

# Vietnam's role in the Complex Web of International Wildlife Trade & Trafficking

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## Introduction to Wildlife Trade & Trafficking

Crime takes many shapes and forms. When you think about a crime, you may think about murder, stealing, arson, money laundering, and the list goes on. What has received less attention is the crime of illegal wildlife trade/trafficking (Lavorgna 2014). Illegal wildlife trade and trafficking is known as a specific kind of “green crime” which involves the illegal trade, smuggling, poaching, capture, or collection of endangered species and protected wildlife. A variety of wildlife are included in wildlife trade such as mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians, and even insects (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013). Wildlife trafficking is seen as a “Low priority” compared to the other crimes to be dealt with on the law enforcement agenda of many governments (Lavorgna, 2014). Does this mean that wildlife-related crime is less serious? Not necessarily... in fact, research on wildlife-related crime over the years has proven otherwise. Illegal wildlife trade is ranked as one of the most lucrative illegal economies in the world along side with drugs, human, and arms trafficking (Cao Ngoc and Wyatt 2013). It is so much so that it is actually considered a threat to national and global security (Lavorgna 2014). The effects of illegal wildlife trafficking extend far beyond the animals and biodiversity but also go as far as impacting the social and economic development of communities around the globe (Lavorgna 2014).

The three main parties reported to be involved in this crime are local farmers (who usually want to supplement income), mafia style groups in developing countries, and international smuggling rings. Demand for plants and animals of all types comes from entities such as biomedical laboratories (wanting to get ahold of these species for research), hunters, fur, and

skin dealers (Lavorigna 2014). Research has pointed to Asia, especially China and Southeast Asia, as one of the main countries fueling the supply and demand of wildlife. This illegal trade and trafficking scheme is a result of corruption. Corruption acts not just on the individual level but also on the level of corrupted structures like the justice system, economic, and political systems as well. This deep-rooted corruption makes wildlife trafficking difficult to dismantle. Its complexity is a large factor in the willingness for legal officials to take the action needed to address it. There are several steps in the processing of wildlife trafficking and trade. The process is a version of the following: planning, poaching/breeding, distribution, transportation, processing, selling, and laundering (Wyatt, Johnson, Hunter, George, and Gunter 2017). Considering the broadness of this topic, we will focus our studies on one of the main hubs and transit countries for wildlife trade...Vietnam (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013) (World Wildlife Fund International 2016).

### Wildlife Trade and Trafficking in Vietnam

Vietnam is known to be home to a variety of endangered species, some of which are found nowhere else in the world. In fact, Vietnam is home to 10% of the world species. For this reason it has become one of the world's illegal wildlife trafficking and trade hotspot. According to Cao Ngoc & Wyatt, the most popular wildlife trafficked live in Vietnam are birds, snakes, turtles, geckos, pangolins, and lizards. Revenues and profits made from illegal wildlife trade estimate to be around 65 million and 21 million USD annually. These profits are four times higher than the fines given for being caught. This gives illegal wildlife traders & traffickers no incentive to stop considering they still could make a good profit (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013). Popular products distributed from illegal wildlife trade and trafficking are ivory tusks and rhinoceros horns. These

items are coveted status symbols in Asian culture. Thousands of elephants and rhinos are poached each year according to the World Wildlife Fund (World Wildlife Fund International 2016). These are referred to as “dried wildlife products”, which are animal products that are used as souvenirs, decoration, food or medicine. In Vietnam, wildlife trafficking is supplemented by the demand from local restaurants who serve wildlife meat. Attempts have been made by local authorities to close these restaurants, but they still persist below the radar. The species most commonly served are snakes, civets, monitor lizards, porcupines, leopards, pangolins, monkeys, forest pigs, hard and soft-shell turtles, boas, and birds. These items will not be directly on the menu but if the request is made to the server, they will fetch an employee to bring the meat that is stored nearby. A majority of trade, however, is sent to international markets with a large portion destined for Peoples Republic of China (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013).

### Wildlife as a Way of Life

This severe exploitation of wildlife and overall biodiversity for quick profit has been referred to as “tragedy of the commons”. Unfortunately, this is just how some people are able to get by in the poverty-stricken communities of Vietnam. Even after poverty reduction programs were put in place, the poverty rates in Vietnam remained relatively high with 31% of the population still struggling with food shortages. In order to make it by, these residents resort to natural resource exploitation. This is a common trend in many developing countries where wildlife exploitation is the last resort when there are no other feasible alternatives. Illegally acquired wildlife has also been reported to be exchanged for food, medicinal treatments, entertainment, and household decorations (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013).

## Current Conditions & Projected Impacts

It is important to understand that legal wildlife trade also exists in Vietnam. Legal wildlife trade has brought great opportunities to local communities by increasing their incomes selling natural products. Unfortunately, even with legal outlets, illegal wildlife trade and trafficking still persists. Illegal wildlife trade has been connected as a severe contributor to the decline of rare and endangered species in Vietnam including but not limited to bears, cats, pangolins, reptiles, and amphibians (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013). A 1998 report estimated that only 200 tigers, 20 Javan rhinos, and 200 elephants (about 20 years prior there were 2,000) were present in Vietnam at the time. In 2008, the Javan rhinos and tigers of Vietnam were listed as threatened. Over those 10 years, Vietnam's biodiversity has deteriorated quite rapidly with systemic hunting and forest destruction being the driving force (Van Song 2008). Research conducted by Vietnam National University suggests that wildlife consumption also has the potential to become a large cause in the extinction of many of Vietnams species. Because of the illusiveness of illegal wildlife trade, no regulations are set on how animal product is collected. This, very disturbingly, subjects animals to abuse and suffering for human gain (Cao Ngoc & Wyatt 2013).

With the current pandemic, it is crucial to harbor awareness and action around this issue of illegal wildlife trade & trafficking. The nature of this global scheme with all the transport/travel while in close contact with other animals and humans creates major potential for outbreaks of another zoonotic disease. Studies on wildife trade in Vietnam investigated the prescence of Corona virus in animals from small-scale traders, large markets, and restaurants. Postive samples resulted in all areas with ranges from 20% of small-scale traders animals to 50% of animals collected by restaurants. Considering the large impacts that Corona virus has had on countries

around the globe, wildlife trade and trafficking should not be taken lightly as it has already showed how it can be a major vector and transmitter of zoonotic diseases (ABC News (Australia) 2020).

## Conclusion

Over the years, Vietnam has tried to fine, regulate, conserve, and protect the species that they can but the lucrativeness of the wildlife trafficking and trade business has kept poachers and smugglers coming back (TRT World 2016). The idea of implementing a total wildlife trade ban to mitigate these effects was difficult as there is no illegal wildlife trade ban system. Because of this, expenditure on monitoring and enforcement would be very high and funds are still needed to train people. As Van Song states, funding is lacking while problems are enormous (Van Song 2008). Since then, recent legislation has been created and as of 2020, Vietnam has banned wildlife imports and closed illegal wildlife markets. The emergent Corona virus helped push this initiative forward as concerns arise with transmission and wildlife trade/trafficking (Nguyen 2020). The end to wildlife trafficking and trade doesn't just lie on the shoulders of Vietnam. It is up to all countries to understand and educate its citizens on the consequences of illegal wildlife trade/trafficking. Its impacts on biodiversity, global security, disease transmission, social, and economic development emphasize how serious this issue is (Lavorgna 2014). As the climate continues to change and the earth continues to warm, environmental related issues such as this should not be ignored. Climate change, wildlife trafficking, pandemics, and poverty. These issues are all related...it starts with humans. As humans, we need to prioritize addressing our shortcomings if we want to salvage and restore what is left.

## Appendix



Figure 1: (Barlow, 2020)



Figure 1: (Vietnamnet , 2014)

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