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WILDLIFE
TRAFFICKING
IN ASIA

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS



ons of confiscated pangolin scales in Vietnam. A crowded bird market in Hong Kong. Orphaned orangutan babies in Borneo. The photos and stories reflect a heartbreaking reality. Although trafficking is a global problem, its prevalence throughout Asia has reached an extraordinary level.

Several factors have merged to create this groundswell of trafficking activity. Economic growth in Asia and the resulting increase in disposable income, especially among the middle class in China and Vietnam, has led to increased demand for animals and animal parts. That demand affects native species as well as species found outside Asia, and it also includes worrying trends.

“There’s a new trade in Asian elephant skin for medicine and jewelry,” said Sue Lieberman, vice president, international policy for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in New York, N.Y. “The songbird trade is increasing massively because endangered songbirds are traded for use in singing contests. We’re also seeing people in China selling jaguar teeth on the Internet, and we never saw that before.”

Added to this combination of increased wealth and consumption is the relative ease of poaching in the source countries.

“International wildlife trafficking hasn’t gotten the attention it deserves as a well-organized crime,” said Craig Hoover, executive vice president for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. “It has high profits and low risk of significant penalty. It’s not taken as seriously as the drug trade or human trafficking. It’s been viewed as a lower-tier illegal activity.”

And to top off this perfect storm—transportation networks have improved and created a global commerce community in which more trade than ever is coming out of Central and West Africa.

Despite this bleak picture, there are reasons for optimism, said Hoover.

“When President Obama issued his 2013 executive order to combat wildlife trafficking, I thought the attention would last about two years. But the level of commitment is just as robust today. The U.S. has played a leadership role, and there’s been an embrace of the issue around the world. The key is to look at wildlife trafficking holistically and bring all resources to bear. You need people who are good at changing consumer behavior, people who are good at law enforcement, people who are good at creating policy and regulations.”

Fortunately, that type of synergistic problem solving is happening among zoos, NGOs, and government agencies around the world.

Collaborative Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officers in source and demand countries typically lack a history of working together, but several organizations are working to change that.

The WCS has brought together enforcement officers from Vietnam and Mozambique, and arranged similar exchanges between other countries within Asia and between Asia and Africa, according to Lieberman.

“It is very important to ensure exchanges between governments and enforcement officials to enable them to combat wildlife trafficking more effectively, and disrupt the criminal networks,” she said. “All too often, enforcement officers and customs officials in an importing country don’t know where to turn, as relates to the country of origin of the illegally traded wildlife.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has also prioritized collaboration between countries, according to David Hubbard, special agent in charge, International Operations Unit, Office of Law Enforcement. “In the past we’ve been reactive. When we would see a seizure we would investigate and try to bring people to justice. But we decided we need to be less reactive and focus on the networks that control the wildlife trade.”

USFWS began placing wildlife law enforcement attachés in embassies in 2014. In Asia there is one in Bangkok, one in Beijing, and there will be one in Hanoi by the beginning of 2020. The attachés fill permanent diplomatic positions, and USFWS hopes eventually to place more of them in source, transit, and demand countries.





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"The attachés provide training and capacity building and work investigations," said Hubbard. "When an agent is working a case in the U.S. that reaches into Thailand, we now have someone on the ground there. We also have attachés in Africa who can connect with the attachés in Asia. The overall goal is to stop wildlife trafficking, but for us, success is getting people who haven't worked together historically to do so."

Government Action

Government's role ranges from offering focused grant support to enacting sweeping legislative change, such as China's closure of their domestic ivory market.

"Policy is slow and [trafficking] is a fast-moving threat to species that are a non-renewable resource," said Daphne Carlson Bremer, chief, Combating Wildlife Trafficking Strategy and Partnerships Branch in the USFWS International Affairs Program. "There's a real sense of urgency to move in time to stop poaching and give species time to recover."

Carlson Bremer manages the Combating Wildlife Trafficking grant program, which in 2018 awarded \$1,461,902 to projects that focused on Southeast Asia. For example, the International Snow Leopard Trust received a grant for a project on combating snow leopard trafficking by creating a database to house all relevant data and building communication lines within government departments and among international partners to facilitate surveillance and real-time information exchange.

Lieberman cites Indonesia as an example of a country in which government involvement has been a positive factor in anti-trafficking efforts.

"It's not about issuing reports or press statements that say, 'government X needs to do more,' but [it's about] working with willing governments to assist them in doing what needs to be done. Their progress is due to multiple factors, including increased political will and commitment to combat this crime, funding from governments and other donors, and our WCS team on the ground that has implemented an outstanding program working with our government partners."

What Can We Do?

Many AZA members financially support projects led by NGOs or colleagues at other zoos. Some, like Ronda Schwetz, executive zoo director, Henry Vilas Zoo, offer onsite support. She leads groups of staff from multiple institutions on trips to rehabilitation centers, sanctuaries, and zoos in Borneo, Sumatra, and Malaysia. These institutions take in trafficked animals and animals that are displaced or injured due to habitat loss or fires. Schwetz's group assists the keepers with training and enrichment activities, provides medical and other critical supplies, and helps with habitat restoration.

"I'm really thankful to have the opportunity to continue to do this," she said. "It's humbling, gratifying, and a life-changing experience to have direct impact on the ground."

Despite the progress that has been made, creating behavior changes remains a thorny challenge. How does education lead people to make difference choices? According to Hoover, it requires an investment in social science and marketing, expertise that hasn't traditionally been used in combating trafficking. And that investment is beginning to take hold within the AZA community.

"The consensus now among zoos and aquariums is that we need to shift from inspiring behavior to working with organizations and communities to facilitate change," said Amy Rutherford, director of professional development and education for AZA.

Institutions that have adopted this approach include Ocean Park Hong Kong in Aberdeen, Hong Kong, which

has implemented WildAid Shark Savers' I'm FINished with FINS campaign in its Shark Mystique exhibit. Fun and educational features support the Park's advocacy against consuming and purchasing shark fin products.

"At the entrance of the Aquarium, there are promotion videos of celebrities taking the "No Shark Fin" pledge by posing for a picture to say 'I'm FINished with FINS,'" said Isabel Lee, education director. "The entire family can take the 'No Shark Fin' interactive game challenge to prepare shark fin alternative dishes in virtual fashion. After the game, the public can show their commitment to helping stop shark finning by posing for a picture to say 'I'm FINished with FINS' and they can even share their campaign photo in social media. Between the launch of Shark Mystique in June 2014 and August 2019, there have been 331,558 pledges."

Similarly, the San Diego Zoo Global's Institute for Conservation Research (ICR) is collaborating with Free the Bears to create a campaign designed to shift behavior in Cambodia away from using bear products for medicine. Researchers trained Cambodian community members as research assistants who interviewed residents regarding their use of bear bile and other products. Based on the result, the research team created behavior change materials that are now being tested with focus groups, said Jenny Glikman, associate director, community engagement team for ICR.

"The campaign will be for the whole community and we'll be doing it offline, with posters, brochures, and maybe at small events. We will implement it in three communities in Cambodia in October and we won't roll it out internationally until we see if it works."

Progress in combatting trafficking in Asia requires taking multiple steps in the right direction, and every AZA-accredited facility has the tools to make an impact.

"Raise the profile of the issue," said Hoover. "Extend the conversation beyond elephants and rhinos. Make sure people understand the scope and scale of the problem. Push for more government resources. Involve more partners and continue to ramp up your efforts. Measure your impact and make changes if necessary."

Whether through advocacy, education, or action on the ground, our reach must extend to all corners of the natural world. Any trafficking crisis is everyone's problem.

Mary Ellen Collins is a writer based in St. Petersburg, Fla.

