

Illegal Wildlife Trade Tied to Drugs, Arms, and Human Trafficking

November 21, 2025

3 min read

Criminals around the world are increasingly mixing trade in illegal animal parts with trafficking of arms, humans, and more—even exchanging wildlife for drugs

By [Rachel Nuwer](#) edited by [Andrea Thompson](#)



A view of elephant tusks after being seized from wildlife traffickers, gathered to be destroyed in Abuja, Nigeria on January 9, 2024.

Emmanuel Osodi/Anadolu via Getty Images

Join Our Community of Science Lovers!

Enter your email

I agree my information will be processed in accordance with the Scientific American and Springer Nature Limited [Privacy Policy](#). We leverage third party services to both verify and deliver email. By providing your email address, you also consent to having the email address shared with third parties for those purposes.

In 2021 investigators in South Africa received a tip that a Vietnamese organized crime ring was operating out of a local farm. When they raided the property, they found more than 800 pounds of lion “cake”—a traditional medicine product made by boiling lion bones to remove the gelatin from joints. The investigators also found 13 gallons of opium that the suspects had been adding to their lion cake.

[Illegal wildlife trade](#) is a multibillion-dollar industry carried out by organized criminal gangs with operations spanning continents. Now new research in the *Journal of Economic Criminology* confirms that those same gangs are also frequently [involved in other forms of criminal activity](#), including trafficking in drugs, arms, people, stolen vehicles, mined resources, counterfeit goods and human body parts.

“We’re seeing criminal networks around the world being more adaptable and interconnected and almost commodity agnostic,” says study lead author Michelle Anagnostou, a University of Oxford researcher of illegal wildlife trade who conducted the research while a PhD student at the University of Waterloo in Canada. This points to the need for “a comprehensive organized crime approach to trafficking activities as a whole, with less focus on the commodity being trafficked,” she says.

On supporting science journalism

If you're enjoying this article, consider supporting our award-winning journalism by [subscribing](#). By purchasing a subscription you are helping to ensure the future of impactful stories about the discoveries and ideas shaping our world today.

Experts in [wildlife crime](#) have long suspected a link with other kinds of criminality, but the new findings provide robust evidence that confirms that connection and elucidates the many forms it takes. Anagnostou carried out 112 interviews with sources in South Africa, Hong Kong and Canada who deal directly with [crime](#), including wildlife officers, national and local police officers, customs agents, intelligence analysts, and experts in [organized crime](#), money laundering and drugs.

The findings revealed criminal overlap that took a multitude of forms. In some cases, cartels that specialized in drugs, gold, diamonds or human trafficking opportunistically added wildlife goods such as [rhino horn](#), rare succulents or bear gallbladders to their dealings; in other cases, wildlife specialists expanded to drugs, stolen goods or sex trafficking. Wildlife at times was used to barter for drugs, too—for example, abalone was traded for methamphetamine and sturgeon exchanged for heroin. Anagnostou also heard of drug traffickers who protected their stash with illegal pet lions or tigers and people who used illegal arms to poach animals. Additionally, criminal bosses sometimes exploited people through forced labor to extract illegal goods from the field, including rhino horn, elk, ginseng, sea cumpers and harp seal oil.

These interconnections show that “the previous long-standing approach of countering each type of organized crime separately is no longer sufficient,” Anagnostou says. “By working separately and not working with each other across units, the bigger picture is missed. Bridging this requires sharing intelligence, data, joint task forces, international cooperation that is not limited to certain illegal commodities, [and] even more coordinated legal strategies.”

“It took years of persistent lobbying, backed up by evidence, to persuade the mandated authorities that illegal wildlife trade was actually being perpetrated by organized criminal networks,” says Mary Rice, executive director of the nonprofit Environmental Investigation Agency. Generating “acceptance and acknowledgment” that wildlife crime also frequently converges with other forms of organized crime is the next step in that conversation, she says, and something that the new study could help with.

It’s Time to Stand Up for Science

If you enjoyed this article, I’d like to ask for your support. Scientific American has served as an advocate for science and industry for 180 years, and right now may be the most critical moment in that two-century history.

I've been a Scientific American subscriber since I was 12 years old, and it helped shape the way I look at the world. SciAm always educates and delights me, and inspires a sense of awe for our vast, beautiful universe. I hope it does that for you, too.

If you [subscribe to Scientific American](#), you help ensure that our coverage is centered on meaningful research and discovery; that we have the resources to report on the decisions that threaten labs across the U.S.; and that we support both budding and working scientists at a time when the value of science itself too often goes unrecognized.

In return, you get essential news, [captivating podcasts](#), brilliant infographics, [can't-miss newsletters](#), must-watch videos, [challenging games](#), and the science world's best writing and reporting. You can even [gift someone a subscription](#).

There has never been a more important time for us to stand up and show why science matters. I hope you'll support us in that mission.



Thank you,

David M. Ewalt, Editor in Chief, Scientific American
[Subscribe](#)