


SATURDAY STAR / NEWS



Tanned 'Crocodylus niloticus' skins seized by Border Force in England in this photo provided by Interpol last year. The World Customs Organization and Interpol said they conducted 1 828 seizures across 109 countries in June 2019 and seized nearly 10 000 live turtles and tortoises, 23 live apes, 30 live big cats, hundreds of pieces of elephant tusk, half a ton of ivory and five rhino horns. Interpol via AP

Wildlife trafficking soars as illegal dealers use unchecked hubs in southern Africa.

By Sheree Bega  3h ago



Guyanese finches are almost always smuggled in hair curlers from Guyana to New York, while pig-nosed turtles are trafficked in high amounts, declared as a marine species, and flown from a regional Indonesian airport to Jakarta before flying to China.

The greatest variation in wildlife trafficking in air transport doesn't necessarily occur between regions but between the species or wildlife products trafficked, the specific methods used with the routes taken by wildlife traffickers heavily dependent on wildlife type, says the Runway to Extinction report: Wildlife Trafficking in the Air Transport Sector, released this week by Usaid's Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (Routes) Partnership, which includes the Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS), the International Air Transport Association, wildlife trade monitoring network Traffic and environment group, the WWF.

The report reveals in 2019, a staggering 1 million wildlife and wildlife products were seized at airports around the world – nearly half from checked baggage. Globally, more than one wildlife seizure was reported at an airport every day last year – the total figure of 400 airport seizures is the highest recorded, according to the partnership. Wildlife trafficking is global in scope and “bleeding” into countries in every continent except Antarctica.

“Once thought of as largely confined to Africa and Asia, wildlife trafficking has become increasingly prevalent all over the world, now ranking behind drugs, human and arms trafficking as the most valuable type of international organised crime by estimated annual value.”

Its nefarious rise has been supported by communications and transport, which have brought once isolated source regions in remote areas closer to large demand markets in North America, Europe and Asia. The proliferation of air transport has exacerbated the problem, putting wildlife at risk like never before.

“The negative side effects of this economic progress are immediately evident in the substantial population decline of vulnerable species over the past few decades alone. If wildlife trafficking continues, unabated at this scale, regional ecosystems face not just species extinction but complete collapse.” But there is a sliver lining. “As wildlife traffickers have come to increasingly rely on income derived from wildlife native to other world regions, they have made themselves dependent on the international systems of transportation that made their illegal trade possible in the first place.

“Implementing preventative measures against wildlife traffickers using international transport systems could increase the cost associated with trafficking wildlife to such an extent that traffickers may abandon the attempt.” The report examines the trends, transit routes, and trafficking methods used by wildlife smugglers exploiting the aviation industry in the Americas, Asia, Europe, Middle East and Oceania.

It singles out 10 countries for wildlife trafficking instances in air transport: China, Ethiopia, Indonesia, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, India and Philippines. Wildlife trafficking activity in the past three years has seemed to cluster slightly in certain countries and areas, such as Mexico, Europe, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, Southern and Eastern Africa, and virtually all of East and Southeast Asia.

China, in particular, seems to count hundreds of trafficking instances flying into and out of the country. Understanding how wildlife trafficking moves through the aviation industry is “absolutely essential” to counteracting it. “Knowing what generally moves through a specific area can help customs and enforcement target the most relevant transport methods used for wildlife trafficking in their airport.”

Between 2016 and 2018, checked luggage was by far the most common transport method used by traffickers – rhino horn, in particular, is generally trafficked in checked luggage while ivory, totoaba bladders, turtles, birds in cages and sedated live animals also “frequently move in checked luggage”.

More ivory by weight is moved in air freight although recent shifts in wildlife product processing towards source regions, likely intended to make trafficking attempts harder to identify “suggest seizures of raw ivory in air freight shipments may decrease while seizures of worked wildlife products in luggage and passenger carry-on items could rise”.

Wildlife trafficking can be split in two: wildlife product trafficking (ivory, rhino horn, pangolin and pangolin products), which generally flows from Africa to Asia in a “broad supply chain that narrows substantially as it approaches its end” and live animal trafficking (reptiles, birds, marine species and mammals), “widely dispersed through the world without a clearly definable supply chain”.

Africa’s biodiversity makes it “an unusually plentiful source region for traffickers targeting everything from elephants to lions, European eels and abalone”. The report highlights countries that have either one or both of the following: significant remaining elephant, rhino, pangolin, bird, mammal or reptile populations (South Africa, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar) or international airports with many connecting flight routes to demand regions. Between 2016 and 2018, Kenya counted the most wildlife seizures of any country according to the C4ADS Air Seizure Database.

“Jomo Kenyatta Airport is a major hub between flight routes originating in Africa and destined for the Middle East and Asia and Kenya enforcement’s awareness of the prevalence of wildlife trafficking in their airports. “OR Tambo Airport counts dozens of connecting flights a day to the Middle East and Southeast Asia, providing traffickers in the region with a gateway to demand markets in other world regions. The airport’s geographic location and flight routes mean it often acts as a funnel for a significant amount of wildlife trafficking leaving southern Africa.

“Both Kenya and South Africa appear as two of the most prominent wildlife trafficking countries, at least in part due to their role as countries with common transit airports.” Seizure rates in Kenya and South Africa may have outpaced seizure rates in other common transit countries because Kenyan and South African officials, noting the high numbers of wildlife trafficking instances leaving their airports only to be seized elsewhere, have dedicated resources to screening passengers and cargo on departure and in transit.

To address the difficulty of manually screening high volumes of passengers and shipments effectively and quickly, enforcement agencies in both countries have chosen to rely on sniffer dogs. Europe, the Middle East and East Africa all emerged as clear transit regions for wildlife trafficking instances leaving Africa. “Within each area, certain airports stood out as particularly important, such as Jomo Kenyatta airport in Kenya, Bole in Ethiopia, Dubai in the UAE, Doha in Qatar, Charles de Gaulle Airport in France, and Istanbul Ataturk in Turkey.

“Each of these airports was used consistently by traffickers.” However, some common transit hubs visible in the Africa routes map were used more frequently by specific types of wildlife traffickers. “Smuggled reptiles leaving Madagascar almost always flew through either Jomo Kenyatta airport, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam airport in Mauritius or Roland Garros airport on Reunion Island on the way to Southeast and East Asia.

“Similarly, OR Tambo airport was clearly a key transit hub for rhino horn leaving other Southern African countries, such as Namibia, Mozambique, Eswatini, and Zambia and destined for China.”

Risk factor:

The illegal wildlife trade is a risk factor for the spread of zoonotic diseases, like Covid-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says three out of every four new or emerging infectious diseases originate in animals. Many species seized in air transport - live birds, reptiles and mammals - are high risk carriers and may end up in illegal or unregulated markets.

“By training staff to detect and report wildlife trafficking and working with enforcement agencies to intercept wildlife traffickers, airports and airlines can help strengthen their operations and play a role in reducing future outbreaks,” says Michelle Owen, Routeslead at Traffic International.

Africa is a prominent source region for ivory, rhino horn, pangolin, marine species (abalone, European eels) and mammals (cheetah cubs, lion claws).

Kenya, in particular, has displayed a unique ability to seize trafficked wildlife in transit by relying in part on teams of sniffer dogs that reduce screening times while improving screening effectiveness

Ivory seizures in air transport have slightly decreased by volume while rhino horn seizures have increased between 2016 and 2018.

Checked luggage trafficking instances may become more prominent over time if wildlife product processing moves closer to origin countries.

Origins:

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◆ Ivory seizures in air transport have slightly decreased by volume while rhino horn seizures have increased between 2016 and 2018. ◆ Checked luggage trafficking instances may become more prominent over time if wildlife product processing moves closer to origin countries.

Trade ban could be 'damaging'

There is a need to address all the root causes of zoonotic disease emergence as opposed to taking a "narrow focus" on wildlife trade, says the Oxford Martin Programme on illegal wildlife trade in a position statement on managing wildlife trade in the context of Covid-19 and future zoonotic pandemics.

Last week, more than 241 conservation and animal welfare organisations urged the World Health Organization to recommend that governments permanently outlaw wildlife markets and for it to end its support of traditional Chinese medicine. Many conservation and animal welfare organisations are calling for long-term bans on wildlife trade and wildlife consumption to reduce the risk of future zoonotic pandemics.

"These calls can seem like (an) opportunistic use of Covid-19 to further their own objectives, which are only tangentially related to public health," said the position statement. The programme recognises that trade in some wild species represents a risk to public health.

"However, we express concern at the dominant discourse, which focuses solely on the links between zoonoses' emergence and wildlife trade, and caution against a blanket approach to wildlife trade regulation.

"Instead, we advocate for a more nuanced and evidence-based approach, which could better serve both people and wildlife. There is a need to address all the root causes of zoonotic disease emergence, as opposed to taking a narrow focus on wildlife trade."

Available evidence, the programme says, indicates that the wildlife trade is one of a growing number of anthropogenic drivers, such as industrialised livestock farming, agricultural intensification and land use change, particularly in tropical regions where wildlife biodiversity is high.

These practices lead to wildlife-livestock-human interfaces and declines in biodiversity, both of which increase disease transmission and are further exacerbated by climate change and global supply chains.

"Policy interventions need to address all these root causes if they are to be successful in reducing the transmission of zoonotic diseases globally. "While some organisations are claiming that wildlife trade should be banned on public health grounds, there remains no conclusive evidence about the relative impact of banning all wildlife trade in preventing the emergence of zoonotic diseases in the future..."

"The statement says that immediate crisis management responses to the Covid-19 outbreak such as closing China's urban wildlife markets are warranted. "However, longer term policy change... should not necessarily be based on extreme cases." Banning all wildlife trade could damage livelihoods and food security of millions of people, threaten biodiversity and drive further land use intensification for agricultural and livestock production.

"Conversely, maintaining well regulated, legal trade for species that can be safely and sustainably harvested can help to secure wildlife habitat in some areas, thereby avoiding the very land use changes that drive emergence of zoonoses. "The wildlife trade can be conceptualised by people living in Europe and North America as something that other people do, which makes it easier to call for draconian action.

“The real issue is the way that we use natural resources – whether this be our use of agricultural products such as soy... our production and consumption of livestock, or our use of wildlife.... Viewing the emergence of Covid-19 as an issue that has been created ‘over there’ absolves us of the need to re-evaluate our own consumption.”

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