

Testimony of Steven R. Galster
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Thank you Mr. Chairman. My name is Steven Galster, I’m Director of Field Operations for Wildlife Alliance in Southeast Asia. I have been involved in investigating, and designing programs to reduce wildlife crime in Russia, Africa, and Asia for the last 17 years. As a security analyst I spent years investigating human trafficking, arms trafficking, and drug trafficking in various parts of the globe. I’ve witnessed firsthand the connections between wildlife trafficking and all of these other forms of organized crime.

I currently run a USAID- and State Department-sponsored program to train and support the new Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network (or ASEAN-WEN), which consists of Police, Customs and CITES authorities from 10 countries, with technical support from Wildlife Alliance and TRAFFIC. Our trainers include US Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agents and US Department of Justice officials.

Wildlife crime is a threat to international environmental stability, the rule of law, and civil society. From my vantage point and that of my colleagues working in Asia, Russia and Africa, wildlife criminals are running roughshod over authorities in many countries. Wildlife crime has become a multi-billion dollar, organized, transnational crime that is unraveling globally important ecosystems. It is driven by global demand for exotic pets and food, medicines, and ornaments. It can no longer be contained at a local or national level. This growing crisis calls for an interagency, international response. The United States is part of this problem, and can be a big part of the solution.

Here are some examples of how big and organized wildlife crime has become. In the past two years we have seen over 20 metric tons of poached elephant tusks (more than 2000 dead elephants) seized from hidden compartments of cargo containers, on their way from Africa to Hong Kong. That’s only what was detected. The confiscated shipments – which may represent only 10% of the real volumes being smuggled – were orchestrated by a mafia group operating between Cameroon, the Philippines, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Every month, we’re witnessing tons of turtles, tortoises and reptiles being shipped across Southeast Asia’s borders, organized by dealers in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, China and the United States

We’re finding that key ecosystem predators, like tigers, leopards and sharks, are being illegally slaughtered in unsustainable volumes to feed a large market in China. The shipment of tigers and leopards in this photo, confiscated at the border between Thailand and Laos, was organized by a cross-border syndicate operating in six countries, with payment arranged by Vietnamese organized crime. These photos were taken 36 days ago. Shipments like this are often mixed with the highly prized pangolin, or scaly anteater, and are happening every week.

If this story sounds like it mainly relates to Asia, please think again. American criminals and – unwittingly – American consumers are behind some very significant illegal wildlife shipments into the United States from Indonesia, Thailand and other countries. Furthermore, foreign criminals are breaking American laws every day by smuggling rare and endangered species into US markets under the very thin US wildlife law enforcement radar.

We're seeing exotic reptiles, primates, and other types of rare and endangered species being shipped illegally out of Southeast Asia into Europe, Japan and the United States every week, sometimes smuggled in personal luggage, sometimes shipped in large air cargo containers, or in personalized boxes delivered by express mail services to dealers on the East and West coasts of the United States and in Middle America. Sometimes, these wild animals are falsely labeled as captive-bred animals to be "laundered" as legitimate imports.

Most of these animals were in fact taken illegally from the forest, and some overseas government officers are working hand-in-hand with wildlife dealers to legitimize the shipments, which are rapidly contributing to the demise of many species. Neither the US Government nor American consumers should be accomplices to this level of corruption and environmental destruction.

Of course most field officers are not corrupt, and are crying out for our help. One Filipino law enforcement officer was shot dead last year when he attempted to investigate a major wildlife crime case. Rangers we support in Cambodia were attacked with grenades during an anti-poaching patrol, and thankfully survived. Other rangers have been caught in jerry-rigged traps intended to snare tigers and elephants, with potentially deadly results. An Indian investigator I used to work with was knifed to death by rhino poachers. The injury or killing of conservationists and wildlife law enforcement officers is common across the world, especially in developing countries.

Why should Americans be concerned about wildlife crime, including its international dimensions? The obvious reason is the knock-on effect – that when one species is removed from an ecosystem, it has a knock-on effect to other species, including eventually onto us, people. There are over 30,000 species of wild plants and animals listed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. As a nation, we woke up slowly to the reality of global warming and its serious implications for society. Do not underestimate the dangers of letting wildlife crime wipe out thousands of species from this planet.

Americans should also be deeply concerned about wildlife crime because it strengthens transboundary criminal elements, corrupt government officials, and other enemies of the rule of law and civil society.

Wildlife crime, due to its high profit margins and low risks of arrest and punishment, is attractive to professional criminals. In Russia I came across two separate gangs that were trafficking women to China and Japan, while smuggling bear and Siberian tiger parts to these same countries.

We've recently come across brothels in Vietnam that offer young girls while serving up wild animal parts as aphrodisiacs to their customers.

We are also seeing some links between wildlife trafficking and drug trafficking. Some black market traffickers are involved in both wildlife and drugs, even using wild animals to conceal narcotics. Some wildlife sanctuaries and national parks are being used as bases to manufacture and smuggle drugs. Two years ago, during aerial anti-poaching patrols in western Cambodia, we came across these large make-shift facilities used to extract chemicals to make methamphetamines, located inside protected forests. The illicit materials are then moved into neighboring countries for production before being shipped to international markets.

All of these linkages between wildlife crime and other transnational crime point to a lack of effective patrolling and investigations, due to scarce resources and political will, and a fear of revenge. Simply put, government agencies tasked with protecting wildlife and forests in most developing countries are seriously out-gunned. The result: important ecosystems on which everyone on the planet depends are being seriously damaged. Like most professional crooks, wildlife criminals do not stop until they're caught. When they deplete one species, they move on to the next. We have seen organized poaching and trafficking rings move from tigers and other highly valuable species to smaller cats, pangolins, snakes and reptiles – as the most valuable species are extirpated from the forests. The final frontier – thankfully still rich in biodiversity—may be the United States.

Recommended Response

The US is one of the biggest consumers of wildlife in the world. It also has arguably the best-equipped and best-trained wildlife law enforcement agencies in the world. Our country has both a moral obligation and the technical and financial wherewithal to lead a global effort to curb wildlife crime before the situation becomes irreversible.

First, we should make sure that our national leader in the fight against wildlife crime, the US Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement, is strong enough to protect our own wildlife and prevent a massive influx of illegal wildlife trade from overseas. Their wildlife confiscation repository outside of Denver has over a million items in it and keeps growing – a living testimony to how big the illegal trade coming into the US still is. FWS agents are very effective, but there are just too few of them. Their small force of about 200 Special Agents could easily be doubled to catch up with wildlife crime problems in and related to the USA.

Second, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other USG agencies like NOAA and the Department of Justice should be mandated to seriously engage their overseas counterparts to jointly fight wildlife crime, just as the DEA and their overseas counterparts have joined up to curb international drug trafficking. An international effort to curb wildlife crime can work in tandem with, and be more effective than, our anti-drug trafficking efforts. We have already been approached by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to develop a joint program to combat trafficking of people, drugs and wildlife along porous border points in six Asian countries.

There are many similarities between wildlife trafficking and drug trafficking, especially the relationship between supply and demand. Enforcement cannot operate in isolation; there must be parallel efforts to curb demand. But those efforts can take time.

The fight against drug traffickers is very difficult because they can replace a confiscated shipment of cocaine, heroine or methamphetamines relatively easily. They can reproduce their stock. The stock of rare and endangered species, however, is limited. Even if you don't catch the big wildlife dealers in the act of smuggling, they lose a great deal of time and money in their illegal trade when their stock is confiscated.

But currently, wildlife criminals feel very confident they won't lose a shipment *or* get caught. And if they are – outside of a few countries in the world – they won't see any jail time or receive any substantial penalty. They're in this business because of its high profits and very, very low risks.

Imagine, though if these same wildlife criminals were suddenly to have their stocks confiscated, investigations were mounted against them, and they were actually put into jail. Suddenly, the business of wildlife crime would become more difficult and perceived as far less attractive by organized criminal elements. As the profit margins dip, and the risk factor is raised, the flow of trade will be reduced accordingly.

The US is spending an awful lot of money – and American lives – to protect *non-living, limited* resources – fossil fuels-- because we currently depend on those resources for our daily livelihoods. We should consider spending at least a fraction of that money – and no American lives – to protect the earth's *living* and potentially sustainable resources that we depend on for our daily livelihood. We will always need healthy ecosystems. Wild animals and plants are the blood of healthy forests and waters. Without that blood, the ecosystems will eventually cease to function and serve our many needs.

The US is the one country that can help stem the huge tide of illegal wildlife trafficking here and abroad, and in doing so can help secure natural living resources around the globe.

Specifically the US can:

- Post wildlife law enforcement officers to our overseas regional missions to train their counterparts and work with them to investigate criminal groups breaking US and other laws. For example, two FWS Special Agents should be posted next fiscal year to the US regional mission in Bangkok to cover enormous wildlife crime needs in Southeast Asia, where we know local criminals are teaming up with Americans to ship large quantities of illegal wildlife into the United States. They are even starting to smuggle US species back into Southeast Asia.
- Engage our own traditional national security related agencies in lending their machinery, expertise, and technology to help stop wildlife criminals everywhere in the world. For example, the US military and its overseas counterparts conduct joint surveillance and anti-terrorism exercises in forest, high seas and border areas. They use satellites and aerial surveys to watch for

border violations, insurgent groups, and other security threats. Let's ask them to look for poachers and traffickers too, and report these violations to the appropriate agencies.

- Continue to provide resources and technical capacity to combat crimes against nature in cooperation with willing partners in developing countries, which has proven to be a cost-effective and welcome form of international assistance with substantial benefits for wildlife and forests.
- Engage China, the only other country in the world consuming more wildlife than the United States, as an ally in helping to conserve the world's remaining wild animal and plant species. A superpower relationship, if you will, in which our two countries could reduce our respective country's consumption of rare and endangered species, while providing overseas technical support to developing countries in need of more protection.

Most of America's allies – and perhaps even some enemies – would welcome such support and collaboration. In my experience, wildlife conservation is something that all countries, cultures and religions can agree on. And it brings people together to protect our common home.

If this sounds too idealistic, it's already happening on a very small scale and with a very positive response. This week the US-sponsored ASEAN-WEN Support Program, with the assistance from US Fish and Wildlife Service, is finishing a wildlife crime investigation course for Indonesian Police, Forestry and Customs officers at a police training center outside of Jakarta. The trainees have shown deep appreciation for the course and want more. Other such trainings are being planned for the region, including one this month at the US-sponsored International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA). China has expressed interest in joining these courses and already participated in two.

The US *can* play the role of global environmental leader, helping to scale back wildlife crime around the world and by doing so, can help protect our own natural resources from being targeted by increasingly strong and sophisticated transnational wildlife criminals.