

How to halt illegal wildlife trade

by Meindert Brouwer

Illegal wildlife trade is a huge threat to biodiversity, to forest communities and to the national economies of countries in the Congo Basin. It also poses a risk of the breakout of new pandemics. How does it work and what can be done to halt it? Alain Bernard Ononino, Head of Policy of the Central Africa Wildlife Crime Programme at World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) tells.

How widely spread are commercial poaching and illegal wildlife trade (IWT) in the Congo Basin? Which animals are targeted in general?

AO: 'Commercial poaching and IWT are considered to be the most serious and immediate threat to animal species in the Congo Basin. They touch almost all countries and landscapes in the Congo Basin. Commercial poaching and IWT are transnational by nature and Congo Basin is seriously impacted, because it is considered as both a source and transit area. The two animal species most targeted by poachers and traffickers are elephants for ivory and pangolins for scales. Other animals targeted include great apes (gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos), African grey parrots, cats (lions, leopards etc.) for their skins, and bushmeat species, such as duikers (small antelopes, ed.), monkeys, porcupines and cane rats (rodents of the genus *Thryonomys*, ed.)'

Commercial bushmeat and ivory may have different supply chains. Which actors from inside and outside the Congo Basin do you distinguish in the chains?



A stockpile of ivory seized from elephant poachers and illegal ivory dealers is burned in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, in 2012.

© WWF / JAMES MORGAN



Commercial poaching and illegal wildlife trade are considered to be the most serious and immediate threat to animal species in the Congo Basin.

countries, most of which can be found in Asia such as China (despite the China ban in ivory trade), Thailand and Vietnam. It is important to note here that ivory poached today may be turned into legal old, antique ivory sold in antique stores in New York and other major cities.'

AO continues: 'For commercial bushmeat the main actors include hunters from indigenous and local communities, bushmeat sellers mostly women who collect bushmeat products from local hunters and supply restaurants and in urban areas; bushmeat consumers mostly found in urban areas who purchase bushmeat from local or urban markets or consume directly from restaurants. Outside the Congo Basin, bushmeat products are found either in wildlife markets in Asia where they are purchased for in-house consumption or in restaurants in Western cities such as Paris and Brussels, where they are directly consumed mostly by the African diaspora.'

What is the impact of illegal wildlife trade and its criminal activities in local communities in the Congo Basin forests? Can you give an example?

AO: 'Poaching and IWT lead to a rapid depletion of wildlife populations in areas where local communities live and thereby deprive those communities - who depend heavily on these resources for their well-being - from sustainable livelihood. There is also a social impact, local communities used as hunters by middlemen are easily targeted by enforcement agents and since they are usually heads of families when they are arrested and sent to prison, this creates a breach in the family cell and social dependency. Finally, there is a security impact with the proliferation of arms and ammunition used to kill elephants and other large mammals. In the absence of hunting opportunities, these weapons are sometimes used to commit other crimes such as robbery, physical assault or even murder, therefore posing a security threat to human beings and their belongings.'

Illegal commercial hunting may very well have a negative impact on food security for inhabitants of forest villages

who depend on hunting for their subsistence. How can this problem be solved?

AO: 'This problem can be solved in three ways: (1) by empowering indigenous and local communities through sensitization and education on the value of wildlife and the need to its sustainable use and therefore to stop poaching and effectively take part in protection efforts; (2) by developing income-generating activities based on indigenous and local communities needs and culture; (3) by tackling all the links of the IWT chain and hunters, but also of middlemen and kingpins.'

What is the impact of commercial poaching on the health of forests, the carrying capacity of ecosystems and perhaps on agriculture in the Congo Basin? Please explain.

AO: 'Because commercial poaching is unsustainable, it empties forests of their emblematic species such as elephants, which play an important role in balancing natural ecosystems. Elephants, for instance, as the largest of all mammals trample forests and dense grasslands, making

Commercial poaching and illegal wildlife trade deprive countries of eco-tourism revenues.

room for smaller species to co-exist. They also create water holes used by other wildlife as they dig dry riverbeds when rainfall is low and they transport seeds of certain plant species such as moabi.'

What is the impact of commercial poaching and illegal wildlife trade on the economy of Congo Basin countries? Please explain.

AO: 'Because these activities are illegal, they deprive countries of the taxes and fees they would have collected through the issuance of the various permits and licenses if they had been carried out legally. Because most of the



The long-tailed pangolin (*Manis tetradactyla*) is heavily hunted despite legal protection.

animals targeted by poachers and wildlife traffickers are iconic and therefore attract tourists when they are alive, commercial poaching and IWT also deprive countries from eco-tourism revenues.'

What is necessary to make commercial poachers native to the Congo Basin consider to stop poaching?

AO: 'It is necessary to sensitize and educate them on the ecological and economic value of wildlife, and the fact that they can benefit more from a sustainable use of wildlife resources. It is also important to sensitize them on the risks of unsafe interaction between human and wildlife, which may lead to the emergence of zoonosis that may cause severe epidemics and pandemics such as Ebola and the recent COVID-19. Finally, they must be engaged in income-generating activities that are alternatives to poaching such as fishponds, farming and crafting.'

What has been done and what has to be done to reduce illegal wildlife trade in the Congo Basin: on the ground, on a national level and on an international level?

AO: 'Several efforts have been put together to reduce IWT in the Congo Basin. These include:

On the ground: the creation of protected areas and the assignment of staff and equipment for the management and control of these areas; the organization of anti-poaching activities (patrols and other control operations), awareness-

raising and education of indigenous and local communities, the development of income-generating activities as alternatives to poaching:

On a national level: the enactment of wildlife texts, classification of animal species in protection categories, the strengthening of partnership between the wildlife administration and other stakeholders (other enforcement agencies, conservations organizations, other technical and financial partners, donors etc.), sensitization and awareness-raising of key stakeholders such as parliamentarians, the private sector and the public in general;

On an international level: the creation of transboundary areas, the organization of multi-countries field operations in those areas, the inclusion of IWT in the agenda of major international meetings on regional, continental and global levels.

The establishment of the international Wildlife Justice Commission in 2015 to fight transnational organised wildlife crime, based in The Hague, the Netherlands.'

Being a ranger in nature conservation can be dangerous. In Virunga National Park in DR Congo many rangers have been killed by poachers. Poachers get killed too. Do you see opportunities and solutions to curb the violence or is militarization of national park protection inevitable?

AO: 'It is vital to intensify the work in demand countries in order to stop the demand that influences the prices on a





Portrait of a male silverback mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*). Virunga National Park, Rwanda.



Eastern black and white colobus, or Guereza (*Colobus guereza*).



African forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) at sunrise at Dzanga Bai, Dzanga-Sangha Special Reserve, Central African Republic.

Solutions include increased political will and zero-tolerance policy against corruption.

local level in Africa and therefore the appetite of poachers and traffickers including the rebel groups who use heavy weapons to carry out poaching. Because as far as heavy weapons will be used for poaching it will be difficult to curb the violence or militarization of national park protection. This can be combined with sensitization activities at the local level in order to breach the chain between indigenous and local communities and other links of the trafficking chain.'

What are the main challenges to reduce illegal wildlife trade in the Congo Basin?

AO: 'The main challenges include corruption and other related offences (complicity, influence peddling) which undermine all the efforts to reduce IWT.'

It is vital to intensify the work in demand countries in order to stop the demand that influences the prices on a local level in Africa.

Other challenges include poverty, which leads locals to engage in poaching for lack of other income-generating activities, insufficient resources (human, financial) to tackle poaching and IWT, the insufficient consideration of the impact and negative consequences of IWT.'

Are there opportunities and solutions which could be helpful to reduce commercial poaching and illegal wildlife trade in the Congo Basin?

AO: 'Few opportunities exist which include:

- The fact that IWT is kept high on the regional and international agenda and continues to attract donor interest;

- The fact that Congo Basin remains a priority eco-region because of its rich biodiversity;
- The existing partnerships between governments and key regional institutions – such as the partnership between the inter-governmental Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) – and partners including conservation organizations;
- The existence of transboundary nature conservation initiatives such as TRIDOM, TNS , Lac Tele-Lac Tumba and GVTC that are necessary to address the transnational nature of IWT.'

(TRIDOM comprises eleven protected areas in three countries including three national parks: Dja in Cameroon, Odzala in the Republic of Congo and Minkébé in Gabon. TNS – Trinational de la Sangha in French – comprises five national parks in Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. GVTC stands for The Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration, referring to the treaty of the same name in 2015 between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda. Ed.)

AO: 'Solutions include:

- Increased political will, including a zero-tolerance policy against corruption;
- Upholding the rule of law;
- Providing more resources (human and financial) to tackle poaching and IWT;
- Increase inter-agency and cross border collaboration to effectively tackle transboundary IWT;
- Empowering indigenous and local communities to effectively take part in protection efforts.'

Could setting up cattle farming and keeping pigs, goats, sheep and chicken help to reduce hunting?

AO: 'Cattle farming, keeping of pigs, goats, sheep and chicken have produced balanced results. In forest areas those activities didn't really help to reduce hunting because of the age-old cultures and traditions of consuming bushmeat, which is considered in those areas as a delicacy. Results

Local commercial poachers must be engaged in income-generating activities that are alternatives to poaching, such as fishponds, farming and crafting.

are better in savannah areas (Northern part of Cameroon) where communities don't really feel strongly about the culture of eating bushmeat.'

What could be incentives for restaurants in the Congo Basin to refrain from serving bushmeat?

AO: 'Incentives can come from sensitization and education of owners of these restaurants, consumers and the public in general, explaining that the economy would benefit more and continuously from wildlife alive, because wildlife species could attract tourists who would in their turn be customers of these restaurants. Other incentives could come from effective enforcement of wildlife regulations which provide deterrent penalties (imprisonment terms and fines) for those involved in IWT.'

Could you give an example of a case in the Congo Basin in which commercial poaching has been reduced or perhaps stopped successfully? Please explain.

AO: 'Without consistent data it is difficult to say if commercial poaching has been reduced or stopped. However some signs of poaching reduction have been

Illegal wildlife trade may cause a new pandemic in the future.

observed in Dzanga Sangha protected areas in Central African Republic in recent years, at least since 2016. These include a reduction in poaching signs such as animal carcasses, poaching camps observed in the forest, a reduction in ivory and weapons seizures and a reduction in the number of poachers arrested.'

What is your message to inhabitants of forest villages in the Congo Basin?

AO: 'Commercial poaching is a very lucrative illegal activity from which outsiders profit mostly and by which indigenous and local communities are affected mostly.'

It is vital to protect and conserve wildlife resources for sustainable livelihood and for income that could be generated from eco-tourism.'

What is your message to national governments of Congo Basin countries?

AO: 'Commercial poaching is a transnational organized crime which is very lucrative and deprives governments of economic resources from taxes and eco-tourism revenues. It is vital to provide front-line staff with adequate resources to tackle this plague, to establish conditions for inter-agency collaboration and to better involve indigenous and local communities in protection efforts.'

What is your message to governments of countries elsewhere in the world which are destinations of illegal wildlife trade products?

AO: 'Commercial poaching empties forests and deeply affects populations in source countries, especially indigenous and local communities. It is vital to close down wildlife local markets, strengthen controls in border areas and increase collaboration and cooperation through information exchange between source countries, transit countries and demand countries. Illegal wildlife trade poses a risk of unsafe interaction between human and wildlife, which may lead to the emergence of zoonosis that has caused the recent COVID-19 pandemic and may cause a new pandemic in the future.'

CONTACT INFORMATION

www.wwf-congobasin.org
Zero poaching toolkit: www.zeropoaching.com

For more information, contact:
Alain Ononino
Email: aononino@wwfcam.org
alainononino@yahoo.fr



A chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) from the Ngamba Island Chimpanzee Sanctuary in Uganda.



African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), Loango NP, Gabon. The elephants of Loango NP are known to cross rivers and lagoons and forage on the beach.