In 2017, over 12 months, eBay prevented or removed 45,000 listings that violated the company's wildlife trade policies. As a percentage of the company's product offering at any given time—one billion+ listings—this number is relatively small. However, with regards to illegal wildlife trade, it is indicative of the prevalence of illegal trade and criminal operations in online marketplaces, which give large-scale market exposure to sellers and provide a layer of anonymity to protect against risk of detection.

EDITORIAL

Wildlife law enforcement action is no longer solely focused on individual outlets or physical markets, but increasingly across websites and social media applications globally. In 2017, TRAFFIC found 2,069 advertisements for endangered species products for sale online in China during a four-month period, with 1,687 of those advertising elephant ivory.[1] Similarly in the USA, TRAFFIC recorded 2,056 ivory items offered for sale online in a seven-week period in 2016.[2]

Wildlife trafficking online isn't limited to products like elephant ivory, tiger teeth or pangolin scales. Live, protected species that are in demand for the exotic pet trade are increasingly available through social media platforms. A rapid online survey conducted by TRAFFIC in 2017 found 1,623 protected live birds and reptiles for sale on Facebook in the Philippines in just 17 days.[3]

A 2016 study investigating the availability of illegal wildlife products on the "dark web" found offerings to be negligible, indicating that wildlife trafficking through the surface web was so unregulated as to not require traders to seek the cover of the dark web.[4] It is likely that continuing advancements in technology and global connectivity will only fuel the trade in endangered species and their products online without intervention. Fortunately, the private sector has stepped up to take on this challenge and is presenting an increasingly united front from the industry against wildlife crime.

TRAFFIC, along with partners WWF and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), launched the Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online on 7 March 2018, bringing together some of the world's biggest internet companies[5]. The aim of the collaboration is to reduce wildlife trafficking online by 80% by 2020.

This Coalition expands on previous collaborations with the private sector to address the threat of illegal wildlife trade online. TRAFFIC regularly monitors online trade and shares findings with both the companies identified and local law enforcement for action. Just one year prior to the Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online launch, Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent—the biggest technology companies in China and some of the largest in the world—joined together to pledge zero tolerance to wildlife trafficking online in celebration of World Wildlife Day.[6] On 22 November 2017, eight more China-based companies joined this effort and an alliance was formed.[7] The companies recently received training by wildlife and enforcement experts at Baidu's headquarters in Beijing to increase capacity for monitoring illegal wildlife trade online and learn how to find and deal with illegal wildlife trade information on their platforms in China.[8] On 4 December 2017, Instagram launched a hashtag interstitial to educate users about wildlife trafficking when searching for one of the hashtags provided by TRAFFIC and WWF that may be linked to illegal trade.[9] Activities such as these will continue through the Coalition, aiming to strengthen detection by companies and encourage behaviour change in company users.

TRAFFIC will work with Coalition members to address specific illegal wildlife trade threats on their platforms. This includes providing wildlife policy guidance, delivering training to company staff members to help them better detect products derived from threatened species, looking to advance the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance technological tools for detection, and engaging company users and conservation supporters to be a part of the solution to wildlife trafficking online.

The launch of this Coalition is just the first step. TRAFFIC aims to see eBay's efforts replicated across the industry, with companies sharing best practices to prevent criminals simply shifting between platforms. Truly unplugging online trafficking routes will require additional partnerships across sectors such as the transport and financial sectors, as well as hand-in-hand collaboration with law enforcement. Rather than the availability of illegal wildlife going viral online, the Coalition aims to use the global connectivity of the online industry—which originally led to this current crisis—to provide solutions to combat wildlife trafficking online.

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[1]Zhao, Xu, Xiao, Guan and Lau (2017). *Revisiting China's ivory markets in 2017*. TRAFFIC Briefing; [2]Kramer, Sawyer, Amato and LaFontaine (2017). *The US elephant ivory market: A new baseline*. TRAFFIC Report; [3]Canlas, Sy and Chng (2017). A rapid survey of online trade in live birds and reptiles in the Philippines. *TRAFFIC Bulletin* 29(2); [4]Harrison, Roberts and Hernandez-Castro (2016). Assessing the extent and nature of wildlife trade on the dark web. *Conservation Biology*. https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12707; [5]The founding members of the Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online are Alibaba, Baidu, Baixing, eBay, Etsy, Facebook, Google, Huaxia Collection, Instagram, Kuaishou, Mall for Africa, Microsoft, Pinterest, Qyer, Ruby Lane, Shengshi Collection, Tencent, Wen Wan Tian Xia, Zhongyikupai, Zhuanzhuan and 58 Group, convened by WWF, TRAFFIC and IFAW; [6]*Youth and internet giants speak out against wildlife cybercrime* (2017). http://www.traffic.org/home/2017/3/2/youth-and-internet-giants-speak-out-against-wildlife-cybercr.html; [7]*Chinese internet giants launch alliance to combat wildlife cybercrime* (2017). http://www.traffic.org/home/2017/11/22/chinese-internet-giants-launch-alliance-to-combat-wildlife-c.html; [8]*China-based internet alliance trained on combating wildlife cybercrime* (2017). http://www.traffic.org/home/2018/3/26/china-based-internet-alliance-trained-on-combating-wildlife.html; [9]*Instagram users to receive alerts about threatened wildlife* (2017). http://www.traffic.org/home/2017/12/4/instagram-users-to-receive-alerts-about-threatened-wildlife.html