

The Asian illegal wildlife trade, a summary of challenges, actors and potential collaboration

- Complementary study to the “Mapping of actors to combat illegal trade of flora and fauna”



Chinese pangolin, the world's most trafficked mammal. Photo: Naveen Pandey

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Sida's Helpdesk for Environment and Climate Change is a government agency collaboration between the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), University of Gothenburg (GU) and Sida to promote enhanced integration of environmental issues and perspectives in Swedish development cooperation.

Summary

- The overall objective of this assignment has been to identify actors in Asia that work to combat illegal trade of flora (including timber) and fauna. This is done by describing i) briefly the field of illegal trade with flora and fauna in Asia; ii) the problems and challenges to prevent illegal trade of wildlife in Asia; iii) the actors in the field of illegal trade of flora and fauna in Asia; and iv) potential entry points for support and collaborations.
- The assignment is an extension and complement to the report “*Mapping of actors to combat illegal trade of flora and fauna – The global and African illegal wildlife trade, a summary of challenges, actors and potential collaboration*” (hereafter the Global and African Mapping) delivered to Sida in May 2022. Therefore this report is considered a “sister-report” and preferable to be read together with the Global and African Mapping to be fully comprehensive with the overall picture that is provided.
- The study can only be seen as a snapshot of illegal wildlife trade challenges, actors and intervention gaps of interventions in Asia. The study relies on available information on the public domain, e.g. reports, scientific material and websites. Thus, for most of the publically available information used in the report, the Helpdesk has not verified the statements through third/independent parties although some crosschecking has taken place by using a variety of sources.
- The limitation of data gathering is a substantial obstacle regarding illegal wildlife trade. It is a challenge to access reliable figures for the value of the illegal wildlife trade. Primarily because of lack of data and varied trade status for specific species. Nevertheless, data gathered for this report is as far as possible based on formal and acknowledged sources.
- Southeast Asia (SEA), with its linkages into the larger Asian market, including China, Indonesia, and India, is one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots with a high rate of endemism, as well as one of the world’s hotspots for the illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife parts. It is estimated that less than 10% of IWT is detected and confiscated¹.
- Although demand markets for wildlife, including legal² and illegal wildlife trade, are present throughout the world, China ranks as the world’s largest market for illegal trade in wildlife, and wildlife products (followed by the United States).
- All ASEAN³ countries function as source, consumer and as transit for wildlife coming from within the region as well as the rest of the world, applying to trade that’s both legal and

¹ Van Uhm, Daan P. 2016 <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/bfm:978-3-319-42129-2/1>

² In 2008, although older data, the combined global value of legally traded wild plants and animals was approximately US 24.5 billion. This figure was developed by TRAFFIC on the basis of an analysis of data derived from UN and FAO.

³ The 10 member countries; Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

illegal, with many inadequacies and loopholes concerning regulation, law enforcement and overall levels of sustainability.⁴ All ASEAN countries are Parties to CITES.

- The study highlighted the region's major issues that continue to allow illegal trade to thrive, including the existence of organised criminal networks, wildlife illegal imports, poor conviction rates, inadequate laws, and poor regulation of markets and retail outlets. Wildlife cybercrime, as well as challenges that have persisted over time such as pervasive corruption, a lack of political will and continued consumer demand for wildlife, were also examined in the report.
- Combatting illegal wildlife trade has great challenges. To tackle IWT and mitigate its impacts requires a complex and multi-disciplinary strategy at global, national, and local levels that can address a wide range of challenges. It is necessary to include a variety of disciplines and actors for any counteractive approach to work effectively. One strategy to follow is not enough as the scales and drivers of trade are diverse. They range from actions for basic subsistence in local communities to high-profit international business.
- Laws may be insufficient, are out of date, ignore relevant science or be inadequately enforced. Also, concepts such as 'legally harvested' does not necessarily mean 'sustainably produced' or 'sustainably managed'. There are concerns that sustainable trade is hard to achieve in many cases, particularly given the systemic lack of scientific data on the status of wild populations and/or the effects of trade.⁵
- The consequences of wildlife offenses vary by country. Although all SEA countries have established regulatory measures and made efforts to regulate their exploitation and movement nationally and across borders of endangered and protected species, there is a lack of national enforcement.
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- The transport sector and financial institutions are the clearly involved as illegal products are trafficked via commercial land, sea and air transport services, and financial transactions take place via regulated financial services providers and the global banking system.
- While some forms of wildlife use and trade, such as uncontrolled commercial wild meat harvesting, pose a major threat to biodiversity⁶, in many cases, sustainable wildlife trade can provide key incentives for local people to actively protect species and the habitat they depend on, leading to population recoveries⁷.
- The pandemic did put illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade under the spotlight due to enhanced restrictions on movement and increasing awareness about the public health risks associated with wildlife consumption. On the-ground activity has decreased due to pandemic

⁴ Krishnasamy, K. and Zavagli, M. 2020

⁵ Fukushima a, et al 2021 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320721003943>

⁶ Gray T.N. et al. 2018 <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10531-017-1450-5.pdf>

⁷ Roe et al 2020 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X20302485?via%3Dihub>

restrictions as it has weakened demand for wildlife products, recent reports⁸ suggest. On the other hand advertisements and trade continue to proliferate on social media platforms, and there is evidence that traders may be resorting to stockpiling animal parts in anticipation of demand recovering as restrictions are eased⁹. Also, social media has provided traders with round-the-clock access to an unlimited number of customers, at no cost and with limited risk, and without the need for special skills or technology.

- To fight IWT, tools from domains as varied as economics, law enforcement, legal policy and information technology is needed, however provides complexity. The report includes a selection of relevant key policies and agreements described, also different tools available to identify a country's unique strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that can inform government strategies, help develop priority actions tailored to national conditions, and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of scarce financial and human public resources, to address priority risks associated with illegal activities.
- There are a large number of actors engaged in the work to combat IWT. These can be found at different levels and at all or different steps in the IWT supply chain. And they have a wide range of donors. The report includes a selected list of actors.
- It can be concluded that many programmes and activities take place in the Asian context. This is not surprising due to the devastating impact that IWT has and that countries in the region function as a source, a transit as well as consumer for wildlife and timber, both legally and illegally, with many inadequacies and loopholes concerning regulation, law enforcement and overall levels of sustainability and biodiversity loss.
- From recent research and empirical work it can be concluded that local communities have an essential role to play, and that linkages to livelihood, health and exploitation of natural resources are crucial to consider in combatting IWT.
- **Overall findings in short:**
 - Specifically Southeast Asian countries are source, transit and destination markets for illegal wildlife trade (including timber).
 - Criminals and traffickers do not discriminate between domestic and foreign wildlife and timber species, which are poached, shipped and consumed throughout the region.
 - There is an awareness and governments have begun to put their commitments into action, to protect their resources and thus their people. Nevertheless, the pace is slow and the commitments and actions have major gaps, thus IWT persists.
 - Although there are governments that show commitments in the Asian region, still the whole region faces various challenges in combating IWT e.g. law enforcement, weak institutions, and corruption.
 - Efforts are stronger in Southeast Asia, than in South Asia and the rest of the region.

⁸ WWF 2021a https://wwfasia.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf_online_trade_ii_v2_2.pdf, Mongabay 2021, and Mongabay 2022

⁹ WWF 2021 <https://asiapacific.panda.org/?372899/going-viral-report>

- The international community together with donors and local communities have to strengthen their efforts and their collaboration.
- Many actors are involved in IWT and the whole supply chain can be targeted with action, from habitat to market.
- Tools and technical solutions are developed and are in use already, but can be further developed.
- Internet is widely and vividly used for criminal elements in wildlife business. To be in the forefront of the development, and preferably staying ahead, is necessary for combatting IWT.
- **Recommendations in short:** Potential entry points for support and collaboration relevant for the Sida regional Asia strategy (and also possible synergies with global or other strategies) are listed below.
 - Long-term strategies to sensitize the value of protecting natural resources and biodiversity loss are important components of a holistic approach and a sustainable future.
 - Supporting platforms/collaborations/coordination for relevant authorities and/or organisations to develop regional and inter-regional mechanisms for law enforcement cooperation and governance.
 - Improving the understanding of the links between IWT and other criminal activities affecting the environment and the broader issues of climate change and biodiversity loss.
 - Important working prerequisites for IWT are; donor coordination; legal enforcement; community engagement; and behavioural change at the consumer market.
 - Actors may focus on the whole supply chain while others may focus on one or few species or on one aspect of the supply chain. It is important to include a variety in cooperation.
 - Whole supply chain; The organisations and/or initiatives that is deemed to have capacity and are advocating to reach out to the whole supply chain are USAID-RDW, ASEAN-WEN, GWP, ADB, TRAFFIC, WTA and TRACIT, among others.
 - Focus on species; Organisations that have this inclusive approach are Freeland, FFI, TRAFFIC and WWF.
 - Focus on legal aspects and legal enforcement, Those working in this area are USAID-RDW, UNODC, GWP, ACCO, and Freeland.