

ANIMALS

Wildlife seizures are down—and an illicit trade boom may be coming

Analysis for Nat Geo shows pangolin, rhino, ivory seizures during COVID-19 had steep decline.

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A Temminck's ground pangolin searches for a meal of ants at a rehabilitation center in Zimbabwe.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT STIRTON, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The amount of elephant ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin scales intercepted by authorities in 2020 was far less than compared with the previous five years, according to analysis for *National Geographic* by the Centre for Advanced Defence Studies (C4ADS). The coronavirus pandemic likely dampened both the ability of wildlife

Both the number of seizures and weight of seizures plummeted, which suggests that even if the wildlife parts were transported between Africa and Asia in smaller batches, the overall level of their trafficking between the continents dropped. Nonetheless, some wildlife experts note that the online trade has remained robust throughout the pandemic and that poaching in some locations has actually increased.

Assessing seizures of these three wildlife products isn't representative of what's been happening with illicit trade in all wildlife, says Faith Hornor a C4ADS program manager, who led the analysis, but it's a good indicator of intercontinental wildlife trade trends between Africa and Asia, where those three commodities are particularly valued.

Pangolin scales and rhino horn are used in traditional medicine, primarily in China and Vietnam, and both ivory and rhino horn is in demand in China and elsewhere for carvings. According to C4ADS, global seizures of ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin scales averaged almost 530 a year from 2015 through 2019. In 2020, there were 466 seizures, down from a high of 964 in 2019. The tallies represent all incidents recorded by customs officials or described in media reports in any of 15 languages.

Yet a recent surprising incident in Nigeria, a wildlife trafficking hub known for being the [source of many Africa-linked pangolin seizures](#), may be a sign of what's ahead as pandemic-related restrictions lift. In January, Nigerian customs officials in Lagos were inspecting a 20-foot shipping container marked as "furniture supplies." Hidden behind a load of timber, they found 162 sacks of pangolin scales, weighing more than 19,000 pounds and representing thousands of killed pangolins.

Another 57 sacks contained various other wildlife parts, including elephant ivory and lion bones, an increasingly popular substitute in traditional Chinese medicine for now hard-to-find tiger bones. The shipment was bound for Haiphong, Vietnam.

"It's a snapshot of what's to come" as travel resumes, says Steve Carmody, chief of investigations at the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC), a nonprofit based in The Hague, Netherlands, that works to expose criminal networks. The incident also seems to confirm what illegal traders have been telling WJC's undercover agents—that they've been stockpiling wildlife products because of disruptions caused by the pandemic.

"We know traffickers are stockpiling products not just in Africa, but also in Asia—in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—in huge quantities," says Carmody, who was not involved in the C4ADS analysis. The worry now, he adds, is that with increased flights and other travel, they'll quickly sell stored contraband, and pent-up demand will fuel an explosion of animal poaching.

In 2020, it's possible that traffickers divided some shipments into smaller bundles to evade detection. But if overall volumes were similar—just parcelled out in smaller individual shipments—there likely would have been an uptick in seizures, even with some reduction in law enforcement capacity, Hornor says.

shipments has generally decreased during the past six years, there was a substantial, 72 percent, drop in 2020.

What seizure data reveal

Wildlife trafficking isn't invariably down, and some researchers caution against drawing definitive conclusions based on seizure data alone.

In some locations, inspectors may have been diverted to other COVID-related tasks, limiting their capacity to detect or report illicit shipments, says Chris Shepherd, executive director of Monitor, a nonprofit that seeks to end illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade. "There are a number of reasons why the decline in reported cases has happened, and more research into this is needed."

Some researchers report an increase in other indicators of wildlife crime, including poaching numbers and online sales of animals or their parts, underscoring the difficulty of drawing conclusions from seizure data alone.

During 2020, "we didn't see any disruption in the size of the online markets, which is where a lot of these deals get brokered," says Gretchen Peters, the founder of the Alliance to Counter Crime Online (ACCO), a nonprofit network of researchers combating organized crime and monitoring advertising of illicit goods on social media platforms and [e-commerce sites](#). She adds that there also hasn't been "any slowdown in the number of criminals offering wildlife. None of my members reported anybody talking about difficulties getting supply."

Patricia Tricorache, an illegal wildlife trade expert and member of ACCO, says her tracking suggests that illicit online advertisements for exotic pets such as [cheetahs](#) boomed during 2020. Cheetahs, she says, typically are transported from Ethiopia, northern Kenya, or Somaliland by boat to Yemen and then taken overland to buyers in the Gulf states. Online offerings and seizures of those animals grew collectively by about 40 percent last year, she estimates. (C4ADS does not track land-based seizures of cheetahs.)

There were also signs that the illegal trapping and killing of wildlife for sale as bushmeat and for local consumption continued—or intensified—in 2020 in Uganda, [Madagascar](#), and other countries as their tourism industries collapsed and food insecurity and poverty worsened. Seizure data also don't account for this trend.



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Meanwhile, other poaching numbers, also not reflected in seizure data, have been mixed. Namibia documented a steady decrease in poached rhinos, and Kenya reported no poaching of the animals in 2020. But in South Africa, where country-wide lockdowns reduced wildlife poaching initially, nearly 400 rhinos were killed for their horns in 2020.

What the pandemic has revealed

Last month, the United Nations Development Program noted in a new [report](#) that the pandemic has forced wildlife traffickers to rely more on maritime cargo shipping because of “disruptions to airline travel and fewer opportunities for smuggling on passenger ships.”

Nevertheless, Hornor says, C4ADS found that busts of maritime shipments of pangolin, rhino horn, and ivory fell from nearly 4 percent of all seizures between 2015 and 2019 to less than 2 percent of seizures in 2020.

Carmody says law enforcement agencies were able to gather new intelligence about wildlife traffickers during the pandemic that may aid their future detection work. Traders have had to find new customers for their illicit products, and that’s given officials and groups such as the Wildlife Justice Commission insights into their criminal networks—information he says they hope to act on in coming months.

“Law enforcement doesn’t end with a seizure of a container,” Hornor says. What’s also needed are broader investigations into criminal networks and their bosses, leading to arrests and convictions. That, she says, “will have a more systemic impact on dismantling these operations in the long run.”

Wildlife Watch is an investigative reporting project between National Geographic Society and National Geographic Partners focusing on wildlife crime and exploitation. Read more [Wildlife Watch stories here](#), and learn more about National Geographic Society’s nonprofit mission at nationalgeographic.org. Send tips, feedback, and story ideas to NGP.WildlifeWatch@natgeo.com.