



# Illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade

Each year, hundreds of millions of plants and animals are caught or harvested from the wild and then sold as food, pets, ornamental plants, leather, tourist curios, and medicine. While a great deal of this trade is legal and is not harming wild populations, a worryingly large proportion is illegal – and threatens the survival of many endangered species. With overexploitation being the second-largest direct threat to many species after habitat loss, WWF is addressing illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade as a priority issue.

*Black rhinoceros (Diceros bicornis), a species poached for its horns. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey*

## What's the problem?

Wildlife trade is big business, worth billions of dollars and involving hundreds of millions of wild plants and animals from tens of thousands of species. For example, some 88 million wild orchids, 6.2 million wild-caught live birds, and 7.5 million live-caught reptiles were traded globally between 1996 and 2001.

A great deal of this wildlife trade is legal and likely to be conducted at sustainable levels. But some of the trade is illegal and unsustainable, driven by high profit margins and, in many cases, the high prices paid for rare species.

Illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade directly threatens the survival of many species in the wild. Some examples are well known, such as poaching of elephants for ivory and tigers for their skins and bones. However, countless other species are similarly overexploited, from toothfish and marine turtles to pangolins and timber trees.

Illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade not only affects the species being exploited. It also directly affects the livelihoods of millions of people – especially the world's poorest, who depend on local wild animals for meat and on local trees and plants for fuel and medicine. Illegal trade also undermines countries' efforts to protect and sustainably manage their natural resources.

The trade can also harm other species. For example, illegal fishing of already depleted fish stocks affects other marine animals that depend on the fish. And the fishing gear used by illegal fishermen kills millions of other marine animals too, including endangered seabirds, marine turtles, dolphins, corals, sharks, and other fish species. Similarly, illegal harvesting of timber destroys forests that are home to a multitude of other plants and animals. On top of this, wildlife trade has often led to the introduction of invasive species into new habitats, where they prey on, or compete with, native species.

## So what's the answer?

Through its global network and especially the work of TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, WWF works to stop illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade. This includes supporting enforcement of CITES, the international convention that regulates international trade in wildlife; promoting new laws; helping with anti-poaching activities; and public education.

Above all, the aim is to encourage sustainability in wildlife trade – by informing all those involved, including the general public, about the environmental harm that illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade can cause, and by providing guidance and support to counteract it.

## Examples of WWF's work on illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade

Tens of thousands of different animal and plant species are harvested from the wild for trade. WWF focuses on priority species, for which illegal and unsustainable trade poses a serious threat to their continued survival, as well as on national, regional, and international laws and agreements to control wildlife trade. The majority of WWF's wildlife trade work is done in collaboration with TRAFFIC, a joint programme of WWF and IUCN–The Conservation Union. Other partners are also involved, ranging from other conservation organizations to local communities and governments.



Millions of wild-caught orchids are traded each year. © WWF-Canon / Diego M. Garces

### 1. Support to CITES

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulates international trade in some 30,000 species of plants and animals through a system of certificates and permits. This system has been hugely successful: for example, by banning international trade in rhino horn when rhino numbers plummeted due to demand for their horn, the convention has helped to ensure that rhinos continue to survive in the wild. Indeed, not one species listed on the CITES appendices has gone extinct due to overexploitation for trade.

**WWF and TRAFFIC support CITES in various ways. For example:**

- **Providing technical and scientific advice.** WWF and TRAFFIC carry out cutting-edge research on illegal wildlife trade routes, the effects of wildlife trade on particular species, and on deficiencies in wildlife trade laws — information which is essential for CITES members to keep abreast of new trends and react accordingly. For example, a 2004 TRAFFIC report on ivory markets in Africa helped CITES create a new plan that commits

every African country with elephant populations to either strictly control their domestic ivory market or shut it down altogether.

- **Promoting the inclusion of new species in the CITES appendices.** WWF and TRAFFIC have improved the protection and/or management of a number of species threatened with trade by advocating their inclusion in the CITES appendices or resolutions. Recent examples include three shark species, big-leaf mahogany, seahorses, Irrawaddy dolphin, ramin (an Asian timber tree), humphead wrasse (a coral reef fish), saiga antelope, sturgeon, Asian big cats, and great apes.
- **Encouraging participation in CITES.** WWF and TRAFFIC encourage countries to join CITES and effectively implement its regulations.
- **Keeping CITES strong.** WWF works closely with governments to ensure that the CITES mandate is not weakened or over-ruled by institutions pursuing economic priorities with little consideration for their long-term impacts, such as the World Trade Organization.



Tigers are poached to feed consumer demand for tiger derivatives in traditional Asian medicines. This poaching is the largest direct threat to the species worldwide. © WWF-Canon / Hartmut Jungius

## 2. Tightening and enforcing legislation

It's one thing to ban or limit trade in a particular species, but another to effectively enforce this — especially in developing countries where equipment, training, and funds for enforcement are often lacking. In addition, many countries still lack strict national legislation and/or appropriate penalties for illegal wildlife trade. Examples of work to counter these problems include:

- **Helping countries comply with CITES regulations.** For example, WWF helped develop a “Falcon Passport” in the United Arab Emirates in 2005. This system provides a legal structure that complies with CITES regulations regarding falcon trade and, at the same time, provides falconers with a permissible, easy-to-use way to participate in the traditional sport of falconry.
- **Helping to create new national, state, and local laws.** For example, WWF action helped to bring about revision of wildlife trade regulations in the EU, one of the largest markets for wildlife trade. At the local level, in 2004 TRAFFIC helped draft a new law for New York City that closed a loophole which had allowed products claiming to contain endangered species, including tigers, rhinos, and leopards, to be sold in the city despite this being against US federal law.
- **Running training workshops.** To be successful, laws need to be widely understood, accepted, and practical to apply. WWF and TRAFFIC regularly run workshops

around the world for customs officers, border police, nature conservation officials, scientists, and traders to give them the appropriate skills and tools to comply with and enforce wildlife trade laws. Part of this involves creating species identification guides to help people recognize both legal and illegal species in trade.

- **Assisting with enforcement efforts.** For example, information provided by WWF led to a raid in 2003 on an illegal Thai wildlife slaughterhouse that was supplying restaurants with tiger, orang-utan, and bear products, while technical and financial support led to a successful raid in Peru on illegally logged mahogany from a nature reserve worth nearly US\$500,000. WWF has also set up hot lines to help members of the public report illegal wildlife trade.
- **Helping with anti-poaching efforts.** For example, WWF helps fund anti-poaching brigades for rhinos in Nepal, tigers in the Russian Far East, and gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).
- **Encouraging cross-border cooperation.** WWF and TRAFFIC have recently helped forge regional initiatives to tighten legislation and enforcement of wildlife trade in Southeast Asia (the ASEAN Regional Action Plan) and the European Union (the EU Enforcement Group).



Transboundary patrol with confiscated wildlife and snares, Djembé, Cameroon.  
© WWF-Canon / Olivier Van Bogaert



Illegal logging of valuable cedar trees (*Cedrela odorata*) in a Peruvian lowland rainforest.  
© WWF-Canon / André Bärtschi

### 3. Public education

One of the most powerful tools of all for addressing illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade is to persuade consumers to make informed choices when buying wildlife-based products. This includes not just the people buying the end product, but also shop-keepers, suppliers, and manufacturers.

**Examples of WWF's work to raise public awareness of the issue include:**

- **Discouraging purchases of certain wildlife goods.** For example, WWF campaigns in Thailand targeting tourists and people working in the tourism industry have raised awareness about illegal products such as ivory and jewelry made from turtle shell, while campaigns targeting consumers and shop-keepers in North America have raised awareness about illegal traditional medicines containing products from endangered species such as tiger, rhinoceros, musk deer, and bears.

- **Encouraging production and purchases of sustainable wildlife goods.** For example, WWF helped establish, and continues to promote, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) — consumer labels guaranteeing that marine and forest products, respectively, were harvested and produced in a sustainable manner.
- **Working with local communities.** From Asian coasts to South American rainforests to the African plains, one of the largest hurdles to overcome is that of poverty. Most poor people do not have the luxury of thinking about the future of wildlife when they are struggling to survive from day to day. WWF is working hand-in-hand with communities around the world, providing practical help to overcome poverty and helping them use their local wildlife in a sustainable way.



MSC-certified fishermen with California spiny lobsters at Baja California, Gulf of California, Mexico.  
© WWF-Canon / Gustavo Ybarra

#### Find out more...

This fact sheet is designed to give a broad overview of the environmental harm that illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade can cause, and to give examples of WWF and TRAFFIC's work and solutions on the ground. For more detailed information on species, WWF, TRAFFIC, and the work we do, please visit [www.panda.org/species](http://www.panda.org/species) and [www.traffic.org](http://www.traffic.org)

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