

There is little doubt that the past few years have seen unprecedented levels of poaching and illegal trade in many species. Over 1000 rhinoceroses were illegally killed during 2013 in South Africa alone, the equivalent of nearly three animals a day, making it the worst year on record for rhinoceros poaching in the country. In 23 years of compiling ivory seizures data

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for the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS), 2011 was the worst year ever for large-scale (>500 kg) ivory seizures, with some 21 incidents involving a total of more than 34 t of ivory. Preliminary figures for 2013 already represent a 20% increase over the previous peak in 2011, with some 18 large-scale seizures totalling more than 41 t.

One of the factors leading to these unprecedented figures is the increased involvement of organized criminal networks in illegal wildlife trade. Wildlife criminals are now better organized, better equipped and exploiting extensive trading links and networks that span Africa and Asia.

In view of these fast-changing trends and the impact they are having, it is no surprise that illegal wildlife trade has received previously unseen international attention at the highest political levels over the past year. In 2013, the issue was discussed at the United Nations General Assembly and at regional political fora such as the Africa Security Summit, APEC Leaders Meeting and the European Parliament. World leaders—from President Ali Bongo of Gabon and President Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, to US President Barack Obama and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon—were for the first time publicly speaking out about the implications of wildlife trafficking. More importantly, they linked wildlife crime to wider issues of concern such as national security, rule of law and socio-economic development, and all echoed the urgent need for a global response to this threat.

The London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade 2014, that was held on 12–13 February was perhaps exactly the global response that was needed and the culmination of over a year of high-level political attention and commitments on the issue. Initiated by His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, and the Duke of Cambridge, the Conference was organized by the UK Government, its aim to inject a new level of political momentum into efforts to combat the growing global threat posed by illegal wildlife trade, with a focus on rhinoceroses, elephants and Tigers. There is little doubt that this was achieved, with participants including the heads of government from Botswana, Chad, Gabon and Tanzania, foreign ministers from seven countries, environment and other ministers from 19 countries, and other senior officials.

The meeting concluded with the London Declaration that was adopted by acclamation by 41 countries, plus the European Union. This 12-page document sets out a clear, detailed and ambitious international plan to fight wildlife crime, with specific objectives and tangible actions to eradicate the market 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. New resources to tackle illegal wildlife trade were also discussed during the Conference and donors urged to provide resources, support and technical assistance for implementing the Declaration commitments. Global Environment Facility (GEF) CEO and Chairperson Naoko Ishii announced that the GEF has redesigned its funding strategy for the next four years to step up its support to stamp out illegal wildlife trafficking. Individual countries also announced crucial new funding and resources to support effective implementation of the Conference commitments.

The Conference also reaffirmed high-level political support for the effective implementation of prior commitments made in the past year, such as the Urgent Measures agreed to at the IUCN African Elephant Summit and the elephant and rhinoceros Decisions adopted at the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

While all these represent huge steps forward in the international fight against wildlife crime, the Conference was not without its disappointments. Missing from the list of countries pledging their support for the London Declaration were key nations implicated in the surge in rhinoceros poaching and the illegal ivory trade—South Africa and Thailand. The engagement and support of these countries is absolutely essential for the successful implementation of the Conference commitments.

Ultimately, the real success of the London Conference can only be demonstrated with positive conservation action on the ground in the key source, transit and consumer countries concerned. While the high level of political attention to illegal wildlife trade and unanimous international call for action is unprecedented, the challenge now is to keep up the pressure and help translate this attention into tangible action at the national level.

Hopefully, by the time of the follow-up conference in Botswana in 2015, the London Conference will perhaps be viewed as a key turning point in the war against wildlife crime and the point at which the tide of unrelenting poaching of elephants, rhinoceroses and Tigers finally turned.

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