

THE KASANE CONFERENCE ON THE ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE: TIME FOR ACTION

Heads of State, ministers and officials from 31 governments met in Botswana, on 25 March 2015 and adopted crucial new measures to help tackle the unprecedented surge in illegal wildlife trade. The Kasane Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade was hosted by President Ian Khama of Botswana in the town of Kasane on the edge of the Chobe National Park, and delegates ended the meeting with agreement on the Kasane Statement—an ambitious pledge of fifteen commitments to take action on demand reduction, strengthening the legal framework for tackling money laundering linked to wildlife crime, tougher law enforcement, and engaging communities in protecting their wildlife resources.

The Conference was a follow-up to an earlier high-level conference held in London on 13 February 2014, aimed at injecting a new level of political momentum into efforts to combat the growing global threat posed by illegal wildlife trade to species such as elephants, rhinoceroses and Tigers. That Conference adopted the 25-point London Declaration, with ambitious measures agreed 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.

President Khama said in his welcoming address that the Kasane Conference provided countries with another opportunity to share experiences in combating wildlife crime. "It also presents a chance to re-dedicate ourselves to eradicate the scourge. The time for talking has long passed, this is the time for real action," he stressed.

At Kasane, governments reported on their progress in implementing the London Declaration, including increased levels of law enforcement action, improvements in domestic wildlife-related legislation and regional co-operation in curbing poaching. Most governments appear to have taken their commitments last year seriously. Many demonstrated in Kasane how they are turning the commitments in the London Declaration into tangible actions on the ground and strengthening their resolve to see the job through.

However, the situation with illegal wildlife trade remains dire. In a presentation to the Conference, TRAFFIC highlighted our most recent research which clearly indicates levels of illegal ivory trade rising sharply over recent years and continuing largely unchecked. More worryingly, an increasing number of large-scale ivory seizures point to greater involvement of organized crime. Similarly, the situation for rhinoceroses continues to deteriorate, last year being the worst on record with around 1300 animals killed continent-wide. The scale of illegal trade in a wide range of less-celebrated species of animals

and plants—from tortoises and pangolins to abalone and precious woods—is also staggering, with the conservation losses felt across the globe.

What is clear from research and analysis over recent years is that wildlife crime is getting more organized and more sophisticated. To keep up with these developments, an equally sophisticated approach is needed in response, an approach based on an up-to-date theory of change grounded in experience from other fields of crime fighting—a holistic approach to increase the effort criminals have to make to succeed in this business, to increase the indirect risks they face and to reduce the rewards they can reap from wildlife crime.

The Kasane Statement adopted in March hopefully will provide the innovative approaches needed. For example, countries agreed to focus on tackling money laundering and other financial aspects of wildlife crime. This commitment to "follow the money" is a huge, innovative step that provides a mechanism to bring down the trafficking kingpins by hitting them where it hurts—in their pockets. It should also help to stamp out the corruption that so often undermines enforcement actions.

In addition, the Kasane Statement calls for a strengthened engagement with the relevant local community groups and the appropriate retention of benefits from wildlife resources by local people. Participants also agreed to engage further with the private sector, including logistics and transport companies, which are uniquely placed to stem the flow of illicit wildlife products but which often find themselves an inadvertent vector for wildlife trafficking. At the consumer end of the trade chain, extra impetus was injected into understanding the motivations and behaviour of users of illegal wildlife products—learning lessons from past successes and applying strategic approaches to dissuade buyers from participating in the illegal wildlife market.

A year on from the London Conference, the tide is slowly turning against wildlife criminals, with important battles being won as remedial efforts increase in quality and quantity. However, the picture overall remains deeply worrying. The actions outlined in the Kasane Statement can provide solutions but governments will need to continue scaling up their efforts and work together to turn these actions into concrete results. Further, the impact will not be seen overnight—the war against illegal wildlife trade will only be won if there is sustained action over a number of long and probably difficult years. But it can be won.

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