

Technology, Intelligence and Cooperation: Advancing the Fight Against Transnational Wildlife Crime

Chengdu, China — 11 June 2026

Wildlife crime doesn't stop at borders.

Concealed elephant ivory, hundreds of turtles hidden in shipments, and tonnes of illegal timber can all be part of wider criminal chains. These crimes threaten species, weaken ecosystems, and undermine the rule of law. They're also becoming harder to detect, with criminal networks using more complex routes, methods, and financial systems to move illegal products across countries.

That's why cooperation matters.

As wildlife trafficking and other forms of cross-border smuggling become more sophisticated globally, law enforcement agencies across Asia-Pacific are working to stay one step ahead.

From 9 to 11 June 2026, the Mid-term Review Meeting of Operation Mekong Dragon VIII (OMD VIII) was held in Chengdu, China, focusing on emerging trends in wildlife and drug smuggling and opportunities for stronger joint operations across borders.



Seized elephant ivory highlights the ongoing threat of illegal wildlife trade to elephants and the need for coordinated enforcement.

Hosted by the Anti-Smuggling Bureau of the General Administration of China Customs (ASB, GACC), the meeting brought together 50 in-person delegates from 27 member states and regions and two law enforcement authorities, alongside 13 online participants.

The event provided a platform for participants to review progress under OMD VIII, share enforcement achievements, and discuss how cooperation can be strengthened as criminal networks adapt.

OMD was jointly launched by Chinese Customs and Vietnamese Customs in 2018, carried out with support from international organizations including the World Customs Organization Regional Intelligence Liaison Office for Asia and the Pacific (WCO RILO AP) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The initiative's membership has grown from the original six to 27 states and regions. It has evolved into a vital cooperation platform in the Asia-Pacific region for combating cross-border smuggling of narcotics and wildlife-related crimes.



Ling Xu, Director of TRAFFIC China, said:

As OMD continues to gain momentum, we are pleased to see the regional law enforcement cooperation network expand steadily and cross-border joint enforcement mechanisms grow increasingly mature. This reflects the shared commitment of all participating members to tackling transnational wildlife crime through collective action. Looking ahead, TRAFFIC will continue to support law enforcement agencies across the region by strengthening capacity building and fostering innovation in technology-enabled enforcement. In particular, we will promote the application of artificial intelligence, big data analytics, supply chain traceability, and anti-money laundering tools to enhance the effectiveness of combating illegal wildlife trade. Through these efforts, TRAFFIC remains fully committed to safeguarding regional ecological security and contributing to global biodiversity conservation."

During the event, Mr. Wuqin Lü, Director General of the ASB, GACC pointed out that cross-border smuggling crimes and money laundering activities are becoming increasingly sophisticated. China put forward four cooperation proposals as follows:

- Establishing a more efficient and smooth intelligence sharing mechanism;
- Stepping up law enforcement cooperation on capital tracing and cross-border anti-money laundering;
- Advancing technology empowerment and law enforcement capacity building;
- Refining joint operation mechanisms under bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

Participants agreed that the challenge is no longer limited to one commodity, one route or one country. The smuggling of endangered species, narcotics and tobacco is increasingly connected with money laundering and other serious crimes. Responding to this requires trust, shared intelligence and coordinated action between enforcement agencies.

Since its launch eight years ago, OMD has grown into a key cooperation platform for regional customs and law enforcement authorities. Over that period, participating parties have reported seizures of more than 630 tonnes and nearly 60,000 pieces of endangered wild fauna, flora and their products.

These seizures show both the pressure facing wildlife and the progress that coordinated enforcement can deliver. By intercepting illegal trade, authorities are helping to protect biodiversity, strengthen public security, build intelligence, expose trafficking routes, and weaken the criminal networks driving wildlife crime.

The cases presented at the meeting show how varied and persistent illegal wildlife trade remains across the region. By April 2026, OMD VIII had recorded 47 wildlife seizure cases, including 44 involving animals and three involving plants. Saiga antelope, pangolins, rhino, birds, giant clams, lizards, turtles and tortoises, and other endangered species and derivatives all featured in the cases — a reminder that traffickers continue to target wildlife in many forms, across many routes.



Sea turtles displayed for sale as decorative items, highlighting how demand for wildlife products can threaten protected species and drive illegal trade.

The findings underline the need for faster intelligence sharing, stronger coordination and practical tools that help enforcement agencies identify species, trace supply chains and follow illicit financial flows.

As a long-standing key technical partner supporting China's wildlife law enforcement cooperation, TRAFFIC shared at the meeting the law enforcement toolkit jointly developed with China Customs, capacity-building programmes carried out over recent years, and the Europe-China and Asia-Africa law enforcement exchange platforms it has helped to establish.

TRAFFIC also elaborated on its approaches to trade data monitoring powered by artificial intelligence, identification and traceability tools for timber, shark fins and other commodities, as well as anti-money laundering training courses and research findings



Such tools and resources can assist customs law enforcement authorities in strengthening their capabilities in species identification, supply chain tracing, risk early warning and finance investigation, thereby further boosting the efficiency and accuracy of law enforcement operations.

By combining international cooperation with practical enforcement tools and emerging technology, OMD VIII is helping build a stronger regional response to the criminal networks driving illegal wildlife trade. For species under pressure, and for the ecosystems and communities that depend on them, coordinated action across borders remains essential.

