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Ivory, scales, tropical wood - smuggling protected species is booming

The prohibited trade in protected animals and plants remains a billion dollar business, according to a UN report. In addition to the elephant, rhinoceros and tiger, the pangolin is currently on the collar. In the meantime, this was also suspected as a corona virus host.



Customs officers show confiscated elephant teeth. Photo: Ronald Kabuubi, AP, dpa

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By Christina Peters, dpa

Vienna (dpa) - The pangolin is reminiscent of an anteater disguised as a pine cone. His flesh and scales are coveted - but forbidden - by humans, which brings the insectivore a sad record: it is probably the most smuggled mammal in the world. Due to the drop in ivory prices, professional smugglers are also switching to animals that are particularly sought after as medicinal products in Asia - from 2014 to 2018, the number of horn scales that customs investigators worldwide found online increased tenfold. This emerges from the report on illegal trade in wild animals and plants by the UN Office for Combating Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which was presented in Vienna on Friday.

Tropical wood and ivory each made up almost a third of the total value of all contraband discovered from 2014 to 2018 from nature. The pangolin trade accounted for around 14 percent and the horns of rhinos around 12 percent. Rare turtles, tigers and eels are also important black market goods.

The "World Wildlife Crime Report", the first edition of which was published four years ago, is based on data on seizures reported by 149 states, supplemented by detailed research on the illegal business with protected animals and plants. Around 6,000 species have been found in customs finds since 1999. The suspects came from around 150 countries.

"Wildlife crime triggers a vicious cycle that jeopardizes our health, security and development," said UNODC director Ghada Waly when the report was released. "Cross-border networks of organized crime are making profits on crimes with wild species, but the poor are paying the price."

With a view to the corona pandemic, the experts warn that the exploitation of nature is not just climate and biodiversity, but also threatened human health. Almost three quarters of all new infectious diseases in the past few decades have spread from animals to humans, even according to the current state of knowledge, the novel corona virus.

A few months ago, the pangolin, also known as pangolin, had just come into discussion as a possible intermediate host of the Sars-CoV-2 pathogen: in samples from animals that were smuggled alive in Asia for their meat, researchers had extreme human viruses. Similar pathogens were found, similar to those found in bats.

In the meantime, it no longer looks like Sars-CoV-2 has jumped directly from the pangolin to humans, said wildlife researcher Stefan Prost from the Senckenberg Society for Natural Research in Frankfurt. At least one stage of development in the virus is missing. However, possible intermediate hosts are pangolins. Wildlife markets in particular offer the virus ideal conditions for jumping from species to species and ultimately jumping on humans.

Prost's team also recently saw a massive increase in smuggled pangolins. "In my view, the reason is that pangolins are much easier to catch than elephants and have much less punishment," he said. The trade is extremely lucrative - and has only recently been regulated in the highest protection level.

In fact, the UNODC researchers are observing that the ivory and rhinoceros horn market appears to be flattening in recent years. Record finds of ivory and rhino horns in 2019 therefore indicated a sale rather than new poaching, it said. According to the 2018 report, poachers in Kenya only received \$ 55 per kilo of ivory; It was \$ 148 in 2014. However, the totals remain staggering: Experts estimate that the ivory trade is worth around \$ 400 million annually, and that rhinos make \$ 230 million annually.

Nonetheless, government efforts seem to be having an impact, according to the UNODC. The drop in ivory prices is at least partly due to the fact that both the United States and China have finally banned ivory trade in recent years.

Other species that have been strictly protected for many years continue to be traded cheerfully despite the prohibitions. For example, the trade in tiger products, especially bones, sought after in traditional Chinese medicine, has been at a low level, but has increased in recent years - increasingly as a status symbol instead of as a remedy, the report says.

Deforestation, which often ends up in legal trade with veiled origins, continues to be a major problem. Around four million trees of a protected rosewood species were exported from Nigeria in 2017 alone. The protective mechanisms are constantly lagging behind the agile trade routes of organized crime: As soon as one species of tropical wood is upgraded in species protection, it is said that the next species will be cut down immediately to replace the first.

