

Critical link between resource plunder, illegal wildlife trade

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Illegal trade in wildlife is no longer an abstract issue. Organised transnational as well as trans-regional environmental crimes are rapidly rising threats to the environment, to revenues from natural resources, to state security and to global sustainable development.



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The scale and nature of this harsh reality is widely known. The current [United Nations Environmental Programme \(UNEP\) environmental crime report](#) pinpoints a number of international conventions and national initiatives that seek to address this reality. At stake is the financial loss running into billions of dollars that these environmental crimes cause, the ecosystem disruption, loss of biodiversity [and crippling ecosystem services that underpin human wellbeing to build resilience economies and adapt to climate change](#).

Globally, the cumulative monetary value of different forms of transnational organised environmental crimes is between \$70 billion and \$213 billion annually. At the heart of these activities is a network of crime spanning Africa, the Amazon, Western Central Pacific, Indonesia and South East Asia with China, Japan, Western European countries and North America being the main destination countries.

Wildlife, fisheries and logging economic loss

Forests and savannas are home to some of the world's most majestic species but they are also home to intricate webs of illegal trade in wildlife worth \$10 billion annually. To put this loss into perspective, crime on elephants alone could financially cost Africa \$1.9 billion each year. This is separate from the environmental loss in terms of numbers and the related impacts on ecosystem stability. The number of elephants killed in Africa is in the range of 20,000-25,000 every year. This is out of an already low population of 420,000-650,000. For the forest elephant, the population size has been estimated to have declined by about 62% between 2002 and 2011. In Asia, the poached African ivory may represent an end-user street value of an estimated \$165 million to \$188 million, in addition to ivory from Asian sources.

Ecosystems throughout Africa are threatened by many factors, besides illegal trade in wildlife and climate change. In 2012, Africa earned [about \\$43.6 billion from tourism](#). At the same time illegal poaching and trade in wildlife earned about a quarter of that amount. Moreover, climate change is expected to reduce the size of habitats for some 81% to 97% of the 5,197 species, according to the [Africa Adaptation Gap Report](#). These compounding affects must be addressed in tandem if the world is to see its wildlife, fisheries, forests (and tourism) continue to prosper.

In addition to wildlife, additional losses due to crime are being experienced in the fisheries and forestry sectors. Illegal fisheries cost the global economy between \$10 billion and \$23.5 billion annually. Out of this, sub-Saharan Africa loses about a billion dollars each year.

On forests, illegal logging costs timber-producing countries an annual loss in revenue of [between \\$10 billion and \\$15 billion, accounting for over a tenth of the total timber trade worldwide, estimated to be worth more than \\$150 billion annually](#). Other estimates show that [illegal logging costs the global economy between \\$30 and \\$100 billion per year. Africa accounts for 17% of this plunder at an annual cost of \\$17 billion](#).

To put the scale of Africa's loss into perspective, factoring in timber by-products that are traded illegally, it is estimated that illegal charcoal trade alone involves a direct loss of revenues of \$1.9 billion annually. This loss is perpetrated in a number of dimensions, including tax evasion, understated volumes, exploitation of weaknesses in regulation and criminal activity, among others.

Climate change, illegal trade in wildlife and resource plunder nexus

Illegal trade in wildlife can undermine climate change adaptation efforts, particularly ecosystem-based adaptation which uses ecosystems and biodiversity as an overall adaptation strategy. Similarly, illegal deforestation can hinder carbon capture and climate change mitigation efforts. Globally, illegal logging costs up to \$100 billion annually. These illicit incomes encourage illegal logging thereby significantly impacting the success of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) initiative.

The two main sources of the decline of African elephants has been the demand for ivory and land-use changes. [Up to 90% of elephant mortality in Central Africa is due to poaching, and today throughout Africa more elephants die from poaching than from natural causes](#). Indeed, increases in poaching levels and loss of habitat are threatening the survival of [African elephant populations in Central Africa as well as in previously secure populations in West, Southern and Eastern Africa](#).

As climate change shifts land ranges, it is possible that these types of conflicts could become more commonplace. It is for this reason that it is essential that we put in place adaptation strategies that employ ecosystems services and livelihoods that work with elephants, not against them. The 2014 Africa Progress Report by UNEP observes that Africa is at the epicenter of a struggle between sustainable management and the unsustainable "mining" of marine assets, with the balance tipping toward unsustainable mining. Between 50% and 90% of the wood in some tropical countries is suspected to come from illegal sources or has been logged illegally. With these developments, at stake are livelihoods, species extinction, endangered forests, climate change emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and national economic loss, given that illegal logging accounts for 15% to 30% of the global legal trade.

Implications for policy

Work to combat illegal poaching and climate change impacts must go hand-in-hand if sustainable development is to be achieved. This could be done in the following manner:

- Addressing the gap between legislation and action: Banning illegal trade is just one step in the right direction, but enforcing the ban is the real challenge. It is particularly problematic in developing countries which lack equipment, training and funds for enforcement, which are unfortunately and most often home to the endangered wildlife.
- Strengthening legislation on environmental crime at country level: Only 27 arrests were made in connection with 1,808 confiscated great apes between 2005 and 2011. In Guinea, hidden camera footage recorded a notorious wildlife dealer disclosing that he had shipped "over 500 chimpanzees". He earned just a one-year sentence which in fact was severe, by wildlife-trade standards.
- Enhancing national, regional and international cooperation: There are several international agreements and national processes relevant to climate change and biodiversity. These should be implemented in ways that are coordinated and mutually supportive since the issues they address often have regional "domino" effects. For example, between 1997 and 2005, timber production in Tanzania grew by an astounding 1,400%, most of the raw hardwood was exported to China. As a result of losing \$58 million to illegal trade in 2004 and 2005, Tanzania took action to halt the trade. Just as soon as it did so, the trade picked up and moved next door to Mozambique.
- Addressing the future effects of climate change on parks: While it may take some time for the biodiversity and natural habitats of these animals to shift to nearby zones - as climate change moves or alters ecosystems - an understanding

of exactly when and where this shift will take place will be essential. High tech modeling and forecasting are important aspects of preparation, but this cannot replace on the ground observation, actions and reaction by local personnel.

- Acting before it is too late: Prior to the first United Nations Environmental Assembly, UNEP issued a [Global Environmental Service Alert](#) on technology that can help address illegal trade in wildlife. A recent Duke University-led study found that emerging technologies could give scientists and policymakers a more efficient way to identify the species at greatest risk and take steps to protect them before it is too late. Technological products include hidden cameras and surveillance videos, audio recorders, extensive databases, crowd-sourcing applications, "Mikrokpoters", radio collars, and even "drones".
- Taking the profit out of plunder: Considering that some regions especially in [sub-Saharan Africa loses a colossal 5.7% of their annual GDP through illegal financial outflows from fisheries and forestry sector](#), a substantive policy and regulatory framework to re-invest recovered monies back to strengthen these sectors is invaluable.

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