

When the first London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) was held in February 2014, the world was seeing unprecedented levels of poaching and illegal trade in many species. The year before had been the worst year on record for rhinoceros poaching in South Africa thus far, with over 1,000 animals killed illegally. The report of the Elephant Trade Information System that was presented at the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered

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Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) that year also showed illegal trade in ivory at its highest levels in nearly two decades, with 2011 the worst year on record for ivory seizures. Political attention at the highest levels was urgently needed to address the crisis and many hoped that the London Conference would provide the global response that was needed.

That meeting concluded with the London Declaration that was adopted by acclamation by 41 countries, setting out an international call for action to eradicate markets for illegal wildlife products; strengthen law enforcement efforts and ensure effective legal frameworks and deterrents are in place; and promote sustainable livelihoods through positive engagement with local communities.

Four years on, some progress is being made on these fronts, with co-operative efforts to address wildlife crime increasing in quality and quantity. While levels of poaching and illegal trade for many species remain unacceptably high, we are seeing the international community, as well as key countries, tackling illegal wildlife trade as a serious organised crime. Evidence of this can be seen from the outcomes of the 2018 London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade that was held in October.

The Conference was the fourth in the series of high-level events which aimed to mobilise international action on IWT; the London Conference in 2014 was followed by IWT meetings in Kasane, Botswana, in 2015 and Ha Noi, Viet Nam, in 2016. However, the Conference this year took a fresh approach, providing the high-level political attention that will allow the international community to address the strategic and systemic problems that are driving illegal wildlife trade, such as growing consumer demand for illegal wildlife products, financial crime linked to wildlife crime, wildlife-related cybercrime and greater engagement by the private sector.

For example, just prior to the meeting, the Duke of Cambridge spearheaded the launch of a financial task force to disrupt international money flows linked to wildlife trafficking. The United for Wildlife Financial Taskforce will initially comprise representatives from 30 global banks and financial organisations such as Standard Chartered, HSBC, RBS and Citi Group, as well as agencies, regulatory bodies and organisations such as TRAFFIC. Firm action in this critical area will help prevent money laundering and the corruption associated with wildlife trafficking, while asset seizures would act as a strong deterrent to those perpetrating wildlife crimes.

The Taskforce will also be working to identify criminals using legitimate financial institutions to conduct their businesses and illuminate the confluence of proceeds from wildlife and other illicit trades.

Illegal wildlife trade on the internet was another focus of the Conference, recognising that e-commerce and online auction sites, as well as social media platforms, are increasingly used to sell illegal wildlife products, providing as they do an alternative to physical markets which may be perceived to be or may actually be more exposed to monitoring and enforcement action. Showcased at the Conference was the work of the Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online. The Coalition, which includes 23 global e-commerce, social media and technology companies including Tencent, Alibaba, eBay, Google, Microsoft and Rakuten, in partnership with TRAFFIC, WWF and IFAW, aims to reduce wildlife trafficking through web-based platforms by 80% by 2020.

Another strong display of private sector engagement in championing global efforts to tackle wildlife crime at the Conference was the announcement by the World Travel and Tourism Council that over 100 travel and tourism companies have now signed up to the Buenos Aires Declaration, working towards a common goal to educate over one billion travellers about the nature, scale and consequences of illegal wildlife trade.

The need to address demand for illegal wildlife products was another issue highlighted at the Conference, with Defra announcing the establishment of a consortium of global behavioural change specialists, including TRAFFIC, the Oxford Martin School at the University of Oxford, Wildlife Conservation Society, United for Wildlife, UNEP, and USAID. The consortium aims to share knowledge and experience in order to develop recommendations on the approach and scope of targeted illegal wildlife trade demand reduction initiatives.

The Conference saw delegates recognise that illegal wildlife trade affects a far broader range of species and commodities beyond just elephants and rhinos. In terms of monetary value, for example, more significant is the illegal trade in timber, which deprives local communities of food, income, and well-being, undercuts legitimate businesses and deprives governments of income from sustainable exploitation of natural resources. It was therefore good to see sessions at the Conference address the issue of illegal timber trade and forest governance. The global reach and influence of the Conference has also expanded beyond Africa and Asia, with Peru announcing that it will host the first regional conference in Latin America focused on illegal wildlife trade next year.

Over 1,300 delegates from more than 70 countries attended the Conference and over 50 countries adopted the London 2018 Declaration committing to action to tackle the illegal wildlife trade. However the success of the Conference can only be gauged by how effectively individual governments, businesses and organisations implement the commitments they made in London and if those actions ultimately result in measureable and meaningful declines in poaching and illegal trade.

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