AFRICA-TWIX: A PLATFORM SUPPORTING LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Report by François Kpwang Abessolo

AFRICA-TWIX (**Africa T**rade in **W**ildlife **I**nformation e**X**change) is a platform that was designed to promote collaboration between enforcement agencies in Central Africa engaged in tackling illegal wildlife trade and related criminal activities. It was launched in February 2016 following a phase of in-country needs assessments with government stakeholders in four pilot countries: Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Since the launch, the Central African Republic has also joined the platform.

As described in *TRAFFIC Bulletin* Vol. 28 No. 2, AFRICA-TWIX is based on experience drawn from the hugely successful EU-TWIX database and information exchange system used by enforcement personnel across Europe for more than a decade. As with EU-TWIX, the participating countries decided that AFRICA-TWIX would be managed by TRAFFIC on behalf of government enforcement agencies. It is hosted by COMIFAC (Commission of Central African Forests).

When AFRICA-TWIX was launched, a total of 57 officials were connected. Today, this number has risen to over 116 (out of 131 designated people). Users comprise representatives of national Customs, national police, forestry services, justice departments, gendarmerie, INTERPOL, other specialised organisations and sub-regional and international organisations involved in wildlife and forestry law enforcement. Three regional workshops and three national workshops have taken place to date, and the management structure is already in place.

AFRICA-TWIX comprises two principal components: a mailing list and a website containing a database holding information relating to wildlife seizures and other useful resources:

- The mailing list allows the exchange of information with the whole group. An email sent via the platform is instantly redirected to the mailboxes of all users. All non-sensitive information relevant to illegal wildlife trade can be exchanged on the forum. Users are encouraged to share their experiences, successes, best practices and to offer help and support to each other. By 25 April 2018, over 782 messages have been exchanged, and users have discussed, among other topics, seizures carried out by their respective agencies, key events happening in their countries
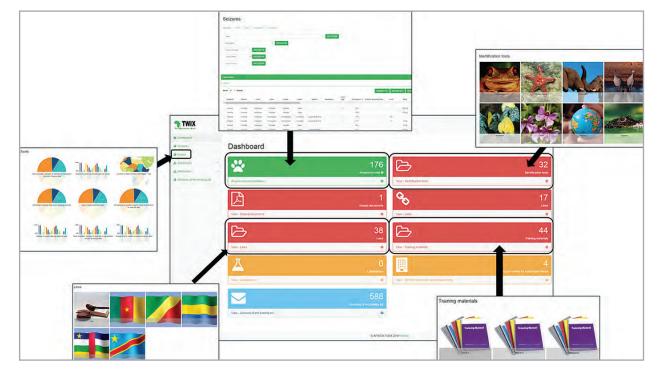

Fig. 1. A sample page from the AFRICA-TWIX website illustrating the multiple sections that have been created for the provision of tools, the identification of seized specimens, and training materials.

◄ **Seizure of pangolin scales in Hong Kong, arriving from Cameroon in June 2016—one of the cases investigated with AFRICA-TWIX collaboration.** ▶

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(for example the burning of ivory and pangolin scales in Cameroon), and shared identification guides and training materials. These exchanges have triggered and/or supported international investigations where nominal information was shared via official channels *outside* the AFRICA-TWIX mailing list. For example, AFRICA-TWIX helped to establish a connection between Hong Kong and Cameroonian authorities to investigate a shipment of four tonnes of pangolin scales seized in Hong Kong in June 2016. Although the investigation is ongoing, the Cameroonian officials who were identified during the enquiry as being accessories to the crime have already received administrative sanctions. Four other investigations have been initiated and/or been supported thanks to information shared on the mailing list.

• The AFRICA-TWIX website (www.africa-twix.org) was created to provide law enforcement officials with useful resources and to centralise seizures data in the region. Information is available in both French and English, and already contains training modules, identification tools, laws and regulations and many other useful resources. The AFRICA-TWIX database was launched in February 2017 and became functional in April 2017. Though the recording of seizures data was not common in most of the Central African enforcement services, with training, lobbying and advocacy pressure undertaken by the TRAFFIC team, more than 213 data entries are already stored in the AFRICA-TWIX database. The seizures database is an essential element of the website. Although no sensitive or nominal information, such as offenders' or investigators' names, ID/passport numbers and so on, is stored in this database, the data collected do support analyses and risk assessments to be carried out to determine the scale, and spatial dynamics of the problem in the region, and to monitor law enforcement efforts over time. The possibility to create multiple charts is available to users to facilitate analyses.

Fig. 1 demonstrates how multiple sections have been created: for example, the provision of tools and documents to facilitate the identification of seized specimens, training materials to deepen knowledge and locate new information, and a legislation section holding legal texts from the member countries.

TRAFFIC and the regional agencies have a longstanding co-operation in place that is formalised by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The co-operation encompasses joint capacity-building efforts and information exchange. The World Customs Organization (WCO) Secretariat, for example, confirmed their agreement to share CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) data reported to the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) database with AFRICA-TWIX. Negotiations with some other agencies are in progress.

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Participants at an ▶
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