

Biodiversity and wildlife crime

Wildlife crime is one of the most profitable criminal activities worldwide. It has devastating effects on biodiversity, undermines the rule of law, and can trigger economic losses for entire countries. The European Union has been engaged in the fight against wildlife trafficking for decades.

Wildlife trade and wildlife trafficking

The legal wildlife trade into the EU alone is worth €100 billion annually, while the global illegal trade in wildlife is estimated to be worth between €8 and 20 billion annually. This very lucrative activity is highly complex and its legal and illegal forms are often connected.

Trade in wildlife and derived products (such as skins, medicinal ingredients, tourist souvenirs, timber, fish and other food products) is authorised providing legal restrictions are respected. These restrictions come mostly from the 1975 United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), to which the EU and all its Member States are parties. The convention protects roughly 5 600 animal species and 30 000 plant species. If not protected under CITES, even endangered species can be traded legally. Some non-governmental organisations note that, if monitored and well-regulated, wildlife trade can deliver benefits to local communities in regions with few other sources of income. Unlike wildlife trade, wildlife trafficking is illegal. Although trafficking is not a new phenomenon, it has worsened considerably in recent years, driven largely by growing demand from East and South-East Asia. This demand includes to a large extent products from endangered species, such as elephant ivory, rhino horns used in traditional medicine, tiger bones and skins, luxury woods and reptile skins. Wildlife trafficking has now become one of the most profitable criminal activities worldwide.

What are the consequences of wildlife trafficking?

Illegal wildlife trade has devastating effects for biodiversity. Species endangered by illegal trade include, among many others, reptiles, sharks, tigers, great apes and turtles, tropical timber such as rosewood and mahogany, and plants such as orchids. In turn, whole ecosystems can be impacted by the removal of a single species providing essential services: for instance, elephants act as 'megagardeners', eating seeds, carrying them over long distances and discharging them together with fertiliser; rhinos keep grass cover short in the savannah, which increases plant diversity; and top predators such as lions and tigers help regulate diseases in prey species. However, poaching is not the only factor contributing to depleting wildlife populations; habitat loss as well as high levels of exploitation and trade can also have significant negative impacts. Wildlife trafficking can also lead to economic losses, for example in countries that are highly dependent on nature-based tourism. It also undermines the rule of law, as it may fuel corruption and help to fund guerrilla groups.

What is the European Union doing about it?

The EU has been engaged in the fight against wildlife trafficking for many years: it supports protected areas and funds biodiversity protection outside the EU; it has strict rules to make sure that wildlife products only enter the EU if they are legal and sustainable; and it supports enforcement against wildlife crime at international level. Through development aid, the EU also helps to reduce poverty and inequalities in countries of origin, two of the root causes of wildlife crime.

In 2016, the European Union bolstered its action against wildlife trafficking on the basis of three priorities: preventing trafficking (for instance by combating the ivory trade from and within the EU), stepping up the fight against criminal activities linked with trafficking, and building a global alliance against wildlife crime.

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Author: Didier Bourguignon, Members' Research Service
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epers@ep.europa.eu (contact) <http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet) <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank> (internet) <http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)