How to halt illegal wildlife trade

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?

AO: ‘Concerning the main actors inside and outside the Congo Basin it is important to distinguish between ivory and commercial bushmeat. Main actors in the ivory supply chain include: hunters mostly from indigenous peoples and local communities who are used to enter the forest to kill elephants; middlemen from various profiles including uniformed officers, local business men, local administrative authorities who live mostly in or close to small localities near the forest or along the trafficking routes and who are in charge of providing hunters with the necessary large hunting equipment and collecting back the ivories and ensure they are conveyed to exit areas (airports, seaports, other border areas) of countries. It is important to mention here that certain rebel groups operating on the African continent (Sudan, DRC, Nigeria) who are heavily armed with machine guns are also reported (although this is not sufficiently documented) to be involved in ivory poaching to finance their militias; kingpins found at exit areas who collect products from various middlemen and ensure they leave the supply and transit countries and reach the demand.

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

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

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

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

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Bushmeat for sale in the Congo Basin.
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.

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.’

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.

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 Télé-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.)

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

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

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

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

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 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.’