

Environmental Crime and Development Challenges: The Illegal Wildlife Trade in Asia

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The global illegal wildlife trade is a billion-dollar industry and the second most abundant form of trade in the black market. It poses a threat to biodiversity, national development, security, human, and animal health. Southeast Asia, due to its biodiversity, is a center of illicit wildlife trade. Governments are struggling to find sufficient management and regulations to control the region's illegal wildlife industry. This article analyzes the illegal wildlife trade with a particular focus on the trade-in wild animals, such as tigers and pangolins, the consequences of illegal and unsustainable trade in wildlife, and potential steps to improve effective control of wildlife trade.

Keywords: illegal wildlife trade, Southeast Asia, China, endangered species, development challenges

Illegal wildlife trade in Asia is not only an environmental crime but is also a major development problem and a threat to human and animal health. Biodiversity and whole ecosystems are under serious threat, inequality is increasing, and good governance is difficult to achieve; all these are a result of illegal wildlife trafficking. Illegal wildlife trade involves not only trafficking live animals or plants, but also animal products, such as animal skin, bone, and other parts. In Southeast Asia, it's an advanced business, worthy \$8 - \$10 billion per year, and globally it's a second most abundant form of black-market commerce (Warchol, 2004; Lovgren, 2008). Due to high biodiversity, Southeast Asia is a hub of illegal wildlife trade (Sodhi, Koh, Brook & Ng, 2004). The tourism entertainment industry, traditional medicine, sport, clothing, or the rich who want exotic pets are just a few reasons for the popularity of illicit wildlife trade.

The global exchange of wildlife products is crucial to international society as it provides goods essential for the development and well-being of populations. However, due to limited natural resources, the legal wildlife trade must be sustainable and based on tight regulations that won't harm biodiversity, animal population, or affect our environment to a greater extent. The wildlife management and conservation are mostly regulated by the Convention on International Trade Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) and domestic laws. CITES is an international agreement between signatories to ensure that wild animals and plants are protected and that wildlife trade is regulated and controlled (CITES, 2019). CITES has been signed by 183 countries (CITES, 2019).

However, unsustainable and illegal trade in wildlife can lead to damage of biodiversity, species extinction, increase poverty among particular communities, economic losses, an animal welfare concern, and a threat to human and animal health (Deeks, 2006; WSPA, 2007; Gómez & Aguirre, 2009; Rosen & Smith, 2010). It can be especially harmful to rural communities as they depend on natural assets for their livelihood. For example, animal products in Cambodia, Indonesia, or Laos are crucial for rural communities as they provide food, building materials, medicine, income, and so on; thus, the lack of access to it can be catastrophic to the rural poor. Hence, illegal wildlife trade is also a link to poverty. Illegal local traffickers can make relatively good money, but the real profit goes to international traders. Tigerskin can go for \$200 from a local dealer, while a foreign broker can resell the skin for up to \$10,000 (Baldauf, 2002).

The illegal wildlife trade is also a threat to national governance and development. It affects direct and indirect sales and tax income on imports and exports of goods that are usually state-controlled (UNODC, 2013). Additionally, it impacts national and international security and the rule of law (Deeks, 2006). Routes used for the wildlife trafficking are also used by human or drug traffickers, these routes pose huge challenges to the central government as illegal wildlife trade impend national security and development in the areas without security (Deeks, 2006).

The growing population in East and Southeast Asia has had an impact on the demand for wildlife resources and products. China is the region's biggest consumer market for wildlife products and Southeast Asian, because of its connection to the largest Asian markets such as China, India, and Indonesia, is called wildlife trade hotspots (Felbab–Brown, 2011). The leading exporters of wild animals and animal-related products are China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia (Nijman, 2010). Japan, together with the European Union, are significant importers of wildlife (Nijman, 2010).

Due to its biodiversity, Southeast Asia is threatened by wildlife trafficking. The illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade is a huge threat to the region's biodiversity and ecosystem, as it causes the extinction of already endangered species — for instance, the tiger or pangolin population. The wildlife trade has pushed tigers to become one of the endangered species. The demand for products obtained from killing tigers is immense in Asia. Tigers are killed and used for their skin, bones, and organs (TRAFFIC, 2007). Most of these are used as traditional medicine, which has been practiced for ages.



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According to the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), at least one tiger is killed every day for its use in traditional medicine (Kasnoff, 2019). The CITES regulations aren't respected and are easily circumvented by signatory states. Countries like China, Japan, South Korea are still involved in the tiger trade, as many loopholes can be found in their law. For example, the Japanese legislation system bans the trade of endangered species, but it doesn't regulate the law, which covers products not easily recognizable, e.g., powder or pills (Kasnoff, 2019).

The popularity of tiger products has led to a massive decline in the number of Chinese tigers, which in turn led the hunters to seek tigers in Nepal and Bangladesh, affecting the tiger population in this part of Asia (Kasnoff, 2019). Several countries, including Thailand, South Korea, Japan, China, and Nepal, have endorsed strict regulations and protection of wild tigers; however, it doesn't stop the demand and hunting (Kasnoff, 2019). The results of tigers hunting are terrifying. Wild tiger population in Malaysia has fallen from an estimated 500 in 2010 to less than 200 currently, whereas Myanmar has only 22 wild tigers (White, 2019).

As for pangolins, they have become the most commonly captured mammals in Asia's illicit wildlife trade, resulting in a significant decline in the number of pangolins in China and other Southeast Asian countries. National legislations and CITES prohibited trading on these animals, however pangolins till now are often used in culinary and traditional medicine. The biggest markets are China and Vietnam (WWF, 2016). The pangolin researchers in January 2017,

during the meeting in Singapore, reported that increased demand from China resulted in massive declines in pangolin populations across Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos (UN Environment, 2018). Nowadays, they are mostly imported from Indonesia and Malaysia, which affects the population of pangolins in said countries. China, as a signatory of CITES, should have banned trade and consumption of pangolins.

Moreover, pangolin trade is forbidden under China's Wild Animal Protection Law unless used for scientific research, exhibits, or other particular uses, such as traditional medicine (Yan, 2019). In January 2010, the National Forest and Grasslands Administration (NFGA) invited representatives of the forestry department from nine southern provinces in China to discuss future measures to preserve the pangolins population (Yan, 2019). However, the demand for pangolin parts and products isn't declining. Illegal wildlife trade is also one of the leading conservation challenges in Asia. It contributes to forest functions degradation, which is damaging for the rural population as the forest provides water filtration and prevention of soil runoff; without it, the general wellness is getting worse (Deeks, 2006).

As mentioned above, wildlife trade is widespread for many reasons, involving economic or sociocultural reasons. Law enforcement is another challenge for the government, especially if wildlife trade is connected to the sociocultural cause, like traditional medicine. The practice of traditional medicine is one of the demands for the wildlife trade. Traditional medicine is closely related to cultural values; thus, the domestic and international regulations aren't very efficient in preventing the trade. Traditional medicine uses natural resources based on plants, animals, and mineral-based materials to cure a wide range of diseases and to maintain good health (Felab-Brown, 2011). Even though other methods are now commonly available and the effectiveness of traditional medicine is highly questionable, because of its cultural and conservative values, it's still a popular treatment method among many people. Unfortunately, traditional medicine is directly linked to illegal wildlife trade, since its use requires the use of products obtained from the killing of endangered animals which is prohibited by the law.

Additionally, low capacity and human capital are other challenges. Not enough forest rangers in protected areas and the lack of proper training on species identification and CITES regulation for customs officials results in disregarding the law and facilitate the growth of the illegal wildlife trafficking (Deeks, 2006). A common method of trafficking is mixing protected species with legal shipments of look-alike species or/and false certificates, which is why the proper training for customs offices is necessary (Deeks, 2006).

The knowledge of species identification and CITES regulation should be a must as wildlife trade is also linked to human health. Irresponsible interaction between people and animals can end up in the outbreak of epidemics, like avian flu or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. The legal wildlife trade poses a disease risk connected to the global movement of live animals; thus, illegal trade can even raise this risk. Outbreaks like SARS have a massive impact on economies, which has been seen in economies of Southeast Asia. In Adams' study, the 2003 SARS outbreak cost Vietnam \$350 million (as cited in Deeks, 2006). To avoid these outbreaks, the national laws on wildlife protection and CITES regulations must be respected.

Illegal wildlife trade is an international business, using all available methods to find customers worldwide, so like many other businesses, illicit wildlife trade went online. Wildlife cybercrime is possible due to the popularity of social media platforms and the lack of adequate network monitoring (Thomas, 2019). In 2016 CITES agreed to cooperate with social media platforms, search engines, and e-commerce websites to counter illicit international wildlife trade; however, it doesn't deter illegal traffickers (Thomas, 2019). According to the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC, in 2016, over 1,500 live animals were found for sale online on 12 Facebook groups (Thomas, 2019). Fighting illegal wildlife trade online is time-consuming, and modern technology is essential. However, more countries recognize the need to fight back against wildlife cybercrimes.

Many actors take part in illegal wildlife trade, such as poor rural inhabitants, professional and unprofessional hunters, organized-crime groups, government, and military officials, which makes it difficult to combat the trade. The trade is also conducted in many ways, there isn't one smuggling method or trafficking routes, and the trace chains involve both domestic and international storage, transportation, and marketing specialists. Moreover, it can be conducted by land, air, and sea.

The illegal wildlife trade is a massive threat to the animals as it causes the extinction of species. It is dangerous for biodiversity and the ecosystem in general. Also, it affects the socio-economic aspects because the state is losing revenues, the possibility of the spread of disease is increasing, and the lifestyle of local communities is at risk.

Governments are often ignoring the problem of wildlife crimes and trade. Besides, the corruption on high levels is also affecting the impunity of traffickers. However, in recent years, more high-level officials have recognized the importance of protection of wildlife trade. For example, in 2017, the Nanjing Forest Police College (NFPC) and TRAFFIC co-organized a workshop in Nanjing, during which 60 law enforcement officials learned how to tackle wildlife crime on the internet and via courier networks (TRAFFIC, 2017). The topics which were discussed included the CITES and Chinese Wild Animal Protection Laws, laws and procedures regulating the digital and logistic sector of wildlife trade, identification of species frequently traded as pets, identification of wild animal and plant products and techniques used to combat crime and more (TRAFFIC, 2017).

The workshops help to increase the knowledge and ability to prevent the illegal wildlife trade. However, still most countries in Southeast and East Asia don't have strong laws governing wildlife trade, and the penalties for illegal wildlife trade are relatively low. Furthermore, governments need to cooperate and share information about the traffickers and the trade itself. There aren't many common systems to prevent international illegal wildlife crimes. Also, there isn't much data about the wild animals that are being trafficked. Establishment of an electronic database that includes numbers, routes, and trends of illegal trafficking should also be a priority of countries struggling with illicit wildlife trade. Most of the countries in the Asian region have signed CITES, but some countries are breaking the rules of the conventions, and there isn't any pressure on respecting the convention from other countries in the region. Also, the borders between countries aren't very secure, so the traffickers can easily smuggle wild animals from

one state into another. Besides, governments' efforts to inform the public about the consequences of illegal wildlife trade aren't very effective, the international campaign about the devastating effects for biodiversity, animals, rural communities and so on could be a good start to inform the local and international audience of the consequences of illegal trade in wildlife. Reviewing penalties relating to the trafficking of wildlife animals should be forcefully implemented as well.

Nevertheless, the regional governments' response to the illegal trade in wildlife has been strengthened, such as the creation of the ASEAN-Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) in 2005 to promote law enforcement. Moreover, in combating the illegal wild animal trade, the role of NGOs is essential as well. Thus, governments should cooperate with domestic and international NGOs and share information and knowledge about illegal wildlife crime.

Not only the law must be respected, but another problem also lies in sociocultural aspects. The law can be relatively easy to change, and countries might have signed the conventions, regulations, and other agreements to respect the wildlife trade and to combat wildlife crime. Still, the cultural and traditional aspects are way harder to change, especially among older generations or among rural populations. Thus, not only regulations should be stricter, but there should also be more educational programs that help people to recognize the problem with the illegal wildlife trade.

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