



Organised crime and animals

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Accepted: 12 November 2021 / Published online: 14 December 2021
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Abstract

This article provides an introduction to the special issue of *Trends in Organized Crime* on ‘Organised Crime and Animals’. The special issue contributes to the criminological literature on organised crime, new illicit markets and green criminology. The articles in this special issue offer a wide range of empirical evidence, criminological analysis and theoretical explorations of the various connections between organised crime and animals, including the illegal wildlife trade, gambling on animals, puppy trafficking, the killing of wolves and illegal, unreported fisheries and the regulatory and enforcement responses to these phenomena.

Keywords Organised crime · Animals · Green criminology · Illegal markets

Introduction and historical background

The well-documented link between animals and powerful historical figures, from kings and sultans to notorious crime lords, shows that there has always been a great demand for animals, domestic and wild. Animals were used for rituals, such as in ancient Egypt (Ikram 2009), for demonstrating the wealth or status of their owners (Kalof 2007), or for manifestations of power, when captured and tamed exotic mammals and reptiles were kept in courts and private households. Animals were used for military exhibitions (Gabriel 2011), as guardians (Collard 2013) or for entertainment (Kalof 2007). Keeping and exhibiting wild animals symbolised status, power and wealth all around the world (Van Uhm 2018).

Pablo Escobar, the drug lord of the Medellín cartel, may well be one of the most famous historical examples, with his 530 ha of jungle and grassland along the Magdalena River in Colombia that he called *Hacienda Napoles*, the secret

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passion of an ‘animal lover’. In the late 1970s he began to collect endangered species from all over the world, hiring expert advice on which species could survive and bribing customs officials to import illegal species by small planes. His collection of 1900 animals from more than 100 species, including elephants, rhinos, hippos and exotic birds, became one of the most valuable collections in Latin America. Pablo Escobar even opened *Hacienda Napoles* to the public (Escobar 2014).

Another notorious drug lord, Mario Tabraue, demonstrated how animals not only play a role as symbols of status and power, but can also be used as a business commodity for organised crime. Like Tony Montana from the movie ‘Scarface’, Mario Tabraue owned big cats and ran a powerful cocaine drug ring. The Tabraue Syndicate, worth \$75 million at its height, was considered one of Florida’s most violent drug organisations of the 1980s. However, Tabraue was also involved in the trafficking of endangered species for profit, such as smuggling 35 endangered hyacinth macaws into the US inside of PVC pipes to avoid detection. Tabraue had his own animal store where he sold exotic animals, lent some of his animals to zoos, while others were kept as pets (Van Uhm 2016).

In addition to using animals as status symbols or contraband, mafia bosses have also used big cats, crocodiles or aggressive dogs to cement their grip on power or facilitate organised crime activities. A prime example is the notorious Italian-American mobster Joseph Gallo of the Colombo crime family of New York City, who kept a pet lion named Cleo in his basement to frighten debtors into paying what they owed (DiMatteo 2014). Resembling the James Bond scene at Kananga’s farm, where crocodiles protected heroin processing plants, a crocodile on a rooftop was recently used by the Camorra mafia in Naples to intimidate business owners who were late paying their “pizzo” protection money. A pair of African grey parrots that had been trained to act as drug pushers for the mafia was also seized by the Neapolitan police. When the phone rang, the birds would respond ‘Hello. How much do you need?’ and in stressful situations they would say ‘I’ll shoot you’.

Over the past few decades, green criminologists in particular have presented empirical evidence on smuggling, exploitation and harms caused to non-human animals by various illegal actors (Wyatt 2013; Nurse 2015; Van Uhm 2016; Maher et al. 2017; Moreto and Pires 2018; Petrossian 2019; Sollund 2019; Wong 2019). Green criminology interrogates the harms of both legal and illegal activities and the blurred line between what is defined as legal or illegal, which is often determined by existing power dynamics (Lynch and Stretesky 2014; South 2014). Although illicit markets and criminal activities involving animals have been explored in the academic literature, the connections to organised crime have not been systematically analysed until now. Questions as to how organised crime is smuggling animals, such as birds, puppies or reptiles, how large the profits are and why organised crime developed an interest in these markets in the first place remain unanswered, as well as questions regarding the nature of the organisations involved, their modus operandi, division of tasks, the environmental harms, the transnational character of the phenomenon and more. The present special issue attempts to fill in at least some of the gaps in the existing literature. First, by contributing to the study on organised crime in general and new illicit trends and markets in particular and second, by drawing together the fields of organised crime and green criminology.

Links between organised crime and animals

In the winter of 1997, the editors of *Trends in Organized Crime* 3(2), Roy Godson, William Olson and Louise Shelley, noticed that ‘a relatively new type of crime is apparently becoming more organized’ and ‘often controlled by well-organized crime rings’. What they were referring to were the connections between organised crime and animal trafficking (pp. 3–18). In the early 2000s, several UN reports documented the link between animal trafficking and certain specific organised crime groups: Chinese Triads were believed to smuggle ivory, rhino horn and shark fin, the Neapolitan Mafia was allegedly behind the illegal trade in endangered parrots, the Russian mafia was linked to the trade in illegal caviar as well as tiger and bear poaching, while Colombian drug cartels would exchange endangered species for drugs, resulting in cashless transfers (Zimmerman 2003; Wyler and Sheikh 2008). Since then, researchers have highlighted that criminal organisations, driven by perceptions of low risks and high profits, are diversifying their portfolio from ‘traditional’ criminal activities, such as drug trafficking or human trafficking, into the illicit trade in animals (Van Uhm and Nijman 2020).

The activities of organised crime continuously evolve in response to socio-economic, political and ecological changes in the world. By shifting their operations, organised crime groups are able to diversify into new illegal markets, including animal markets (Interpol 2016; Moreto 2016). This allows them to infiltrate, cut across borders, penetrate fragile governments and open up branches abroad devoted to a specific set of activities (Campana 2013). Some organised crime groups make a career shift to new businesses and infiltrate new markets in an effort to adapt to changing conditions (Von Lampe 2015), whereas other groups attempt to dominate new markets completely (Varese 2011).

The presence of parallel legal markets provides a perfect opportunity for organised crime groups to disguise or launder animals, as evidenced by several reports (e.g. Europol 2021). Based on legal-illegal interfaces, interactions between the underworld and upperworld actors, flexible and fluid networks are developed and new alliances are established, including organised-corporate crime ventures and state-organised crime groups involved in animal crimes (Wyatt et al. 2020). The perpetrators benefit from existing legal *and* illegal infrastructures in the areas where they operate (Siegel et al. 2003), such as access to smuggling routes, smuggling methods or corruption, which illustrates the various forms of crime convergence (Van Uhm 2022).

Finally, organised crime is known for its involvement in gambling, including gambling on animals. Jay Albanese lists animal fighting and betting as one of the four types of illegal gambling operations of organised crime (Albanese 2018). The rich tradition of betting on animals, from horse races to dog fights, ensures an important source of income for legal as well as illegal entrepreneurs. Journalists have linked traditional organised crime groups such as the Italian mafia and the Japanese Yakuza to animal fighting, including their involvement in sponsoring dogfighting events.

All this raises a number of questions. In what ways is organised crime involved in animal crimes? What are the characteristics of these organisations and what are

the harms being done to non-human animals? How can and should law enforcement respond to the increasing involvement of organised crime in animal crimes?

This special issue on Organised Crime and Animals aims to provide a wide range of both empirical evidence and criminological analysis of the nature of the phenomenon and the ways in which criminal organisations have in recent years developed new illicit markets and activities involving animals.

This special issue

The special issue starts with an article about the often made link between wildlife and drugs. Based on literature and original fieldwork, *Daan van Uhm, Nigel South and Tanya Wyatt* reveal the overlaps and synergies of wildlife and drug trafficking and provide concrete examples of where these markets co-exist as well as intertwine.

This is followed by *Angus Nurse's* examination from a green criminological perspective of the phenomenon of dogfighting as a distinct form of organised and subcultural crime. He critically assesses contemporary legal perspectives on dogfighting, the associated animal crimes, the masculine subcultures, and the organised crime elements of gambling on animals.

Ragnhild Sollund and David Goyes introduce a non-speciesist theory of organised state green crime to explain the Norwegian state-licensed killing of wolves. They argue that underlying cultural, political, and economic interests have a countervailing effect on the protection of wolves by the state.

The diversification and involvement of organised crime in animal markets is discussed by the authors of the following articles. *Daan van Uhm and Rebecca Wong* examine the involvement of Chinese organised crime groups in the trade of wildlife by looking at the diversification of these crime groups and the outsourcing of activities to local opportunistic crime groups in the borderlands of the Golden Triangle.

Jennifer Maher and Tanya Wyatt analyse the organisation of the European illegal puppy trade. They argue that along the supply chain organised crime groups are potentially responsible for the suffering and death of puppies and the economic and emotional damage to 'consumers'.

Israel Alvarado Martínez and Aitor Ibáñez Alonso reveal how and why Mexican drug cartels have shifted their operations from drug trafficking to the illegal trade in *totoaba* maw, the swim bladder of a large fish. They highlight that Mexican organised crime groups are diversifying into the poaching and smuggling of *totoaba* by means of corruption and violence and by establishing alliances with local fishermen and Asian criminal networks along the trafficking chain.

The connection between organised crime and gambling on animals is the topic of the next two articles. *Angelique Reuselaars and Frank Bovenkerk* describe the historical interest of the urban underworld in the trotting sector of Dutch horse racing and discuss the participation of a mixture of people, including members of the royal family and well-known criminals in the Netherlands.

Dina Siegel and Daan van Uhm analyse the organisation, the various actors, their modus operandi and the possible involvement of organised crime in dogfighting

in the Netherlands by looking at reputation, status and trust in the sub-culture of dogfighters.

Finally, *Andrea Stefanus and John Vervaele* discuss the regulatory and enforcement challenges posed by transnational organised IUU fishing crimes. They emphasize that suppression conventions at global and regional levels could serve as solutions to tackle organised crime involvement in animal crimes and in fisheries in particular.

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