



Drivers and facilitators of wildlife trafficking



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High-profile law enforcement operations against illegal wildlife trade (IWT), such as Interpol’s Operation Thunderball in July and the arrest of notorious trafficker Moazu Kromah in Uganda in June, have drawn welcome attention to IWT as a financial and organised crime and not only a conservation issue.

Yet in working to strengthen legal frameworks and law enforcement capacity in countries that suffer from high levels of IWT, we must not forget the social drivers and facilitators behind wildlife trafficking – factors that laws alone are powerless to change.

Wildlife trafficking is a lucrative crime...

IWT is sometimes described as a low-risk, high-reward business. In many source and transit countries in Southern and Eastern Africa, for example, rates of detection and arrests are low, prosecutions are rare and penalties are weak even for those caught red-handed.

These low risks are offset against the high prices that traffickers can obtain by selling valuable illegal wildlife products such as ivory, rhino horn and pangolin scales to black markets mainly in Asia.

...yet it's not just about money and the law

A growing body of research supports the idea that behaviour is driven by a complex array of social, cultural and other behavioural factors. Illicit behaviour is thus not only the result of a cost-benefit analysis by individuals seeking personal economic gain. Nor, therefore, will it be solved by laws and law enforcement alone.

International agreements such as CITES, which regulates the global trade in wildlife, along with national efforts to strengthen the enforcement of formal regulations, are necessary but not sufficient. This is because they do not address the underlying social context that motivates individuals to engage in trafficking in the first place.

With a better understanding of these factors, we will be better equipped to design effective interventions that influence the attitudes and behaviours of people directly involved in the early stages of IWT, as well as those who are indifferent or directly support them.

What drives people to engage in wildlife trafficking?

Beyond purely economic factors, our preliminary research indicates three main beliefs that drive and justify individuals' decisions to engage in wildlife crime.

Firstly, that **trafficking engenders wealth and status**. The financial rewards of IWT allow poachers and traders to acquire more wealth than they can access through relying on the formal economy. The money trickles down through social and family networks to benefit the rest of the community. This raises their prestige and status in the community and simultaneously helps to legitimise the illegal behaviour.

Secondly, there is often a belief that **wildlife trafficking is a victimless crime**. In many countries where humans and wild animals live in close proximity, animals are viewed as either sources of food or nuisances that destroy crops and threaten personal security. Widespread human-wildlife conflict can drive people to consider wildlife products as any other kind of commodity.

This legitimises behaviours such as actively engaging in trafficking (on the side of the citizens) or facilitating trafficking by turning a blind eye (on the side of public officials).

Thirdly, members of a community may consider they have a **moral right to appropriate wildlife**. Communities that have lost land to newly created (or colonial-era) safari parks and protected environmental zones may resist legislation protecting wildlife on the grounds that it criminalises a generations-old right to access and use wildlife.

How do socio-economic and political factors play a role?

Communities along the major wildlife trafficking routes in Africa generally suffer from poverty and limited employment opportunities. The constrained socio-economic context can drive otherwise law-abiding individuals, be it members of the community or local public officials, to assist in activities such as moving contraband from point A to point B.

Poverty therefore sets the stage for both poaching and the trafficking of commodities across cities and countries. A thriving supply of illegal wildlife products is the result. Ironically, in demand countries on the other side of the globe, it is the increasing wealth of the middle and upper classes that is helping fuel the demand for these in the first place.

The political context is also key to explaining how wildlife trafficking can take place with impunity. Poor governance, endemic corruption and constrained public institutions in source and transit countries are important facilitators of IWT.

Even more worryingly, there are countless examples of militants and terrorist groups engaging in poaching and wildlife trafficking to fund their operations, from the Lord's Resistance Army to the Janjaweed Arab militia of Sudan.

Drivers and facilitators are intertwined – and we need to understand both

The socio-economic and political context in which IWT takes place increases and facilitates the propensity for individuals to engage in trafficking. Social norms and beliefs help explain the underlying motivations and justifications individuals may adopt to actually engage in trafficking.

We need to understand both a lot better if we want laws and law enforcement to stand a chance of effectively taking down the trafficking networks threatening our endangered animals and global biodiversity.

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