

CORRUPTION WITHIN THE ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE: A SYMBIOTIC AND ANTITHETICAL ENTERPRISE

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This study focuses on the role of corruption in facilitating the illegal wildlife trade. This research attempts to contribute to the literature by disentangling the existence, influence and nested nature of corruption within the illegal wildlife trade based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in China, Morocco, Russia and Uganda. By utilizing Passas' concepts of symbiotic and antithetical relationships as theoretical framework, we examine the presence of corruption within illegal wildlife trafficking. Our findings lend support for, and extend the framework with the concept of legal exploitation, while highlighting the unique nature of corrupt practices influenced by different socio-political and cultural settings. Symbiotic and antithetical relationships were revealed through qualitative fieldwork and provided in-depth knowledge behind the social world of wildlife trafficking.

Keywords: illegal markets, illegal wildlife trade, corruption, wildlife crime, ethnography, qualitative methods

Introduction

In recent years, wildlife crime has become an important and viable topic in criminology and criminal justice. This is due in part to the development of theoretical frameworks specifically tailored to crimes against or involving the environment (see [Gibbs et al. 2010](#); [South and Brisman 2013](#); [White and Heckenberg 2014](#)), as well as the use of established criminological frameworks, including techniques of neutralization ([Eliason and Dodder 1999](#)), differential association theory ([Eliason 1999](#)), routine activity approach ([Warchol and Harrington 2016](#)) and situational crime prevention ([Pires and Moreto 2011](#)). Criminal justice scholars have also examined an array of different topics including law enforcement ranger and conservation officer roles and responsibilities, community-relations, discretion, job stress and job satisfaction and corruption ([Forsyth 1993](#); [Carter 2006](#); [Shelley and Crow 2009](#); [Moreto et al. forthcoming](#); [Moreto and Matusiak 2017](#)) further establishing the role that both criminology and criminal justice have within this line of inquiry.

With relevance to the current study, researchers have examined a variety of wildlife crimes including poaching and the illegal trading of the world's fauna and flora ([Leberatto 2016](#); [Moreto and Lemieux 2015a](#); [2015b](#); [Pires and Clarke 2011](#); [Van Uhm 2016a](#); [2016b](#); [Van Uhm and Siegel 2016](#); [Warchol et al. 2003](#); [Wyatt 2009](#); [Zabyelina 2014](#)). The illicit market in flora and fauna has significant social, political, economic and ecological costs, and unique domestic and transnational characteristics. Domestic markets tend to involve the trading of products removed from rural, forest or tropical

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settings and sold in local markets or city centres. As a transnational crime, the illegal wildlife market involves multiple source, transit and destination countries (Van Uhm 2016b). Biodiversity-rich countries tend to fulfil the role of source countries, while developed states tend to be destination countries (Reeve 2002). Moreover, the complexity of transnational illegal wildlife market and the potential for sizable profits has raised concerns over the involvement of organized crime groups (Haken 2011; Zimmerman 2003) and the existence of corruption (Miller 2011; Sundström 2012; Moreto et al. 2015).

We focus on the latter in the current study. Although corruption appears to play a role in contributing to and facilitating the illegal wildlife trade¹, empirical research is lacking on the subject. This research attempts to contribute to the literature by disentangling the existence, influence and nested nature of corruption within the illegal wildlife trade. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in China, Morocco, Russia and Uganda and utilizing Passas' (2002) concepts of symbiotic and antithetical relationships as a theoretical framework, we examine the presence of corruption within the illicit wildlife market. Our findings lend support for Passas' framework, while also highlighting the unique nature of corrupt practices in different socio-political and cultural settings.

The Illegal Wildlife Trade

Considered to be one of the largest and most lucrative illicit markets in the world, the illegal wildlife market is believed to be valued between \$9 and 20US billion dollars annually, excluding fisheries and timber (Barber-Meyer 2010; Brack 2004; Broad et al. 2003; Ferrier 2009; Wilson-Wilde 2010).² While the complexity of markets will vary and depend on the species targeted, transportation logistics, processing requirements and trading dynamics, specific stages are often required (at times repeated) for successful progression of wildlife products through a market (cf. Moreto and Lemieux 2015a). The illegal wildlife market involves several different acts including the unlawful hunting, capturing, killing, removal of species; manufacturing and movement of the product through middlemen and suppliers; transportation and smuggling through domestic and international borders; and sale to the end buyer or consumer (Bowen-Jones 2003; Moreto and Lemieux 2015a; Wyatt 2013). In addition to the various stages, research has unravelled the existence and varying motivations of several actors involved in the trade, including poachers, middlemen, processors, transporters, traders/market sellers and consumers (Broad et al. 2003; Leberatto 2016; McMullan and Perrier 2002; Tailby and Gant 2002; Wyatt 2013).

There are different types of wildlife species that can be the target of an illegal market such as elephants, rhinoceros, tigers, pangolins, cacti and orchids. Importantly, one

¹For example, see John E. Scanlon's, the Secretary-General CITES Secretariat, presentation on corruption and the illegal trade in wildlife at the 6th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention Against Corruption (3 November 2015). Retrieved on 1 August 2016 from: https://cites.org/eng/news/sg/cites_sg_presentation_at_the_6th_session_of_the_conference_of_the_parties_to_the_un_convention_against_corruption_03112015

²However, due to the clandestine nature of the trade, such figures are purely approximations (Broad et al. 2003; Reeve 2002). Indeed, even official reported levels of legal wildlife trade have been found to be inaccurate and evidencing various levels of discrepancy (Blundell and Mascia 2005).

species can be traded for different reasons and can serve multiple purposes. Such products can be used for medicinal purposes, food, ornaments/furnishings, apparel/clothing, pets/hobbies, ornamental plants and manufacturing and construction (Broad et al. 2003; Reeve 2002). For example, a tiger can be divided into several products, including skin (apparel/clothing, ornaments/furnishings) and tiger bone (medicinal purposes). As such, a species can be introduced into the illegal market in various ways and can represent different monetary and symbolic values (Moreto and Lemieux 2015a). Due to the unique characteristics of wildlife products themselves (i.e. alive or dead products may require different stages and actors due to the different logistics involved), it has been argued that much more attention should be paid to how the products themselves can influence what stages are required and which actors need to be involved (Moreto and Lemieux 2015a).

Importantly, the implications of the illegal wildlife market are wide-ranging and have accelerated as a result of globalization as criminal entrepreneurs have taken advantage of improved transport and communication methods (UNODC 2016; Van Uhm 2016a). Geographically, the illegal wildlife trade appears to display unique spatial and temporal patterns (Kurland et al. 2017; Petrossian et al. 2016; Van Uhm 2016b). For instance, wildlife products appear to flow from developing to developed countries (Duffy 2010; Reeve 2002; Roe et al. 2002) with African and Southeast Asian countries being identified as main source countries for illegal wildlife (e.g. Lawson and Vines 2014; Rosen and Smith 2010; UNODC 2016; World Bank 2008). Recently, this was further supported by analyses of more than 20,000 wildlife seizures in the EU over a period of ten years with a marked concentration of confiscations from Africa and Southeast Asia (Van Uhm 2016b). However, it is important to note that such clear-cut designations (i.e. source compared to destination country) do not factor in situations where a country is both the source and destination as is the case for strong domestic demand for specific products (i.e., caviar in Russia). Furthermore, and similar to other transnational crimes that appear to operate in a similar fashion (e.g. drug trafficking, human trafficking, etc.), the critical assessment regarding the variability of transnational criminal networks (cf. Haken 2011) should be promoted in order to highlight the distinct nature of specific markets (e.g. ivory) within broader categories of trade (e.g. illegal wildlife trade).

Beyond the potential ecological implications (i.e., diminishing fauna and flora populations), the trade has significant local, regional and global economic implications by removing avenues for generating income or profit within legitimate markets. This is particularly detrimental in impoverished communities with limited or non-existent alternatives (Duffy 2010). Additionally, the introduction of unsanitary or unhygienic wildlife products could result in the unhealthy consumption or use of such products, as well as the introduction of pathogens, such as Ebola, SARS and Avian Influenza (Karesh et al. 2005; Wyler and Sheikh 2013). From a human rights perspective, the overt focus on species often results in neglecting how the illegal wildlife market impacts human beings. For instance, the link between labour trafficking and the illegal fishing industry have been found in the past (EJF 2010). Lastly, the potential links with organized crime, terrorism and corruption further highlights the breadth and scope of the issue (IFAW 2013; Zimmerman 2003), as well as explicitly displaying how the illegal wildlife trade should be on the agenda of criminologists.

Corruption Within the Context of Conservation

In general, corruption can negatively impact conservation by reducing the effectiveness of conservation programs by reducing financial resources, law enforcement and political support, as well as establishing incentives for the overexploitation of resources (Smith and Walpole 2005). Corrupt practices can also undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of laws and regulations. Indeed, corruption can have ‘the effect of diluting the sanctions for non-compliance’ (Damania 2002), while also reducing the trust placed on government authorities (Infield and Namara 2001). Not surprisingly, corruption within the illegal wildlife trade is viewed as an indicator of the presence of organized crime groups due to its potential role in facilitating transnational trading and transportation and negating the impact of law enforcement, politicians and other government officials (Zimmerman 2003).

Studies examining the role of corruption within the context of environmental policy has also demonstrated links with political instability and state failure (Fredriksson and Svensson 2003; Irland 2008).³ Moreover, it has been argued that countries with rich biodiversity density are subject to the ‘resource curse’ in that despite having high levels of natural resources, they receive reduced levels of development and support and are subject to higher levels of corruption (Kolstad and Søreide 2009: 214). Notably, some researchers have also discussed the potential *benefits* of corruption on biodiversity conservation, further highlighting the complexity of the issue. For example, Katzner (2005) found that countries with low scores on the corruption perception index (CPI)⁴ had higher losses in farmland birds than states with more corruption. Previous studies examining the role of corruption and environment-related issues have included pollution and emission control (Damania 2002), recreational hunting (Leader-Williams et al. 2009), small-scale fisheries (Sundström 2012), and wildlife law enforcement (Moreto et al. 2015).

Crime Symbiosism and Antitheticalism

Many crimes are regularly intertwined with other activities, including legal and other illegal undertakings. For example, previous scholars have acknowledged the involvement of legally registered companies in criminal activities (e.g. Braithwaite 1984; Sutherland 1949) and the relationships between the upper- and underworld (Van Duyne et al. 2002; Van de Bunt et al. 2014). The wildlife trade is no exception as anecdotal evidence suggests that it overlaps with drugs or arms trafficking (e.g. Reeve 2002; South and Wyatt 2011; Wyler and Sheikh 2013). Moreover, legal entities have also been found to be involved within the trade with such places providing an avenue for illegal wildlife contraband to be laundered, sold, traded and transported (e.g. Knapp et al. 2006; Li et al. 2007; Nooren and Claridge 2001; Pantel and Chin 2009; Van Uhm 2016a).⁵ For instance, a recent study by Van Uhm (2016b) examined

³Generally, the source countries for the trade in wildlife include some of the poorest countries with the richest sources of biodiversity from the South, while the demand originates from highly developed Northern countries (Van Uhm 2016a).

⁴See <http://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview> for more information on the CPI.

⁵This is especially noteworthy for our purposes given that some wildlife products have both legitimate and illicit markets (e.g. caviar, TCM).

confiscations of wildlife in the European Union confirmed this nexus; over 30% of perpetrators involved were legal actors (e.g. legally registered animal traders). In essence, there appears to be a cooperative and collaborative association between both illegal-illegal and legal-illegal activities and entities within the illegal wildlife trade.

Symbiotic relationships between legal and illegal actors can manifest in multiple ways: first, 'outsourcing' occurs when a division of labour is agreed upon between legal and illegal actors, where one of the parties provides uniquely distinct services to the other. Not only does outsourcing increase the efficiency of a transaction, but it may also be more convenient. Furthermore, delegating activities provides at least one of the parties with 'plausible deniability' should such questionable undertakings be known (Passas 2002: 22). 'Collaboration' is another type of symbiotic relationship and involves a more sustained and direct association between legal and illegal parties. In such relationships, both groups are attempting to successfully complete the same offense. Unlike a 'reciprocal' relationship, which involves a common understanding as well as mutual benefits, 'co-optation' is premised on unequal power relations resulting in a more coercive partnership for one of the parties. 'Funding' is another type of symbiotic relationship that can occur between legal and illegal actors. In such cases, a legitimate organization may knowingly or unknowingly provide funding to criminals (Passas 2002).

Dissimilar from the previous types of relationships that may require the explicit knowledge of the actors involved, 'systemic synergy' does not necessitate individuals to know about one another's activities or role. In other words, due to existing structural factors, both legal and illegal actors co-exist in a manner that encourages their own goals and interests. Additionally, criminals are not always engaging in crime and must also participate in non-criminal activities. Such 'legal interactions' facilitate an opportunity where an offender can contribute to legitimate businesses, while reducing the risk and maximizing benefits. Notably, Passas (2002) also suggested that 'legal actors committing organized crimes' is another form of a symbiotic relationship, however, as he originally observed, such individuals often 'behave in a typical illegal-actor fashion' or are simply considered 'legal' due to their unscrupulous behaviour (25).

In addition to symbiotic relationships, legal and illegal actors may also engage in antithetical relationships, where there are opposite interests. During an 'antagonistic' relationship, there is competition between legal and illegal actors vying for market share. A connection may also include actors that undermine, attack or harm each other; an 'injurious' relationship. In this case, a legal actor uses contentious techniques from illegal players to impair competitors. Another interconnection may be seen as a 'parasitical' relationship when illegal benefits can be extorted on a more or less regular basis when armed protection is sold to entrepreneurs. For instance, when Chinese triads provide protection to Chinese business owners. Finally, a 'predatory' relationship occurs when the aim is to destroy another company, e.g. when organized crime groups try to dominate the real estate market (Passas 2002). For this study, we utilize Passas' legal-illegal interface as a theoretical framework to investigate the manifestation of corruption within the illegal wildlife market.

Corruption and the Illegal Wildlife Market: Symbiotic and Antithetical Perspectives

Approaching corruption within the illegal wildlife trade from a symbiotic and antithetical perspective acknowledges the potential overlap and interdependence between different illegal and legal activities. This is especially noteworthy for our purposes given that some wildlife products have both legitimate and illicit markets (e.g. the caviar trade). Moreover, the interconnectedness between the legal and illegal world may consist of a variety of components (see [Van Duyne et al. 2002](#)). Indeed, [Ruggiero and South \(2010\)](#) introduced the term ‘dirty-collar crimes’ to highlight the legal–illegal interface in environmental crimes. In such cases, legally registered wildlife companies use their legal infrastructures to trade in illegal wildlife (e.g. [Knapp et al. 2006](#); [Li et al. 2007](#); [Nooren and Claridge 2001](#); [Pantel and Chin 2009](#)).

Additionally, collaboration between legal and illegal actors highlights the role of reciprocity within the legal and illegal domain, particularly through the use of social and informal ties. Here emerges the potential role of corrupt officials or professionals such as lawyers, politicians, accountants, bankers and police officers that offer their services to criminal organizations ([Felson 2006](#); [Passas 2002](#)). Although a discussion on the impact of evolving cultures on moral values is beyond the scope of this paper (see e.g., [Fu and Chiu 2007](#); [Harrison and Huntington 2000](#); [Lam et al. 1999](#)), we emphasize how such reciprocity will be perceived differently in diverse settings as sociocultural variation will result in similar activities being viewed deviant to socially acceptable normative activities ([Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006](#); [Olivier de Sardan 1999](#); [Siegel 2009](#)). Here reciprocity plays a fundamental role as there are consciously mutual benefits for both legal and illegal players ([Felson 2006](#); [Passas 2002](#)).

Study Objectives

The current study contributes to the growing criminological literature on wildlife crime by investigating the existence of corruption within the illegal wildlife market from a symbiotic and antithetical perspective. We utilized a case study approach based on interviews and field observations. Case study research attempts to ‘understand a real-life phenomenon in depth’ while also recognising the underlying and overreaching ‘contextual conditions’ ([Yin 2009](#): 18).

The following case studies are drawn from our combined fieldwork in four distinct countries: China, Morocco, Russia and Uganda. The study areas were chosen due to their role within the illegal wildlife trade, as well as their variability in geography and culture. By examining corruption in various settings, the adaptability and generalizability of our theoretical framework can be better investigated. A content analysis of media reports also supplemented our primary data.

We attempt to advance previous research by generating insight from these data to provide a better understanding of how corruption manifests in different settings and in different illicit wildlife markets. Notably, the existing literature examining corruption within conservation has been based on quantitative analyses; few qualitative studies have been performed. We argue that qualitative methods are especially useful in unravelling the presence and prevalence of corruption within specific settings as such approaches may be more amendable to different contexts. Indeed, corruption within one context (e.g. abuse of public officials for private gains) may have an elusive meaning

in another. Moreover, failing to recognise the potentially normative nature of some corrupt activities (e.g. gifts) neglects the moral and social nature of such activities within a specific culture or context (Siegel 2011).

Methodology

Importantly, using our data to provide a comparative discussion on corruption within conservation was not the initial objective of our individual studies and the potential of such a study only occurred to us upon the completion of data collection and after much discussion. In other words, we synthesized disparate qualitative data sources to unravel themes that crosscut different settings. In this specific case, data obtained from China, Morocco and Russia were for one broader study on wildlife trafficking, while the Uganda data was focused on examining wildlife law enforcement culture and operations.

Data collection occurred between September and October 2012 (Uganda), March and April 2013 (Morocco), November and December 2013 (China) and March and September 2014 (Russia). Study participants were identified using purposeful sampling in all four countries and were approached due to their familiarity or involvement with the illegal wildlife trade or their role in its monitoring or prevention. In total, 168 study participants were interviewed for this study ($n = 68$ in China, $n = 32$ in Morocco, $n = 44$ in Russia and $n = 24$ in Uganda). Interviews attempted to tap into the respondents' knowledge on the various modus operandi and network structures of individuals involved in various illegal wildlife markets. The semi-structured nature of the interviews afforded the authors the ability to probe for additional information, when necessary. When possible, interviews were recorded using a recording device and later transcribed. For situations where study participants did not wish to be recorded, detailed notes were taken. In addition to in-depth interviews, we also obtained useful information through informal discussions and direct observations. Such information was valuable in further contextualizing the data obtained during the interviews, as well as corroborating or refuting information derived from respondents.

Initial or open coding was first performed on our data. Initial coding requires the careful examination of separated sections of transcribed data in order to identify similarities and differences (Saldana 2009). Next, pattern coding was conducted to unravel underlying and overreaching constructs or themes necessary for theoretical categorization (Maxwell 2005; Miles and Huberman 1994). In order to complete the comparative and cohesive analysis necessary for this study, secondary pattern coding was conducted again, however, we were now guided by a symbiotic and antithetical framework.

Our research is not without its limitations. The analysis of regional case studies shed light on the naturalistic and empirical reality of corrupt activities in their unique social and cultural settings, thus providing more reliable insights into the norms underpinning the illegal wildlife trade. Simultaneously, this results in limited attention on the cross-national nature of corruption along the entire flow of wildlife through transnational moral economies. In addition, we are cognizant of potential problems associated with the credibility, dependability and transferability of our research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Moreover, given the sensitive nature of our topic, we are aware of questions related to the honesty of our study participants. In order to strengthen the

credibility and dependability of our research, we utilized a variety of methods to document and record our field notes in a timely manner and triangulated our interviews with observations and media accounts. The fieldwork nature of our study also enabled us to cross-check initial concepts with study participants throughout the data collection phase. Additionally, while potential interaction effects, including ‘error from the respondent’, whereby the respondent’s self-awareness of their involvement may alter their responses or behaviours (Webb et al. 1966) was most likely present, we believe we were able to mitigate such issues by being straightforward and forthright with our study participants. Further, we believe that our status as doctoral students at the time of data collection helped assuage some concerns held by respondents by highlighting the academic nature of our inquiry as opposed to a more investigative one (see also Moreto, Forthcoming). Finally, while our research is not necessarily statistically generalizable to other settings, our findings may be generalizable at a theoretical level (Yin 2009).

Findings

Our findings contribute to and extend the current empirical literature on the illegal wildlife trade by examining the existence and manifestation of corruption within the trade. Moreover, our research supports the symbiotic and antithetical framework we employed. For the present study, care and diligence was taken to ensure that the provided passages represented the most recurrent themes conveyed by our study participants. The following quotations are presented verbatim and pseudonyms are used to conceal the identities of study participants. Notably, rather than simply display evidence from each case study of the existence of symbiotic and antithetical relationships (summarised in Table 1), we emphasize and situate our themes within the broader socio-cultural and political landscape of their unique settings.

China

Gift giving is a common cultural practice in China in all areas of life, both in informal relations and in dealing with official institutions. Reciprocity is a foundation in the Chinese social intercourse as accepting a gift without reciprocity is perceived as morally wrong (Steidlmeier 1999). The Chinese practice of *guānxi* (關係) is the basic dynamic in Chinese personalized networks of influence and refers to favours gained from social connections. The Chinese largely rely on this form of personal informal network for many aspects of their life and reciprocal benefits are necessary to maintaining one’s *guanxi* (Gold and Guthrie 2002; Myers 1995; Yeung and Tung 1996; Zhang et al. 2009). This provides a familiar framework for illegal wildlife businesses with low penetrability as it creates an effective insider-outsider system; enforcement agents are regularly outside the *guanxi* trading relationship (Myers 1995).

Family, cultural and ethnic ties play an important role in different stages in the wildlife trade in China. Business partners would preferably belong to the same ethnic Chinese group from the same region and social ties with family and friends would guarantee the secure network. Our findings suggest that social ties with officials occur frequently in the illegal wildlife trade. For example, border officials take advantage of their privileged access to confiscated wildlife contraband to obtain goods that they

TABLE 1 *Legal–illegal interface within the illegal wildlife trade*

Country	Poaching		Transporting		Processing		Trading	
	Actors	Relationship	Actors	Relationship	Actors	Relationship	Actors	Relationship
Symbiotic	China		Border officials—TCM traders	Reciprocal Collaboration	Government officials—TCM traders	Legal exploitation ^a	Police—TCM traders	Reciprocal
	Morocco	Rangers—poachers Guides—poachers Government officials—hunters	Military—transporters Police officials—traders/ transporters	Reciprocal Collaboration Reciprocal			Pet shopkeepers—illegal traders	Collaboration
	Russia	Police—poachers Military—poachers	Police/ border officials—transporters	Reciprocal Co-optation Collaboration	Collaboration Reciprocal	Government officials—fish farms	Police—caviar traders Legal caviar traders—illegal traders Rangers	Co-optation Collaboration Reciprocal Collaboration Reciprocal Legal exploitation
	Uganda	Rangers—poachers Politicians—poachers Military—poachers	Diplomats	Reciprocal outsourcing Funding Outsourcing Collaboration	Legal exploitation			Legal exploitation
Antithetical	China						Legal TCM traders—illegal traders Legal caviar traders—illegal traders	Antagonistic Antagonistic Injurious
	Russia	Police—poachers		Parasitical injurious				
	Uganda	Police and judges—poachers		Injurious				

^aLegal exploitation is not originally part of Passas' (2002) legal–illegal interface and was identified in this study.

can sell to contacts involved in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). For such informal reciprocal agreements, *guanxi* was acknowledged as a vital determinant as to whether individuals would collaborate with one another. As one respondent explained: ‘Middlemen do have such relations with border officials [...] If you have money and *guanxi*, you can pay the border control’ (Cheung). This informant underlined that the favours gained from social ties is fundamental in this reciprocal relationship to benefit from these special services.

In another example of how a symbiotic relationship can occur within the illegal TCM trade occurs when goods are seized from airline flights. For instance, one representative of a well-known TCM trading company outlined: ‘If smugglers from Myanmar and Laos are caught and the Chinese police seize a rhino horn, they resell it to us illegally. If the stuff (rhino horn) is confiscated by an international airline, they (government officials) burn it’ (Lihua). In addition to this collaborative relationship, respondents alluded to situations where army personnel would utilize their position to allow traffickers to cross borders unimpeded. As one middleman in Anguo admitted: ‘My friend works as a soldier at the Guangxi border. Through this connection I can pass the orders across the border’ (Zhen). Several TCM doctors interviewed also highlighted how TCM clinics would develop a reciprocal relationship with government officials. Specifically, TCM clinics would pay government officials with gifts or money to sell certain products, such as pangolin scales or saiga horn. One TCM doctor in Chengdu described how government officials did not formally protect TCM traders, but did make arrangements so that other officials do not disturb or stop them. For example, it was suggested that such officials would utilize their own connections and networks to ensure that specific TCM clinics would not be inspected. Another TCM doctor explained that ‘[i]f you can pay enough [gifts or other services] you can sell the products’ (Hua). Some study participants surmised that the diplomatic immunity afforded to such officials was one of the main reasons as to why they helped TCM traders, while others believed that the existence of an informal TCM market alongside the official provides opportunities for bribes (see also [Nooren and Claridge 2001](#)).

On the other hand, antithetical relations exist between legally registered TCM companies and illegal TCM traders in the context of competition; the same species were illegally offered on the black market. For example, both saiga horns and pangolin scales are sold by legitimate companies, but generally are illegal and hidden under the counter in plastic bags or pangolins are mainly kept in glass jars ([Van Uhm 2016a](#)). Finally, study participants explained that the existence of tiger farms and corrupt activity resulted in the continued use of tiger parts for TCM. In the 1980s two tiger farms were developed by the Chinese government to breed tigers for the commercial supply of bones for TCM.⁶ While the government banned the use of tiger products in TCM in 1993, respondents stated how government officials still provide legal documents to tiger farms to produce and sell banned tiger bone wines. Since this type of activity is not within [Passas’ \(2002\)](#) original framework, we refer to this type of activity as ‘legal exploitation’. We can speak of *legal exploitation* when legal actors issue authorisations for transactions that are used for illegal activities by illegal actors. In this case, it is not

⁶For instance, in the early 1990s Guilin Xionsen Tigers and Bears Mountain Village, with 400 captive-bred tigers at that time, regularly supplied bones to the TCM industry and a factory in Harbin manufactured half a million tiger bone plasters each day with a bone-crushing machine ([Nowell 2000](#)).

necessarily that legal and illegal actors benefit each other ('systemic synergy') or that consciously mutual benefits between the legal and illegal actors exist ('reciprocity' or 'even exchanges'). Several TCM traders confirmed that they buy their tiger products from tiger farms in China. As offered by one employee of a tiger farm:

Government officials allow us to sell the wine. They gave us a certificate to sell the tiger bone wine, because we have many tigers. [...] Around 100 tigers are born and a lot of our tigers die every year. [...] Yes, all tigers that have died here are kept in ice. (Huan)

In the previous example, a hierarchical form of the legal–illegal interface arises as TCM traders illegally obtain tiger parts from legal tiger farms through the corrupt activities of government officials. In other words, symbiotic relationships appear to occur at different stages of the illegal TCM trade and can cross the legal–illegal boundary multiple times throughout the market continuum. In general, our case study on corruption within the illegal wildlife trade in China shows the important role that the *guanxi* practice of gifts has on developing symbiotic relationships among legal and illegal actors, as well as how the existence of legal captive tiger breeding farms facilitates an opportunity for tiger products to be illegal introduced into the TCM market.

Morocco

'Morocco has been spared weapons of mass destruction, but it is being destroyed by weapons of mass corruption' is an often-heard statement in the kingdom. Three drivers of corruption in Morocco⁷ include the degree of impunity for individuals and members of powerful institutions, the symbiosis between political and economic interests and, finally, the large informal economy (Denoeux 2007). Relevant here are the informal markets or the *souks* (السوق), which stand in sharp contrast to the Western industrial model of doing business whereby different types of trading intertwine (Ilahiane and Sherry 2008). In addition, the geographic presence of Spanish territory (i.e., the cities of Melilla and Ceuta) on the north Moroccan coast represents an important factor in its status as a corrupt 'smuggler's paradise' between Africa and Europe. Historically, smuggling has been a part of life in the northern Rif of Morocco, but grew when the population almost doubled between the 1960s and 1970s (McMurray 2001; Parnell and Kane 2003).

Besides the illegal trade in drugs and human migration, the illegal wildlife trade from African wildlife, such as live monkeys, tortoises and big cat skins has become a major area of interest for smugglers (e.g. Bergin and Nijman 2014; Cowdrey 2002; Highfield and Bayley 1996; Van Uhm 2016c). Evidence of corrupt practices was regularly identified in our fieldwork in Morocco, particularly as it relates to the illegal trade in the Barbary macaque, an endangered monkey species in Morocco. For example, the illegal trade in the Barbary macaque started in the 1990s when such wildlife was obtained for biomedical research. Specifically, hunters exploited the obligatory certificates as a means to catch additional macaques for the retail trade. As one former hunter explained:

⁷Transparency International (2009) underlined that corruption is a major problem in Morocco; 58 percent of households who had contact with the police in 2008 reported paying bribes.

This was the beginning of the large-scale illegal trade in Barbary macaques. Sometimes ten monkeys were captured, while only one was needed for biomedical research. The remaining monkeys were sold for the pet industry (Amir).

Unlike our case study in China, that emphasized the legal–illegal interface through the interaction amongst and between different actors, the abuse of scientific certificates shows the legal–illegal interface through structural factors, but still represents legal exploitation. Notably, capturing macaques for biomedical research is no longer legal because the species is excluded from the list for biomedical research primate species, but the illegal monkey trade has become a lucrative market and continues to flourish in Morocco (Van Uhm 2016c). Another example of corruption we identified involved informal agreements between local villagers and poachers living in the Berber village of Azrou. Based on our fieldwork, it was well known who was involved in the illegal trade of macaques here. Moreover, symbiotic arrangements between poachers and local villagers were established to ensure that poaching occurred outside the tourist spots in the Cedar Forest in Azrou. This reciprocal relationship was to ensure that the financial benefits obtained from eco-tourism were not impacted. In return, guides, lumberjacks and forest rangers would refer potential buyers of macaques to poachers for 100 Dirham ($\pm\text{€}10$) commission. As one of the forest rangers interviewed admitted crime symbiosis: ‘Of course we know them [the poachers]. They have cages in their backyards to keep the monkeys.’ He added how the poachers and guides also ‘originate from the same villages’ and ‘work together’ (Hassan).

Finally, pet shopkeepers and illegal traders collaborate for the commission of sold macaques in pet stores and then the macaques have to be smuggled across the Strait of Gibraltar through Spain into Europe. Study participants explained how police encountered during this journey could be simply bribed also displaying a reciprocal agreement. Indeed, several traders explained how there was low chance of being apprehended due to the potential of bribing officials. As one trader discussed: ‘If the police stop you, you just say it is a present for a friend to show that it is not a structural (commercial) business [...] Then you bribe them for 300 Dirham ($\pm\text{€}30$)’ (Samir).

Russia

Political transformations can also play an important role in terms of corruption. In the case of Russia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of existing regulation systems, a weakening of law-enforcement systems and the emergence of Russian criminal groups, including the Russian *mafia* (русская мафия). Corruption played a ‘greasing’ role in facilitating the reforms during the transitional period (Simis 1982). However, in the post-Soviet period, corruption became a fundamental aspect of many parts of the Russian society (Varese 1997). Numerous reports highlight forms of corruption, even in the highest parts of society. Corruption became a method to control the state officials and to maintain loyalty in the context of growing poverty and property differentiations.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the involvement of criminal networks and corrupt officials in the overexploitation of wildlife was also noticed by several investigations (e.g. Birstein et al. 1997; Raymakers 2002). Police, inspectors and even mayors became involved in illegal wildlife trafficking. For example, in Dagestan, several high-level

officials had their own trawlers to poach on sturgeons, such as the Procurator of the Republic, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Chief of the Water Police and the Chief of the Fish Inspectorate (Vaisman 1997). Our research supports previous studies and media accounts that suggest that coastguards, police and customs officials are involved in the trade. Ironically, the prevalence of corruption led to one police respondent in Dagestan to declare: ‘I am famous as being a fascist, because I do not take bribes’ (Dmitry). Study participants believed that government officials utilized their status to facilitate the illegal caviar trade in several ways.

First, bribed officials would allow poachers to access to sturgeon in the Caspian Sea. While some agreements were reciprocal, others were considered to be more coercive and operated in a co-optation fashion. Study participants explained that each poaching trip would cost approximately 1,500 USD in bribes. Regardless of the relationship, several poachers underlined the importance of being able to access sturgeon with the help of police officials. A poacher in the Babayurt region of Dagestan acknowledged how ‘[we] work together with the police and inspectors. They know what is going on and of course we pay them an amount of money to poach the sturgeon’ (Vladimir). Another poacher explained that ‘we mark our boat with a white dot so that they can see during a helicopter patrol that we have paid some bribes. Then they do not control the boat’ (Georgiy).

In addition to facilitating access, respondents also admitted that they were protected by the police as well. Respondents mentioned that local ‘security vessels’ are used to escort the poachers and to distract the federal police. This type of protection is referred to as *krysha* (Крыша) and is not limited to police protection, but includes both criminal and military protection as well (Volkov 2002). Such protection-focused agreements can fall within Passas’ (2002) parasitical relationship. Notably, several injurious conflicts have been documented in the past where armed militias have protected poachers against federal authorities (e.g. Vaisman 1997; Knapp et al. 2006). Other respondents also noted how police and customs officials would actively be involved in enabling contraband to be transported and smuggled demonstrating collaborative and reciprocal relationships. For example, airport and customs officials were identified as being directly involved in facilitating the transporting of illegal caviar. As one respondent offered:

I have a phone number of an official at the border control at the airport of Atyrau. Do not worry, he arranges everything so that you can fly to Russia or to Europe [...] Of course, he will receive a commission (Aydin).

Similar to our Moroccan case study, respondents also referred to situations where illegal fishing occurred under the appearance of scientific purposes. In other words, some commercial farms are permitted to fish for sturgeons under a scientific quota on behalf of research facilities. However, this provided an opportunity for corrupt fisheries to harvest beyond the set quota. Such legal exploitation often required the involvement of police officials as well. As one farm director clarified: ‘Two well-known sturgeon farms bribed officials to catch the wild sturgeons under the scientific quota [and] used the catch for the illegal trade.’ She further added, ‘Too often an official is involved’ (Svetlana). In accordance with the legal–illegal TCM interface, antagonistic relations between legally registered caviar traders and illegal caviar traders existed; both legal and illegal caviar was offered on the markets in Russia in the context of competition.

Uganda

Finally, we discuss the potential role of low-level and high-level corruption within the scope of protected area (PA) management in Uganda. Low-level or ‘everyday’ corruption is considered to be normative behaviour due to its ‘unconscious and automatic’ nature (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006: 5), while high-level (also referred to as ‘grand’ or ‘political’ corruption) involves activities by politicians, ambassadors and other state-level officials (Lowenstein 2013). In general, it is widely believed that corruption is ‘severe, well-known, [and] cuts across many sectors’ (Human Rights Watch 2013: 2) within Uganda.⁸

Low-level corruption can involve rangers that operate within PAs, the police, local judges and local government leaders. Study participants explained several examples of rangers engaging in reciprocal arrangements with poachers whereby rangers would accept bribes in exchange for patrol information (see also Moreto et al. 2015). For example, one respondent explained how rangers would often ‘get in turn some money’ (David) for providing patrol information to poachers. Additionally, respondents explained how rangers themselves would be directly involved in poaching activities as well with one respondent admitting how he ‘witnessed [a ranger] been killing animals’ (Douglas).

Some respondents also explained that rangers would collaborate or ‘connive’ with community members as a means of outsourcing illegal activity. This was to ensure that rangers had plausible deniability by making sure that they were not the ones directly committing the acts themselves. As one ranger explained: ‘[Rangers] conniving with the communities ‘cause he doesn’t want himself to fall into the act directly. He wants to use another person’ (Douglas). Additionally, rangers are also believed to take advantage of their privileged access to obtain seized goods and re-introduce these products back into the market. Recently, an incident occurred in November 2014 when five officials from the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) were suspended after 1.5 tons of ivory disappeared from the evidence storage room and allegations of corruption surfaced.⁹

Acts of police and judge corruption were also described by respondents as it related to illegal activities that occurred within PAs. Such injurious agreements between poachers, police and other representatives of the criminal justice system not only undermined the effectiveness and legitimacy of the Uganda Wildlife Authority, but such a setting fostered an atmosphere where rangers may engage in similar activities due to the weakened moral environment (see Moreto et al. 2015). One ranger expressed his frustration on how an ivory investigation simply ‘evaporated [...] because the police, who were supposed to help us [...] got compromised’ resulting in suspects receiving a ‘soft landing’ from the courts (Paul).

Importantly, the involvement of high-level corruption was also described by respondents and identified within the media as well. For instance, a commission of inquiry was

⁸In fact, a recent survey public attitude survey conducted by Afrobarometer (2016) shows that the majority of respondents believed that most or some government officials were involved in corruption (34.1 and 38.9%, respectively). Notably, over 88 percent of respondents believed that some, most, or all of the police were involved in corruption. Moreover, over half of the respondents believed that the level of corruption within the country had increased within the last year (51.6%).

⁹Retrieved on January 17th 2016 from: <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-07-10/corruption-worsens-already-devastating-illegal-wildlife-trade-uganda>

developed to investigate the mismanagement of a 95 billion-shilling (approximately 27 million USD) World Bank loan that was meant to improve wildlife conservation.¹⁰ Additionally, although respondents explained how much of the poaching in Uganda could be attributed to subsistence and cultural beliefs, they also explained how some poaching was for commercial purposes (see [Moreto and Lemieux 2015b](#)). This was especially the case for poaching that involved elephants. For example, one ranger proposed that the ‘killing of elephants is involving a lot of people’ including ‘big, big people’ (Adam). He further added:

Even the security personnel (military) [and] the politicians [are involved] in this business of killing elephants for ivory. This business for commercial business. You find people, big people with high ranks involved in poaching [...] So it is internally being involved by politicians and the very high ranked, so this is why it is so rampant.

Specifically, respondents explained how politicians would outsource and fund poachers to hunt and kill wildlife. If caught, ‘the boss who send them’ (Adam) would simply pay the fine. Respondents also described how the payment of fines was not necessary as some individuals would simply use their political influence to ensure that suspects were released without any punishment. Some rangers also surmised that political influence, not surprisingly, often hindered investigations that attempted to unravel deeply entrenched corrupt practices at various stages of the illegal wildlife market within Uganda. Indeed, respondents even described how other trusted bodies operating beyond and within Uganda’s borders demonstrated the deep-seated nature of corruption within the illegal wildlife trade. For instance, individuals may take advantage of their diplomatic immunity to easily manoeuvre through borders. As one respondent elaborated:

So in Congo, we have had even complaints and suspicion of the UN involvement. There’s a mission, a UN mission, they’re called ‘MONUC’ (United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Involvement in poaching. Because, you know, they have diplomatic immunity. They can put ivory [and] transport it. Just cross inspection routes without being checked [...] One time we actually got parrots. They were taking parrots to South Africa, but they were landing in Entebbe [airport]. (Paul)

Discussion and Conclusion

Our research on the presence of corrupt activities within the illegal wildlife trade and its different manifestations within diverse settings presents a unique opportunity to extend both the criminological and conservation science literature. The findings from our case studies supports the existence and variability of corrupt activities within the scope of the illegal wildlife trade. It is clear that within the different settings (China, Morocco, Russia and Uganda) and as it pertains to different types of wildlife products (TCM, macaques, caviar and ivory), corruption exists as a means to facilitate and to ensure the progression of products throughout the market continuum.

¹⁰Retrieved on January 4th 2016 from: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112040059.html>

Moreover, the existence of corruption in our study areas displays its socially embedded nature during day-to-day dealings and interactions suggesting its normative nature. Further, the fieldwork results illustrate that corruption in the illegal wildlife trade is influenced by cultural, political and social aspects. First, the reciprocity of *guanxi* appears to play a fundamental role in the Chinese culture and social interactions and provides a familiar informal framework with low penetrability and therefore opportunities for corruption during wildlife trafficking. Second, corrupt practices are regularly embedded in the social network of the illegal wildlife trade in Morocco. This has been illustrated by the *souks* where legal and illegal businesses intertwine. Third, the political transformation of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of existing regulation systems and thereby fostering opportunities for criminal networks that operate within the wildlife trade. Fourth, low- and high-level corruption as it relates to the illegal wildlife trade in Uganda seems to be widespread and encompasses multiple actors engaged in varying dynamics and relationships.

Furthermore, our research highlights the existence of these various symbiotic and antithetical relationships in the illegal wildlife trade that exist amongst and between legitimate and illegitimate actors in different geographic and social contexts. To illustrate the social interaction between the legal and illegal actors, we demonstrate the applicability of Passas' (2002) legal-illegal interface in this study of corruption and the illegal wildlife trade. Moreover, we were able to identify the existence of both the symbiotic relations, outsourcing, collaboration, reciprocal, co-optation and funding and antithetical relations, antagonistic and injurious within our study. Notably, we also extended the framework to include the activities that involve 'legal exploitation'. By drawing from and extending Passas' (2002) framework, we are able to provide a more nuanced understanding of the existence and role that corrupt activities hold within the illegal wildlife trade. Moreover, by better unravelling the actors and stages involved, a crime-specific approach may be utilized to identify ways to reduce opportunities for corruption (i.e. Gorta 1998).

Our study demonstrates the value of conducting challenging and difficult qualitative fieldwork in efforts to better conceptualize a phenomenon understood largely through anecdotal information. By providing insight on various aspects of corruption as it relates to wildlife crime in different settings, our study modestly contributes to both the criminological and conservation science literature, while also providing a foundation for future studies to extend on. Importantly, in addition to exhibiting the role of qualitative research within quantitatively-inclined disciplines (cf. Drury et al. 2011), the present study may also inform measures and metrics. Indeed, as noted by King et al. (1994: 44), '[i]t is pointless to seek to explain what we have *not* described with a reasonable degree of precision'. Our study also modestly contributes to calls from both criminologists (e.g. LaFree 2007) and conservation scientists (e.g. Mascia et al. 2003) for interdisciplinary scholarship, while also providing a cross-national comparison of corruption. Indeed, given the subjective and ambiguous nature of corruption, such comparative research like the present study provides an opportunity to better understand its complexity, related value judgments and its link with other crimes (cf. Zimring and Johnson 2005).

This study suggests that corruption exists in different social and cultural capacities throughout the illegal wildlife trade. Both symbiotic and antithetical relationships were revealed through our qualitative fieldwork in China, Morocco, Russia and Uganda and

provided in-depth knowledge behind the social world of wildlife trafficking. The existence and influence of corrupt practices reflect the unique features of wildlife crimes within the fundamental legal-illegal nexus and demonstrates how corruption is able to manifest in various political and economic environments.

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