

Organised crime in the wildlife trade

D.P. van Uhm, MA (PhD candidate criminology, Utrecht University)

Centre for Information and Research on Organised Crime

September 2012

Keywords: Wildlife trade, organised crime, environmental crime, smuggling animals, endangered species, CITES, laundering

Introduction

In 2011, in the neighbourhood of Losser in the Netherlands, Dutch authorities kept their eye on a suspicious Irish group, which was apparently selling generators and power tools. At that time, there was insufficient evidence to link the group to criminal activities, except for a report of harassment filed by a rhinoceros horn owner. Coincidentally or not, a year later an Irish organised crime group was found to be responsible for the theft of rhinoceros horns, which were being sold on the black market for more than \$35.000 per kilo (Enforcement Support Officer, 2012).

According to Europol (2012), more than 100 rhinoceros horns were stolen from museums and private collections in 16 European countries between 2011 and 2012. The Irish organised crime group was linked to many of these thefts; we obviously live in a time where even dead rhinos are hunted.

Although the rhinoceros is nearly extinct, there is a high demand for its horn. China, Vietnam and Thailand have been identified as both transit and consumer areas (UNODC, 2010). Despite the fact that there is no scientific evidence of its healing qualities, the powder or shavings of the horns are widely used in traditional Chinese medicine. Moreover, illegal rhino hunting is increasing significantly: a stunning number of 448 rhinos were poached in South Africa alone last year compared to 13 killed in 2007 (DEA, 2012).

To what extent are these groups organised? Besides the theft of rhino horns, the Irish crime group is also involved in tarmac fraud, the distribution of counterfeit products, organised robbery, money laundering and drugs trafficking. "The criminal group does not fear the use of intimidation, threats and violence and has been active in Asia, North and South America and Europe" (Europol, 2012). The question is whether or not and to what extent organised crime is related to the endangered species trade.

Organised crime

While there is only a small number of criminological studies on the illegal wildlife trade, it looks as if organised crime organisations are involved in the wildlife trade (UNODC, 2010). According to Europol (2011) criminal organisations from Asia, Central and South America deliver endangered species and derivatives of endangered species – such as reptiles, birds and traditional Chinese medicines – to several companies across the European Union (EU), particularly in North West Europe (Europol, 2011; Sun Wyler & Sheikh, 2009). Within North West Europe criminal organisations cooperate with breeders in other Member States to launder ‘wild caught’ animals, using false documents to trade them as captive bred on the legitimate market (Clark, 2008; Europol, 2011). According to a series of U.N. studies on the illicit traffic of wildlife, wildlife experts claim that Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and Russian organised crime syndicates are heavily involved in illegal wildlife trade. Triad societies, such as the Wo Shing Wo group, 14K and the Japanese Yakuza have reportedly smuggled ivory, rhino horn, tigers, shark fin, abalone and whale meat. Moreover, the Neapolitan Mafia is said to be behind illegal trading in endangered parrots, and most of the caviar business is reportedly controlled by Russian organised crime (CRS, 2008; ECOSOC, 2002).

Within the EU organised crime groups involved in drug trafficking, the facilitation of illegal immigration, fraud, THB and the distribution of counterfeit products are now active in the wildlife trade along routes established for other types of illicit commodity (Europol, 2011).

Apparently, the illicit traffic in wildlife may exhibit at least a high degree of transnational organisation.

Networks

The chain of the trade, from capture to the market, often covers flexible distribution lines and networks of intermediaries, from harvesters through middlemen and on to wholesalers, exporters, processors and retailers, and may involve intermediate destinations (GFI, 2011; Liddick, 2011). For example, until 2006 the Netherlands legally imported around 100.000 endangered birds each year. From that year on, endangered birds are hardly legally imported into the EU and the Netherlands in particular (WCMC, 2012), because of the import ban and EU protection measures in response to the growing threat of avian influenza (2005/94/EG; Nijman, 2010). According to the Dutch Crime Squad (2012), organised crime groups immediately filled the gap with illegal bird trade to the Netherlands; couriers smuggled birds from Suriname through Spain into the Netherlands several times a month.

In general, Africa, Asia, South America, Central America and Eastern Europe are range states and North America, Western Europe, the Middle East, Japan and Singapore are consumer states. Some countries are both import and export countries, such as China, Australia, Canada and South Africa (Liddick, 2011). The Netherlands is a transit country as well (Van Uhm, 2009). Routes used in the illegal wildlife trade are often complex, where specimens may be transported to a variety of intermediate destinations with weak enforcement efforts or priorities and regulatory loopholes. Especially the free trade agreement between EU states seems to provide opportunities for the illegal wildlife trade (Cowdrey, 2002; CRS, 2008).

Smuggling

According to the Dutch Crime Squad (2012), crime investigation demonstrates that crime networks dealing with the smuggling of animals such as birds or reptiles to the Netherlands use a *modus operandi* similar to that of drug traffickers. A common method is to hide the animals or products in concealed compartments in luggage or on the smuggler's body. The similarities with drug smuggling are obvious here (Elliott, 2011; South & Wyatt, 2011). There have been accounts of customs officers in airports stopping smugglers with birds literally strapped to their legs, with reptiles in their underpants and turtles in their luggage (Schneider, 2012). Recently, three suspects were convicted for illegal import of native protected bird species from Curaçao to the Netherlands and of participation in a criminal organisation. The birds were squeezed into plastic crates without water and food, and transported in the hand luggage (Traffic, 2011). Note that the structure and nature of the wildlife trade is species-dependent: smuggling a parrot requires a different technique than hiding 50 ivory tusks.

Nevertheless, the more animal species are becoming endangered, the greater the commercial value on the illicit market and the incentive for trafficking. Some animal parts are worth more than their weight in gold (UNICRI, 2009; UNODC, 2010). For example, rare macaws may be worth more than \$40,000, tiger skins are being sold on the black market for \$35,000 and rhino horns cost between \$35,000 and \$45,000 per kilo (Van Uhm, 2012). Besides that, the illegal wildlife trade is said to be in the financial top three illegal enterprises worldwide, along with the global drug trade and the trade in illegal arms (ECOSOC, 2003; ICCWC, 2012), with an estimated value of between \$10 billion and \$20 billion annually (McMurray, 2008; Interpol, 2012).

Conclusion

The wildlife trade is a growing business, which is driven by significant demand for live specimens and animal parts. The Netherlands operates as a hub between Europe and the rest of the world. Some animal parts are worth more than their weight in gold and it is not uncommon for criminal organisations to be linked to the illegal wildlife trade. Dedicated organised crime groups may trade in endangered species (or parts thereof) and often exploit legitimate business structures to facilitate the importation and retail of specimens. Corrupted officials, established transit hubs and networks of couriers indicate a high level of organisation and the notably profitable business may be highly attractive to crime groups. Further research is necessary to identify the structure and networks in the illegal wildlife trade.

Literature

Clark, W. (2008) Testimony of William Clark to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources. Hearing on poaching American security: Impacts of illegal wildlife trade, before the Committee on Natural Resources. Washington (DC), USA: House of Representatives.

Congressional Research Service (2008) International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy. Washington (DC), USA: CRS.

Cowdrey, D. (2002) Switching channels: Wildlife trade routes into Europe and the UK. Wolverhampton, UK: University of Wolverhampton.

Department environmental affairs South Africa (2012) Update on rhino poaching statistics. Cape Town, SA: Department environmental affairs South Africa, 17-07-2012.

Economic and Social Council United Nations (2002) Progress made in the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 2001/12 on illicit trafficking in protected species of wild flora and fauna. p. 9-12.

Dutch Crime Squad, interview 2012, the Netherlands.

Economic and Social Council United Nations (2003) Illicit trafficking in protected species of wild flora and fauna and illicit access to genetic resources, report of the Secretary-General, 4 March 2003 (E/CN.15/2003/8).

Elliott, L. (2011) Transnational environmental crime: applying network theory to an investigation of illegal trade, criminal activity and law enforcement responses. Canberra, AU: The Australian National University.

Enforcement Support Officer, interview 2012, the Netherlands.

Europol (2011) Organised Crime Threat Assessment (OCTA). The Hague, NL: Europol, 2011.

Europol (2012) OC-Scan Policy Brief. Involvement of an Irish mobile OCG in the illegal trade in rhino horn. The Hague, NL: Europol, June 2012. File nr. 2521-86.

International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (2012) Wildlife and Forest Crime. Analytic Toolkit. Vienna, AT: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

International Criminal Police Organization (2012) World Model UN 2012. Lyon, FR: Interpol.

Global Financial Integrity (2011) Transnational Crime In The Developing World. Washington (DC), USA: GFI.

Liddick, D.R. (2011) Crimes against nature. Illegal industries and the global environment. Oxford, UK: Praeger Publishers.

McMurray, C. (2008) Testimony of Claudia McMurray to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources (5 March) Hearing on poaching American security: Impacts of illegal wildlife trade, before the Committee on Natural Resources. Washington (DC), USA: House of Representatives.

Nijman, V. (2010) An overview of international wildlife trade from Southeast Asia. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 19:1101–1114.

Schneider, J.L. (2012) Sold into extinction. the global trade in endangered species. Oxford, UK: Paeger Publishers.

South, N. and Wyatt, T. (2011) Comparing Illicit Trades in Wildlife and Drugs: An Exploratory Study, *Deviant Behavior*, 32:6, 538-561.

Sun Wyler, L. and Sheikh, P.A. (2009) International illegal trade in wildlife: Threats and US policy. Washington (DC), USA: Congressional Research Service.

Traffic News (2011) Solitary confinement for Pronk, De Nijs and Felix in bird smuggling case. 28-09-2011.

Uhm, D.P. van (2009) Illegale dierenhandel en de rol van Nederland. Utrecht, Universiteit Utrecht (Masterthesis).

Uhm, D.P. van (2012) De handel in beschermde diersoorten. In: Groene Criminologie. Justitiële verkenningen, jaargang 38.

United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (2009) Eco-crime and justice. Essays on environmental crime. Turin, IT: UNICRI, 2009, p. 60-61.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2010) The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment. Vienna, AT: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

World Conservation Monitoring Centre database, 2012.