, parrots, turtles, and reptiles are known to be subjected to illegal and unsustainable hunting and trade levels that threaten wild populations. As such, there are frequent and alarming reports of negative impacts, including local extinctions, for many species across Asia.

Current and future plans for the expansion of road networks, including those financed by new regional development initiatives, will open up more remote areas to access by humans and will result in increased levels of illegal harvest and trafficking.

As a result of road expansion, there will be increased pressure on wildlife inside and outside of protected areas, compounding pressures on an already struggling conservation system. Indeed, less than a-quarter of the world's protected areas have effective management due to inadequate planning, staffing and budgets, and so most are failing to maintain their biodiversity values and other natural capital.

Three-quarters of countries have at least half their protected land under intense human pressure from mining, infrastructure, settlements, logging or agriculture. The problem is most acute in western Europe and southern Asia.

We, the participants of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation in Kuching:

RECOGNISE THAT:

Illegal wildlife trade affects an enormous range of species, involves demand for diverse types of products with distinct uses and consumer bases, and implicates multiple countries and regions. Illegal wildlife trade also occurs across a range of platforms, from open markets to online trade, involving diverse types of illegal activities, including, but not limited to, organised criminal activities. To be effective, strategies for mitigating wildlife trade must address the many dimensions of this pervasive threat to biodiversity.

Regulation of illegal wildlife trade is supported by strong legislation in some countries, but is hindered by a range of significant gaps and challenges including loopholes that fail to provide adequate coverage for non-native species and facilitate the laundering of illegal wildlife.

This inadequate regulation stems from many sources, including limited and inconsistent law enforcement, inadequate regulation of captive breeding operations that prevent fraudulent practices, corruption, insufficient penalties to deter crimes,

and, lack of awareness in judicial systems about how to prosecute wildlife, and trafficking crimes.

Moreover, enforcement agencies are understaffed, sometimes poorly trained regarding the scope of the problem, and under-resourced compared with the scale and intensity of the problem.

New tools and technologies are available for fighting illegal wildlife trade, including stable isotopes and genetic analysis, webscrapers for online trade, and sniffer dogs. However, many of these forensic techniques currently are unavailable to the enforcement staff on the frontlines who need them the most.

Wildlife trade is facilitated by the expansion and improvement of roads, especially those that provide alternative routes for trade that avoid going through major checkpoints or formal border crossings. In addition, logging and access roads open up new areas for wildlife traffickers to harvest populations of target species that used to be protected by their remoteness and inaccessibility. As with illegal drug trafficking, illegally harvested wildlife is often traded at sea, to avoid international boundaries and checkpoints.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Monitor the extent of wildlife trade, *i.e.* species and numbers illegally traded.
- Perform research on target species' population viability and on the ecological and ecosystem service impacts of illegal harvest and international trafficking of flora and fauna, including less charismatic species such as amphibians and plants.
- Identify the perpetrators and routes along the full chain of activities in illegal trade of wildlife, including less regulated transportation networks (e.g., minivan networks, off-shore deals), as well as better regulated transportation hubs (e.g., airports, seaports, customs checkpoints).
- Increase the attention that law enforcement and investigation agencies provide to monitor online sources of wildlife trade information, including social media.
- Encourage governments to consider wildlife crime as a serious offence that warrants severe penalties under relevant laws and regulations.
- Conduct strategic patrolling and establish protection measures for heavily hunted species (e.g., helmeted hornbills, rosewoods, pangolins) and for lesser-known traded taxa (e.g., songbirds, tortoises) to avert imminent loss of populations and extinction of species.

- Increase efforts to identify, and eliminate, loopholes in wildlife regulations that are crucial to preventing the fraudulent sale of illegal wildlife as legal products. This includes increased minimum penalties for offenses.
- Increase access for law enforcement staff to tools and technologies that facilitate forensic analysis and detection of the laundering of restricted species.
- Improve the effectiveness of law enforcement by engaging local communities in collecting evidence, acting as expert witnesses, and bringing forward cases for prosecution.
- Use ranger-based data for patrol planning, monitoring the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts, and risk mapping of high poaching threat areas in and around protected areas and other critical wildlife habitats.
- Increase training and collaborations between local and international researchers and institutions and government agencies, including legislative, law enforcement, and judicial branches.
- Plan and map the creation and upgrade of roads in accordance with existing protected areas and areas harboring species threatened by wildlife trade.
- Close logging roads to unauthorized vehicles both during and after operations, and permanently close roads after cessation of logging harvest cycles.