

SATURDAY STAR / NEWS

File image.

An increase in poaching expected as criminal networks try to take advantage of lockdown

By sheree bega  May 5, 2020

Poaching incidents could increase during the lockdown period as criminal networks try to take advantage of the closing of parks, perceiving a reduced presence of law enforcement now dealing with the Covid-19 emergency.

“We are in receipt of intelligence that known poaching organisers operating across southern Africa intend taking advantage of the current situation,” said Sarah Stoner, director of intelligence at the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC).

Last week, it released its report, "Rapid assessment of the impact of Covid-19", on wildlife trafficking from the trade between January and April 2020.

It shows that the trafficking continues despite restrictions, albeit at a reduced scale, and that high-level criminal networks are actively seeking workarounds from the current blockages, to resume operations to previous levels.

Border closures and travel restrictions are having a significant impact on wildlife trafficking dynamics, especially in Asia, where traders face challenges to access Chinese markets and sell stock.

In the past four months, the WJC said, border closures, travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders had had an immediate effect on people's lives and businesses, and "organised crime networks had not been immune".

"The WJC observed underlying changes occurring in the criminal dynamics of wildlife trafficking, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and several of these appear to have intensified during the crisis.

"This includes a somewhat waning interest in ivory among brokers, which may be partly due to the ivory trade ban in China and a declining trend in wholesale prices of raw ivory since 2015."

Ivory smuggling into Asia continues, even though traders struggle to sell the stock, resulting in owners stockpiling large quantities of product that they are cautious to move across Asian borders.

"Pangolin scales are holding their value, and retail prices in Asia appear to have risen since 2017. The WJC's analysis of seizures from 2015-2019 shows an increasing prevalence of mixed shipments of ivory and pangolin scales moving from Africa to Asia and, together with the growing difficulties in ivory trade, it is possible that pangolin scales could be substituting ivory in the illegal market in China."

The WJC said even in the first few months of 2020, as Covid-19 was spreading, four Vietnamese suspects had offered its operatives 22600kg of pangolin scales.

"During this period, several Vietnamese traders also expressed difficulties with smuggling wildlife into China due to extended border checks and travel restrictions, and spoke of their desperation to offload large quantities of stock, often at discounted prices."

The WJC has also observed changes in transportation methods of wildlife contraband.

"Security measures on air transport have impacted criminal dynamics, as traffickers are not guaranteed that the shipment, or courier, will arrive at their port of choice.

"Sea and road transport remain as alternative options; products are still arriving or due to arrive through sea, as some may have been sent pre-lockdown, as seizures have illustrated," it said.

It is clear that Covid-19 prevention measures have affected wildlife trafficking operations, said Stoner.

"It is likely that the current lull is temporary, as brokers intend returning their operations to previous levels as soon as possible. There is an expectation that the movement of high-value wildlife commodities will resume, even at intensified levels, once restrictions are lifted."

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