





# Hand-in-Hand

**Wildlife Trafficking and What the AZA Community Can Do**

BY KATIE MORELL

Say the words ‘wildlife trafficking’ to most people outside the conservation community and you are likely to find yourself in a conversation about ivory. But take a deeper look at today’s illegal wildlife trade and you will find a complicated maze involving a wide variety of species and natural habitats; the perpetrators include organized crime rings and consumers.

Wildlife trafficking is now the fourth leading transnational crime, behind the trafficking of humans, drugs, and arms. It is a multi-billion-dollar industry. The U.S. and China are two of its biggest consumers and suppliers.

The good news: there are multitude ways to tackle this issue, and many organizations and governments are dedicating resources to this effort. Notably, in 2013 then-President Obama signed the first executive order to combat wildlife trafficking. In 2016, a near-total ban on the commercial trade of African elephant ivory went into effect in the U.S. Of late, President Trump has expressed support with a tough-on-crime stance toward the illegal wildlife trade. In late 2017, China banned all ivory trade, resulting in a significant drop in demand within its borders.

“I’ve never seen this level of political will [to combat the illegal wildlife trade] by governments; especially the U.S., the EU, and China,” said Dr. Susan Lieberman, vice president, international policy at the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York, N.Y., adding that she’s been working in this space for more than 30 years. “The problem may be worse, but the level of intention of governments is greater than I’ve ever seen.”

### **The Problem**

Rewind the clock back to the early 1970s and there was no written regulation on the trade of wild animals and plants. That changed in 1975 with the creation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an agreement between nations that trade of animals and plants doesn’t threaten their survival. Over time CITES got traction, and today it protects 35,000 species of animals and plants and has 183 participating countries.

A little more than ten years after the creation of CITES, the world’s attention turned to the plight of the African elephant, being slaughtered for ivory. CITES has two appendixes: those species on Appendix I are deemed threatened with extinction and no trade is allowed; those on Appendix II aren’t threatened with extinction, but trade must be regulated so that they don’t become so. At the time, the African elephant was on Appendix II, and poaching of elephants was rampant, causing population numbers to dwindle quickly.

“Between 1987 and 1989, there was a massive media campaign to put the African elephant on Appendix I; and it was listed there in 1989, which was a major victory,” said Lieberman.

Wildlife trafficking did not end with this victory; it just shifted to other species. In the subsequent years, the illegal trade and killing of birds, reptiles, rhinos, and a multitude of marine animals proliferated. In 2008, the international community green-lit a one-time sale of stockpiled ivory from four African nations with the idea that if the market flooded with ivory it would lower prices and decrease the profitability of poaching. This strategy backfired on a catastrophic scale, instead raising the interest in ivory and increasing poaching, leading to tens of thousands of elephants killed in later years.

Around the same time, the economic power of China’s middle class was growing, causing the demand for wildlife products (some seen as luxury items, others believed to possess medicinal properties) to soar.

“In addition, the trade routes had increased; it is now easier to fly from central Africa than it was 30 years ago; we now have direct flights,” said Lieberman. “And then you see the increased engagement of organized crime. Yes, some things are better. Because of CITES and government implementation, there are several species alive that wouldn’t have been, but there are also a new set of issues.”





The issues are complex. In the U.S., the illegal pet trade has grown dramatically in the past 10-15 years. The Internet has long played an enormous part in the illegal trade. A lot of trade has gone online instead of in-person, presenting law enforcement officials around the globe with new challenges as to how to track and apprehend guilty parties.

And then some can be seen in the open, right on social media. When a video of an overweight slow loris holding its hands in the air while its owner seemingly tickled it, went viral, demand went up for the species.

“It was so horrible,” said Kym Gopp, curator of conservation for the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo in Cleveland, Ohio.

“The joke online was that he liked it, but the reality was it was a defensive posture and it was not well cared for; the animal was getting ready to lash out. This is a good example of unknowing consumers sharing a video like that and then creating demand for an endangered species.”

Compounding this issue is lack of coordinated law enforcement. As of now, there isn’t an organized network of where to place animals when they are confiscated at the U.S. border, said

Danielle Kessler, senior policy and outreach manager for the International Fund for Animal Welfare. “Anytime those animals come in to be placed, it is personal relationships that help out—who you know that can take the animal. We are having ongoing conversations with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and government officials to start regional efforts to help because the cost associated with housing and caring for these animals is significant.”

#### **What Zoos and Aquariums Can Do**

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, with access to millions of visitors per year, are arguably at the frontlines of fighting the illegal wildlife trade. In early 2018, the Wildlife Trafficking Alliance (WTA) became a program of the AZA, transitioning WTA’s executive director Sara Walker to the AZA’s new senior advisor on wildlife trafficking. The WTA still operates as an alliance that works with public and private organizations to fight wildlife trafficking.

Walker said AZA-accredited facilities can strengthen or launch programs to educate visitors about trafficking.

“People think it is an Asia problem and they don’t know what to do about it,” she said. “It would be helpful to have more signage and keeper talks and then give visitors actionable items to tackle, tell them about bills before Congress and explain how they can call their representatives.”

“There are also ways the public can support efforts through funding and reporting. If they see something suspicious when traveling—in an open marketplace, for example, or online—they can report it. Education is hugely important in this effort.”

While he agrees that education and thereby decreasing demand over time is



part of the strategy, Dr. Richard Bergl, director of conservation, education, and science at the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, N.C., prefers focusing on anti-poaching efforts on the ground as a way to fight the epidemic of illegal wildlife trafficking.

Bergl has been working on wildlife conservation and research for more than 20 years, and spends a good portion of every year in Africa working on anti-poaching efforts. One of the systems he stands behind is the Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART), that helps more than 800 sites in more than 60 countries track and analyze poaching data.

“It is a system where rangers on patrol can collect data and apply very sophisticated analysis to help plan future actions,” he said, adding that since SMART’s launch in 2011, species such as gorillas in Nigeria have been significantly helped by the technology.

Bergl said it is important for zoos to support anti-poaching efforts because, unlike the drug trade where the damage is done at the end of the supply chain, with wildlife trafficking, the harm is being done at the beginning of the chain when an animal is being harmed or captured.

“In the long-term, you have to deal with the demand, but you are trying to change cultural practices and beliefs in place for thousands of years; we don’t have the luxury of relying just on demand reduction,” he said. “This is a crisis; species are going extinct right now. AZA member organizations can get involved with existing projects like SMART and really help. There are many examples of these programs working, and quickly.

“If you remove the threats, the wildlife comes back.”

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Katie Morell is a writer based in Sausalito, Calif.

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