

The likely failure of global efforts to meet the ambition of the Aichi biodiversity targets agreed by the vast majority of the world's governments in 2010 has long been predicted. A prominent review, published in the journal *Science*¹ as early as late 2014, concluded that “despite accelerating policy and management responses to the biodiversity crisis, the impacts of these efforts are unlikely to be reflected in improved trends in the state of biodiversity by 2020”, the agreed deadline for most of the targets set. Already, there is a flurry of inter-governmental consideration and learned thought hoping to shape the post-2020 biodiversity conservation agenda. Such efforts clearly have strategic importance, but the risk is that the unfinished business of the current decade may be put aside while we plan what comes next.

EDITORIAL

An analysis by TRAFFIC in 2012 concluded that action on the threats and opportunities arising from trade in wild animals and plants would contribute to all but four of the 20 Aichi targets. Indeed an enormous amount of progress has been made over recent years: new regulatory measures under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); strong national actions in many countries around the world; real progress with sustainability standards and voluntary certification; and positive commitments for action by businesses involved in wildlife trade chains.

Unfortunately, the challenges have grown just as quickly: rapidly expanding new markets for some very scarce wildlife commodities; and a fast-changing law enforcement environment as global communications, transport and money flows evolve and virtual markets become commonplace. Furthermore, it is clear that wildlife trade has now attracted serious criminal involvement at unprecedented levels, attracted by perceptions of low risk and high reward. The trend overall for biodiversity impacted by wildlife trade is indeed unlikely to be improving.

With this harsh reality in mind, TRAFFIC has recently established its *Programme Strategy to 2020*, as a strong institutional commitment to informing, encouraging and supporting action on wildlife trade issues in the remainder of the current decade. At its heart is the quest to gather credible and persuasive evidence about wildlife trade, which has been fundamental to TRAFFIC's work for over 40 years, along with carefully considered plans for mobilizing this knowledge to influence actions by governments, businesses and individuals to ensure positive conservation and development outcomes. Since the need for transformative action is urgent, we will focus our efforts in the coming years on two main streams of work: action to enhance systems for sustainable, legal wildlife trade; and action to help strengthen responses to wildlife crime and illegal trade.

¹Tittensor, D.P. et al., (2014). A mid-term analysis of progress toward international biodiversity targets. *Science* 346(6206): 241–244. <http://bit.ly/2zDDrr8>.

The former is critical, because the fact, too often lost among the headlines nowadays, is that the majority of wild-sourced animals and plants and their products in world commerce today are legally traded, often without regulatory or other sustainability safeguards and with minimal benefits flowing to people living in the areas from where wildlife is sourced. For much of this trade, involved businesses and consumers are hardly aware that they are using wildlife at all, never mind cognizant of the impacts of their actions. There is enormous potential for rapid improvement in this situation through mobilization of innovative assessment and traceability tools that can drive both conservation gain and positive impact on human well-being. Moreover, promoting and using such systems is often in the direct interest of businesses using wildlife goods, whether this be wild plants used for herbal teas and cosmetics, timber used to make wooden furniture or marine species used in seafood products.

Third-party certification of sustainability and related traceability systems are available through schemes such as the Marine Stewardship Council, Forest Stewardship Council and FairWild. More creative and rigorous use of the sustainable trade verification framework that can be provided through CITES Appendix II implementation, is eminently achievable.

By contrast, the challenges of wildlife trade crime have been illuminated by an increasingly bright media spotlight over recent years. This has prompted much needed attention by governments, international organizations and a wide range of implicated businesses, from airlines and internet service providers to banks and insurers. This attention is critically important: organized crime has brought immense pressure to conservation efforts for many exploited species, and the negative impacts on the security of local people and law enforcers from source to markets are clear. Remedial action is needed across the trade chain to make illicit wildlife trade more difficult, to increase the risks to illegal traders and to reduce rewards from crime through more discerning consumption choices. With strong momentum in global efforts to tackle wildlife trade crime, major gains are achievable in the short-term, but the pressure to make solutions work needs to be maintained by all involved. Some great initiatives and ideas emerging in recent years are still used by exception not the norm, such as forensic and “follow-the-money” investigation techniques, controlled deliveries and preventative measures by e-commerce businesses.

There is little doubt that action on wildlife trade in the context of the Aichi targets, reducing pressures of illegal and unsustainable activities and enhancing benefits from sustainable trade, will be unfinished business by 2020. It is indeed important to think ahead to new approaches and longer-term solutions. That said, targets need to be taken seriously. There is still time to deliver not just greater action, but real impact on wildlife trade trends by the end of this decade. The pre-2020 conservation agenda is no less important now than when it was first conceived.

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