



**STILL ONLY ONE EARTH:**  
Lessons from 50 years of UN sustainable development policy

### BRIEF #3

# The Evolving War on Illegal Wildlife Trade

Tanya Rosen  
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## Key Messages

- The trafficking and unsustainable trade in wildlife commodities—such as elephant ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales, tiger bone, and bear bile—are causing unprecedented declines in some of the world's most charismatic, as well as some lesser-known, wildlife species.
- The value of illegal wildlife trade is estimated between USD 7 and USD 23 billion per year, making wildlife crime the fourth largest illegal global trade, behind only narcotics, counterfeiting, and human trafficking.
- The illegal trade in wildlife can potentially lead to the spread of zoonoses, such as SARS-CoV-2 that caused the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has been in force since 1975 and is the only international convention addressing legal and illegal trade in wild specimens of flora and fauna.
- Since 2019, there are increasing calls to develop a stand-alone international instrument to address illegal wildlife trade and crime.

In September 2020, federal authorities in the United States busted a wildlife trafficking ring that had smuggled more than 10,000 pounds of shark fins into the country to be exported to Hong Kong. Just seven months earlier, officials seized USD 1 million worth of fins in Miami, Florida (Sharpless, 2020).

In June 2020, poachers killed at least six elephants in a single day in Ethiopia, the largest such slaughter in memory in the East African nation. The poachers immediately removed the elephants' tusks, which officials suspected are being slipped out of the country to China and Southeast Asia (Burke, 2020).



In 2019, an estimated 195,000 pangolins (the only mammals with scales) were trafficked for their scales alone. Pangolins are in high demand in countries like China and Viet Nam. Their meat is considered a delicacy and pangolin scales are used in traditional medicine and folk remedies (WWF, 2020). Eight pangolin species, according to the latest International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List reassessments, are threatened with extinction due to mostly illegal trafficking (Challender et al., 2019).

Between August 2014 and February 2015, eight mail shipments from Bolivia to China containing 186 jaguar teeth—translating into the poaching of at least 93 jaguars—were intercepted by the Bolivian authorities (Nuñez and Aliaga, 2017, p.51). Jaguar teeth are used in Asia for jewelry and medicinal purposes.

These are just a few examples of the illegal wildlife trade that has become one of the most pressing threats facing many endangered and threatened species. Fueled by an insatiable demand for consumption, status, and traditional medicine, the value of illegal wildlife trade has been estimated at between USD 7 and USD 23 billion per year, making wildlife crime one of the world's most lucrative illegal businesses, often run by sophisticated, international, and well-organized criminal networks seeking to exploit the high rewards and low risks of the trade (Global Environment Facility, 2020).

There are complex illicit trafficking structures that facilitate the killing, transport and sale of prized species, such as pangolins, rhino and elephants. Some traffickers are wealthy people with political connections that facilitate the poaching and illegal trade. Those connections often include foreign development workers—individuals uniquely positioned to support



Pangolin searches for ants. (Photo: 2630ben, iStock)

trafficking given their connections in countries where high-value species are found, their access to remote areas, and their political clout to evade border controls. Across a trafficking chain there could anywhere from five to more than fifteen people involved (UNODC, 2020, pp. 68-69).

Every year, more species are targeted and added to the list of highly illegally traded species. Between 1999 and 2018 there were nearly 180,000 seizures from 149 countries representing almost 6,000 species (UNODC, 2020, pp. 32).

No country is untouched by these crimes, which impact biodiversity, human health, national security, and socio-economic development, while enriching organized criminal groups. The illegal trade in wildlife, which does not go through proper sanitary controls, can potentially lead to the spread of zoonoses—diseases transmitted from animals to humans, such as SARS-CoV-2 that caused the COVID-19 pandemic (UNODC, 2020, p. 19).



## The History of Regulating International Wildlife Trade

Regulation of international wildlife trade began with a focus on African species and the signing in 1900 of the “Convention Designed to Ensure the Conservation of various species of wild animals in Africa, which are useful to Man or inoffensive” (British Parliamentary Papers, 1900). While hailed as the first international treaty on nature conservation, it never came into force.

Thirty-three years later, the “Convention Relative to the Preservation of Fauna and Flora in their Natural State” was adopted and came into force in 1936. Known as the “London Convention,” its primary aim was to protect African species by prohibiting hunting, killing, and capture, and by regulating internal and international trade in their trophies (Cioc, 2009).

The London Convention eventually paved the way to a discussion on institutionalizing conservation, which led to the creation of IUCN in 1948. At its seventh General Assembly in 1960, ICUN delegates expressed concern over the threatened status of many species and urged governments to restrict imports of animals according to regulations of exporting countries. This brought to the fore

the realization that countries often did not know other countries’ regulations. To resolve this problem, in 1963 the IUCN General Assembly called for the creation of a new treaty to regulate international trade in wildlife (McNeely, 2003).

It took another eight years, but in 1972 the [United Nations Conference on the Human Environment](#) recommended a “conference be convened as soon as possible ... to prepare and adopt a convention on export, import and transit of certain species of wild animals and plants” (US Department of State, 1973, p. 11). A final draft forwarded by the United States served as the basis for the negotiations and in 1973 the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) was born.

## CITES as Key to Countering the Surging Illegal Wildlife Trade

[CITES](#) regulates both legal and illegal trade in wild species of flora and fauna. There is illegal trade associated with both prohibited and regulated trade. However, CITES was not intended to be a crime-related convention. It does not require countries to make illegal wildlife trade a criminal offence (Scanlon, 2019).

### What is CITES?

CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. It aims to ensure international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Efforts to regulate this trade require international cooperation to safeguard certain species from over-exploitation. CITES was conceived in the spirit of such cooperation. Today, it gives varying degrees of protection to more than 37,000 species of animals and plants, whether they are traded as live specimens, fur coats, or dried herbs. (CITES, 2018)



During his tenure as Secretary-General of CITES (2010-2018), John Scanlon sought to overcome the limitations of the Convention in countering illegal wildlife trade by embedding CITES into the work programmes of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), INTERPOL (International Criminal Police Organization), and the World Customs Organization (WCO). These organizations are better positioned to enforce action against wildlife crime. The creation of the [International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime](#) (ICCWC) in 2010 further enhanced the international cooperation needed to support national efforts to strengthen the enforcement response (UNODC, 2020).

The sixteenth meeting of the CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP16), held in 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand, highlighted the threat of illegal wildlife trade. Amid findings that “illegal trade in wildlife is the fourth largest illegal global trade, behind only narcotics, counterfeiting, and human trafficking” (Benson, et al., 2013), delegates debated impacts of legal domestic trade on illegal markets, since many national ivory markets were still open at that time. Attendees also considered the role of international trade bans, and to what extent they fuel illegal wildlife trade. At a Ministerial Roundtable on Combating Transnational Organized Wildlife and Forest Crime, Ministers responded to these findings by recognizing that transnational organized wildlife and forest crime has vast and far-reaching impacts on “species, livelihoods, economies, regional security, and in some instances human lives” (CITES, 2013).

The same year, the United Nations Group of Friends on Poaching and Illicit Wildlife Trafficking, co-chaired by Gabon and

Germany, promoted the first UN General Assembly resolution on tackling illicit trafficking in wildlife. [Resolution 69/314](#), adopted in July 2015, with three follow-up resolutions, recognizes CITES as the primary legal framework for regulating international trade in species of wild animals and plants and combating illicit trafficking in wildlife. [Resolution 73/343](#) in 2019 further underscores the importance of national level action and commitment to effectively address illegal wildlife trade, urging Member States to “take decisive steps at the national level to prevent, combat, and eradicate the illegal trade in wildlife, on the supply, transit, and demand sides, including by strengthening their legislation and regulations necessary for the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and appropriate punishment of such illegal trade, as well as by strengthening enforcement and criminal justice responses.”

## 2014: A Landmark Year for Confronting Illegal Wildlife Trade

In June 2014, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) dedicated much of its first UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) to addressing illegal wildlife trade. In the [ministerial outcome document](#), delegates urged countries to prevent, combat, and eradicate illegal trade in wildlife. However, some stressed that, notwithstanding the value of a strong message from environment ministers on the issue, UNEP would be best placed to support ongoing initiatives, rather than launching a new platform.

In 2020, UNEP launched the [Wild for Life](#) campaign in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme, UNODC,



and CITES. With illegal wildlife trade often spreading through social media platforms (Williams 2015), this campaign enlists the support of [high-profile social media influencers](#) to promote the urgency and importance of combatting wildlife trafficking (UNEP, 2020).

In 2014, the UK government launched a series of high-level conferences on illegal wildlife trade, first in London, followed by events in Botswana, Viet Nam, and again in London. The 2018 Conference especially sought to strengthen international partnerships and recognize that illegal wildlife trade is serious organised crime. The conference highlighted the need to increase collaboration across continents to tackle trafficking-associated illicit financial flows and corruption, help frontline countries coordinate enforcement efforts across trade routes, and improve understanding of the links to wider security challenges.

## Has CITES Been Effective in Countering Illegal Wildlife Trade?

John Sellar, former CITES Chief of Enforcement, argues “CITES, its CoPs and its Standing Committee, are being left holding the ball far too much when it comes to addressing the thorny subject of implementation and compliance. ... not only is CITES a questionable forum to effectively discuss crime-related matters, many of those matters are wholly domestic in nature, a realm which the drafters of the Convention believed to be outside its scope” (Sellar, 2018).

It is true the scope of CITES is limited. It captures only international trade—legal and illegal—and does not have oversight over



The Wild for Life Campaign raises awareness about the need to tackle illegal wildlife crime (Photo: Kiara Worth, IISD/ENB)

domestic activities. However, CITES can use a [temporary suspension of trade](#)—a powerful economic sanction that prompts countries to enact measures to combat and reduce illegal trade, among other actions. However, CITES has no tools to punish the criminals who have already defied those countries’ governments, which decreases its effectiveness.

CITES-supported partnerships have also led to increases in seizures, though much remains within the purview of individual countries. Partnerships with other international organizations more versed in police, customs, and crimes have generated greater pressure on countries to step up in addressing illegal wildlife trade. For example, several Middle Eastern countries were “peer-pressured” to [adopt laws](#) prohibiting the keeping of big cats as pets, although the [illegal trade](#) in cheetahs and other big cats continues.

Also, a number of countries singled out in the National Ivory Action Plans (a mechanism used by the Convention to strengthen their controls of the trade in ivory and ivory markets) [closed their domestic ivory markets](#) and tightened up enforcement to avoid being shamed by CITES and its parties.



However, there are increasing calls to develop a new convention to address illegal wildlife trade. Advocates note there are many non-CITES listed species that are illegally traded. They also say CITES is already too stretched, and “a comprehensive legally binding regime for tackling wildlife crime, within the framework of international criminal law rather than trade law, is beyond the scope of CITES” (Scanlon, 2019). Scanlon further notes many transnational crimes are fueled by corruption “both domestic and international in nature, and affect CITES-listed and non-listed species. Having no agreed definition of wildlife crime can present challenges for enforcement authorities.”

## The Newest Challenge: CITES in the Time of COVID-19

2020 brought with it the COVID-19 pandemic, which started as an animal virus (SARS-CoV-2) that spread to humans, possibly in a wet market in China where many legally and illegally traded species were found. As calls to shut down wildlife markets and the wildlife trade proliferated, new challenges emerged for CITES.

CITES’s response has been that “Matters regarding zoonotic diseases are outside of CITES’s mandate, and therefore the CITES Secretariat does not have the competence to make comments regarding the recent news on the possible links between human consumption of wild animals and COVID-19” (CITES, 2020). The Secretariat further stressed the detrimental impacts of illegal trade in wildlife.

There have been calls for CITES and its Parties to address the impact of COVID-19, ranging from amending the Convention text, making changes to existing resolutions

or adopting new ones, and enhancing implementation of existing partnerships or establishing new ones. One such proposal is to amend the Convention to add a new Appendix IV that would include species considered to pose a threat to public or animal health (End Wildlife Crime, 2020).

Jonathan Kolby, National Geographic Explorer (2020), notes that “even if coronavirus emerged due to the illegal wildlife trade (for which no evidence has been provided), the legal wildlife trade is just as likely to cause the next pandemic (Kolby, 2020).

But what if restricting or even prohibiting the legal wildlife trade sends that trade underground, further fueling the volume of illegal wildlife trade? Whether this will be addressed by CITES or a new treaty remains to be seen. What is certain is the threat of more pandemics looms large and is likely to impact conservation and efforts to curb illegal wildlife trade.

## What’s Next?

CITES, while not perfect, has evolved with the increasing challenges facing conservation, trade, and sustainable use of wild flora and fauna. It is the only convention that can address related illegal activities. It has also

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**JOHN SCANLON, CITES SECRETARY-GENERAL  
2010-2018.**



established partnerships and alliances with other intergovernmental bodies to increase its effectiveness—an important lesson for other environmental conventions seeking to deepen their impacts.

In a post-COVID world, countries need to consider whether to take a “precautionary, public health–based approach, by working to end all commercial trade in wildlife (particularly birds and mammals) for consumption, and to close all such commercial markets” (Lieberman, 2020), knowing this could increase the volume of illegal wildlife trade. On the other hand, there is the potential for fear of contracting zoonotic diseases to naturally dampen the appetite for wild products.

Debate over a new treaty started well before COVID. The question in 2019 was whether CITES should still be the main place to address both legal and illegal trade or whether a new treaty was warranted to consider “wildlife crime.” But now it is not just about a new treaty to combat illegal wildlife trade, but a new treaty to address “One Health,” the human, veterinary, and wildlife health issues and the relationship with wildlife trade.

A new treaty, whether focused on “One Health” or “Wildlife Crime,” poses several challenges, including the mandate, funding, and coordination with CITES. And whether countries sign on to a new agreement that may contain even stronger and unpalatable compliance measures remains to be seen. In a world economy crippled by the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be such willingness.

The first step, however, will be to consider if CITES can further adapt to better curb illegal wildlife trade and address the challenges brought by COVID-19. So before a new treaty is considered, countries are more likely to explore what CITES can offer in the meantime.

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