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Wildlife Poaching and Trafficking in Asia: An Overview

Scope of the Problem

Asian demand for illegal wildlife has increased in recent years, raising concerns about species conservation amid heightened poaching rates. As one of several contributing threats to biodiversity, wildlife poaching also raises national security and transnational crime concerns. Crimes related to illegal wildlife reportedly generate billions of dollars each year, a source of funds that may fuel instability and finance armed groups, particularly in Africa. Closer to illicit retail outlets, the markup on wildlife products is most pronounced in Asia, and Asian criminal groups largely control this high-profit, low-risk black market—often benefitting from the cooperation of corrupt government officials to facilitate cross-border shipments and protect traffickers. According to the United Nations, environmental crimes represent nearly one-third of the Asia-Pacific black market, conservatively estimated to be worth approximately \$86 billion annually (see **Figure 1**, below). Illegal wildlife, however, represents only a small portion of major environmental crimes in the region (the largest contributor to environmental crimes is illegal trade in wood products).

than \$200 million annually). Other wildlife commonly trafficked include pangolins, rhinos, bears, and tigers.

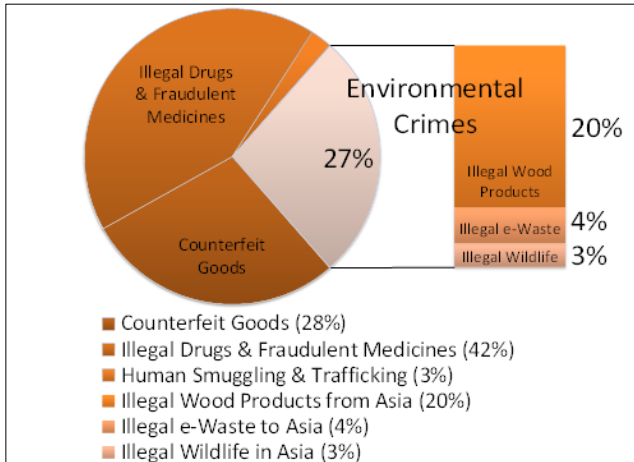
Illegal Ivory: Top Asian Countries of Concern

At the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in 2013, eight States Parties were identified as countries of “primary concern” for their role in the illegal trade in elephant ivory—including five Asian countries: **China** (including **Hong Kong**), **Malaysia**, **the Philippines**, **Thailand**, and **Vietnam**. At subsequent CITES Standing Committee meetings, several additional countries were designated as countries of “secondary concern” or “importance to watch”—including **Laos**.

Tiger Trafficking and Population Trends

Wild tigers in Asia are believed to range across 13 countries, although field estimates suggest that tiger populations are declining overall (see **Table 1** below). Bucking the trend, India has reported increases of up to 30% in tiger populations in the past three years. Captive tiger populations in several Asian countries may be higher. For example, China has over 5,000 captive tigers.

Figure 1. Organized Crime in the Asia-Pacific Region



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime in East Asia and the Pacific* (2013).

The recent surge in Asian demand for illegal wildlife is driven largely by an expansion of wealth in Asian countries and the perceived value of rare wildlife and related products as luxury goods, exotic pets, restaurant delicacies, and ingredients in traditional Asian medicine. According to the United Nations, illegal marine wildlife trafficking (excluding off-shore illegal fishing) represents the largest market in Asia (at least \$850 million annually). Such trafficking involves species of sharks, marine turtles, corals and aquarium fish, and seahorses. Among illegally traded mammals, Asian consumer demand for elephant ivory has surged in recent years and represents more than half the total illegal wildlife market for mammals in Asia (more

Table 1. Wild Tiger Population Estimates

Country	Field Estimate	Official Estimate
Bangladesh	n/a	300-500
Bhutan	50	115-150
Burma	n/a	85
Cambodia	0	10-30
China	<7	20
India	1,706	2,226
Laos	2	17
Malaysia	300	250-340
Nepal	198	198
North Korea	n/a	n/a
Russia	n/a	360
Thailand	221	189-252
Vietnam	<5	<10

Source: International Union for Conservation of Nature.

U.S. Responses

In July 2013, President Barack Obama issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13648 on combating wildlife trafficking. It

directed federal agencies to enhance efforts to address the problem, established an interagency Presidential Task Force on Wildlife Trafficking to produce a National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking, and created a non-governmental Advisory Council on Wildlife Trafficking to provide outside expertise and support to the Task Force.

In February 2014, the Obama Administration released a National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking. It prioritizes domestic and international responses to wildlife trafficking related to law enforcement, demand reduction, and cooperation. The Administration also released a plan to implement the National Strategy with 24 core objectives—several of which involve steps specific to Asia, including support for U.S. participation in international enforcement operations targeting wildlife poaching networks in Asia; initiatives in Asia to reduce demand and raise trafficking awareness among potential consumers; and expanded cooperation with China.

Policy Implementation

Key U.S. agencies involved in implementing the National Strategy in Asia include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which has stationed a special agent at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, since 2014 and continues to protect Asian wildlife through its Multinational Species Conservation Fund (MSCF) programs for Asian tigers, rhinos, elephants, and marine turtles. The U.S. Department of State and Agency for International Development additionally fund multiple anti-trafficking projects internationally. U.S. agencies also partner with outside groups to develop training material for wildlife trafficking investigations, implement novel technologies to survey animal populations, and pursue consumer awareness and demand reduction campaigns.

Building on recent momentum to address wildlife trafficking, the United States has supported three multinational counter-trafficking operations known as Cobra I, II, and III. During Cobra III, which took place in May 2015, participating law enforcement authorities from 62 countries reported 139 arrests and more than 247 seizures of ivory, rhino horns, pangolins, tortoises, rosewood, rare medicinal plants, and other Asian wildlife. Law enforcement activity has also translated into U.S. indictments, prosecutions, and convictions related to Asia-linked wildlife trafficking.

Heightened attention to the wildlife trafficking situation has prompted several Asian countries to increase their commitments and political will to combat such crimes. China, Hong Kong, and the Philippines have also destroyed domestic ivory stockpiles since 2013 (the United States conducted its own ivory stockpile crushes in 2013 and 2015). In 2014, the Prime Minister of Vietnam issued a top-level directive to give priority to wildlife trafficking enforcement, and China committed \$10 million in funding to support wildlife protection and conservation in Africa.

Congressional Role and Policy Issues

Recent Congresses have taken steps to address wildlife trafficking by holding hearings; expanding, renewing,

authorizing, and allocating specific funds for programs to combat such trafficking; and introducing new bills. Such efforts have included the following:

- Department of State Rewards Program Update and Technical Corrections Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-283), which allows the State Department to offer rewards for information on transnational criminal networks, including those related to wildlife trafficking (up to \$1 million is currently being offered for information on the Xaysavang Network, a wildlife trafficking syndicate led by Laos-based Vixay Keosavang);
- Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for FY2015 (P.L. 113-291), which expands the Defense Department’s counternarcotics authorities to include international support to combat wildlife trafficking (in Asia, partner support efforts are underway through the U.S. Pacific Command, the Joint Interagency Task Force-West, and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service); and
- State Department funding in FY2014 (\$45 million) and FY2015 (\$55 million) appropriations Acts (P.L. 113-76 and P.L. 113-235) specifically to combat wildlife poaching and trafficking—in addition to longstanding appropriations for FWS’s MSCF (\$9.1 million in FY2015), a program that is also funded with proceeds of a special-issued postage stamp as well as through matching support from partner organizations.

Several bills pertaining to wildlife trafficking have been introduced in the 114th Congress (e.g., S. 27, H.R. 2494, and H.R. 1945). As Congress evaluates the Obama Administration’s anti-trafficking efforts, the Asia-Pacific region may come under particular scrutiny, especially with respect to demand reduction. Some approaches to enhance existing efforts might include greater Intelligence Community focus on the impact of Asian wildlife trafficking on U.S. national security, along the lines of a 2013 assessment by the National Intelligence Council on poaching threats in Africa. Another approach might involve more regional action to account for differences in the manifestation of wildlife trafficking among Asian countries. Wildlife trafficking has also been a topic under consideration as part of the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership trade negotiations.

Within the Asia-Pacific region, much attention remains on China, which is widely believed to be the primary source of global demand for illegal wildlife products. The topic was discussed during President Xi Jinping’s State Visit to the United States in September 2015. It has also been discussed in past meetings of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogues, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

Liana W. Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics

Pervaze A. Sheikh, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

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