

PM+: EU urged to implement action plan on illegal wildlife trade

Written by Will Travers on 22 April 2015 in Opinion Plus
Opinion Plus

The Born Free Foundation's Will Travers argues that EU policymakers must move quickly to stem the tide of the growing global trade in wildlife trafficking.



Twenty five years ago I joined a throng of young activists, conservationists, investigators and journalists outside the meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) at the Lausanne Conference Centre in Switzerland, and waited for the verdict. Would the world ban the international, commercial ivory trade - or blink?

The decision to ban the trade was made, and I hoped it might also be the prelude to better times for not only elephants but other iconic species such as tigers and rhinos, and less well known animals like pangolins and dwarf geckos.

Initially the signs were good but sadly there has been an explosion in wildlife trafficking in recent years. In some years more than 30,000 African elephants have been slaughtered for their ivory.

In 2014 more than 1200 rhinos were killed in South Africa alone for their horns. Less than 3500 tigers remain in the wild, down from over 100,000 a century or so ago.

Whichever way you look at it, the situation is deeply troubling.

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The demand for wildlife products has increased massively, particularly in China, where new levels of personal wealth and a rapidly increasing population have given hundreds of millions of people buying power that enables them to purchase previously out of reach products, from cars to computers.

Many wildlife products are now within their grasp. The 2008 sale of 105 tonnes of ivory, sanctioned through CITES in an attempt to flood the market and reduce poaching levels, had the opposite effect, weakening the 1989 ban with disastrous consequences for elephants.

Rhino horn, tiger and lion bones, pangolin parts and many other wildlife products are coveted in Asia for their perceived medicinal properties, and many such products have also become prestigious status symbols.

The wildlife trade has long been seen as a high-value, low-risk pursuit, and this has attracted well-coordinated transnational criminal syndicates. Links with militia groups have led to suspicions that the proceeds of wildlife trafficking may even be used to fund terrorist activities.

The trade not only affects the welfare of individual animals, the future of populations and the survival prospects of entire species, but is also threatening the economic, social and political stability of many communities.

The EU is a significant source, transit point and major market for trafficked wildlife. According to the European commission, some 2500 seizures of illegal wildlife or wildlife products are made across the EU every year, undoubtedly the tip of a very large iceberg.

While some of these seizures are products in transit, for many the EU is their final destination. They include high-value items like ivory and rhino horn, bush meat, and live animals for the exotic pet trade.

The EU is one of the world's most influential political and trading blocks and a major financial contributor to development projects across the world. Currently, funds committed to tackling the illegal wildlife trade represent a tiny fraction of member countries' international development budgets. The UK for example has given £13m so far, yet its overseas aid budget stands at £12.2bn.

The Netherlands, France and Germany are all contributors. The EU has made a multi-million euro contribution. But more substantial resources, carefully applied, can help reduce wildlife trafficking, while bringing life-changing social, economic and conservation benefits to some of the world's most threatened species and disenfranchised human communities.

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The EU has long been at the forefront of promoting environmental protection and animal welfare, as well as upholding CITES and other international agreements, law enforcement, good governance and the rights of vulnerable communities.

Indeed the EU has often gone beyond its international commitments and implemented stricter protection measures for vulnerable species. European citizens are rightly proud of this tradition. Now is the time for Europe's institutions to make its citizens proud again.

Therefore, as president of the Born Free Foundation, I am asking the European commission to respond positively to calls from MEPs, through their resolution on wildlife crime, and both create and implement a comprehensive EU action plan on illegal wildlife trade.

Born Free is willing to work with both the commission and parliament on the development of the action plan and, as presented in our new 'End wildlife trafficking', report has put forward constructive recommendations to ensure the EU recognises wildlife trafficking as serious crime; harmonises its efforts to tackle wildlife trafficking across and within its own borders; and ensures its member states have the necessary expertise and resources they need.

The EU should also apply resources and build capacity to help non-EU countries meet the challenges they face. In particular, the EU should utilise its influence through its development aid programmes and diplomatic missions to ensure other countries prioritise wildlife crime.

Finally the action plan needs to explicitly include measures to address the welfare of live animals in trade.

Twenty five years ago I was in Switzerland. This week I'm in Brussels, asking if Europe's institutions will tackle perhaps the greatest threat to the conservation of biodiversity of our time - a threat entirely of our making.

The time to act is now. There is, quite literally, no time to waste.

About the author

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