



September 13, 2021

Wildlife Poaching and Trafficking in Africa: An Overview

Overview

Wildlife poaching—the illegal hunting or capture of wild animals—occurs in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Africa), a biodiverse region. Poaching is a component of wildlife trafficking (i.e., illegal trade in wildlife).

International demand, particularly from Asia, drives poaching and trafficking of certain high-profile African wildlife products, and threatens some species' long-term viability. The role of poaching and wildlife trafficking in reducing biodiversity and disrupting ecosystems, supporting transnational criminal and militant groups, spreading zoonotic diseases, and weakening the rule of law has prompted international concern and led some in the 117th Congress to propose legislation to address such challenges.

Several analyses, including from the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), identify various economic incentives as drivers of wildlife poaching and trafficking in Africa. “Subsistence” poachers may hunt for consumption or local sale for comparatively small profits. Local intermediaries who transport wildlife products for onward trafficking also reportedly obtain limited profits. Organized commercial poachers, international intermediaries, and manufacturers and retailers in destination markets may engage in larger-scale, higher-return operations. Top destinations for trafficked African wildlife products vary by product, but include China and countries in Southeast Asia.

Factors at the community level may also foster poaching in Africa. Tensions between conservation authorities and communities living near protected areas can impede efforts to curtail wildlife crime: residents may disregard regulations or cooperate with poachers due to perceptions that conservation initiatives yield few local benefits or threaten traditional livelihoods (e.g., hunting or agriculture). Human-wildlife conflict over crops, livestock grazing land, or human safety also contributes to poaching in some areas. Low capacity and/or corruption within customs and law enforcement services reportedly enable such activities.

Species of Concern

A range of iconic animals—including African elephants and rhinoceroses—are affected by poaching and wildlife trafficking. These two species are considered threatened or endangered under international conventions as well as the U.S. Endangered Species Act (P.L. 93-205, 16 U.S.C. §§1531-1544), resulting in U.S. trade restrictions on derivative products. African elephant populations range in up to 36 countries depending on herd movements, primarily in Southern and East Africa (home to an estimated 55% and 28% of the continent's estimated 415,000 elephants, respectively). Illegal trade in ivory increased in the mid-2000s and peaked during 2010-2012, when an estimated

100,000 African elephants were reportedly killed. Elephant poaching appears to have since declined. Some scientists attribute this decline to greater awareness and enforcement of anti-wildlife trafficking laws. Within Central African countries, which reportedly experienced the highest per-capita levels of poaching a decade ago, fewer elephants may be left to hunt.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature reported that as of 2020, black and white rhinoceros populations stood at 3,142 and 10,080, respectively. Rhinoceros populations in Africa are concentrated in Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. According to surveys, poaching of African rhinoceroses peaked in 2015 and decreased through 2019. Rhinoceroses are poached for their horns, which are used in practices including traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and as ornaments. South Africa, home to roughly 75% of the African rhinoceros population, has seen the most poaching per-capita. China and Vietnam are reportedly the top destination countries for rhinoceros horns.

Several other rare and endangered species are poached in Africa, including lions, mountain gorillas, pangolins, certain tortoises, and cheetahs. These species are poached largely for their body parts and meat, which are consumed or used in TCM and ornaments. Non-endangered species also are poached. Many observers assess that the bushmeat trade and overhunting have at times led to declines in primates, antelopes, and some rodent populations.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

COVID-19 resulted in restricted travel into and out of African countries, reducing revenue from tourism and hunting licensing and, in turn, funding for management of parks and reserves. Analyses of the relationship between poaching and COVID-19 are sparse. Some conservation groups reported a rise in poaching for bushmeat (wild game for human consumption) and regional sale including in parts of East and Southern Africa, due to increased poverty and reduced monitoring. At the same time, travel restrictions may have disrupted transnational trafficking of certain species. The South African government, for instance, reported that rhinoceros poaching decreased by 33% in 2020, due, in part, to COVID-19 lockdowns. The Kenyan Wildlife Service reported that for the first time since 1999, no rhinos were poached in 2020.

Selected International Responses

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is a multilateral treaty that regulates the international trade in animals and

plants that may be endangered by trade. Ratified by 183 countries, including the United States, CITES establishes incrementally stringent, species-specific restrictions aimed at ensuring species sustainability. International organizations that support efforts in Africa include the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime, UNODC, and Wildlife Enforcement Networks, which aim to connect CITES authorities, law enforcement entities, and other actors focused on combatting wildlife crime. The African Union (AU) adopted the African Common Strategy on Combating Illegal Exploitation and Illegal Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora in 2015, which sets out a range of conservation goals. Many African countries also have established national regulatory frameworks relating to wildlife trafficking.

Selected U.S. Responses

Successive U.S. Administrations have identified wildlife trafficking and poaching as threats to conservation and good governance in Africa. In 2013, President Obama issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13648, establishing a Presidential Task Force on Wildlife Trafficking. In 2017, President Trump issued E.O. 13773, calling for the dismantling of groups involved in transnational crime, including wildlife trafficking. Congress has appropriated funds aimed at addressing wildlife trafficking, including via International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement funds, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Resource Management account and species conservation funds, and a range of other foreign assistance accounts. Congress has also enacted relevant foreign policy laws. The Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016 (END Wildlife Trafficking Act; P.L. 114-231), for example, required the State Department annually to identify Focus Countries (major sources, consumers, or transit points for wildlife trafficking) and Countries of Concern (in which the government has actively engaged in or knowingly profited from wildlife trafficking), and encouraged U.S. aid to build the conservation capacities of Focus Countries.

African Countries In the 2020 END Wildlife Trafficking Act Report

Focus Countries: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Gabon, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe

Countries of Concern: Cameroon, DRC, Madagascar, Nigeria

Various U.S. federal agencies seek to address poaching in Africa and other regions. For example, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) lead wildlife trafficking-related diplomatic, foreign policy, and foreign aid efforts. USAID's Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), for instance, is a long-term, multi-faceted conservation program to promote sustainable natural resource management that includes anti-poaching activities. FWS, within the Department of the Interior, has law enforcement responsibilities related to wildlife trafficking, provides funds for environmental conservation, and leads

U.S. engagement on CITES. The Departments of the Interior, Commerce, Homeland Security, and State play roles in identifying and preventing the illegal or illicit importation of wildlife products into the United States. The U.S. Treasury Department administers U.S. economic sanctions programs that have targeted wildlife trafficking as a driver of instability and corruption in some African countries. The Department of Justice's Environmental and Natural Resources Division prosecutes wildlife crimes. Various Department of Defense components, including U.S. Africa Command, conduct anti-trafficking security cooperation activities in Africa.

Issues for Congress

Anti-Trafficking Approaches. Congress might consider whether U.S. anti-wildlife trafficking approaches are adequately balanced to address the core drivers of wildlife crime. Certain U.S. efforts have focused on building the capacity of African park rangers and law enforcement officials. Others have prioritized reducing demand for wildlife products in destination countries and promoting community conservation management, alternative livelihoods, and nutrition sources in African settings.

Unintended Consequences. Congress might evaluate mechanisms to mitigate the risk that U.S. assistance recipients contribute to local grievances or are involved in human rights violations. For example, communities in some African countries have accused officials of establishing wildlife protection regulations without local consent and dispossessing residents of their land without adequate compensation. Some anti-poaching units that have received funding from U.S. aid implementers have been implicated in torture and extrajudicial killings, including in Cameroon, Central African Republic, DRC, Kenya, and Republic of Congo. Some observers have questioned the human rights implications of an alleged "militarization" of conservation, including park rangers' use of military-style weaponry and tactics. Others contend that such arms are necessary to defend against armed poachers and other attackers who have killed dozens of African park rangers in recent years.

Oversight and Effectiveness. Various U.S. government sources have reported challenges in measuring and conducting oversight of U.S. efforts to address wildlife trafficking, including information gaps, limited staffing, and the remote geography of certain program areas. Other obstacles may include differentiating species population changes caused by poaching from those caused by land use change, climate variability, and other factors. Congress might consider how best to assess the effectiveness of U.S. counter-wildlife trafficking efforts given these challenges.

Katarina C. O'Regan, Coordinator, Analyst in Foreign Policy

Pervaze A. Sheikh, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

Tomás F. Husted, Analyst in African Affairs

Alexis Arief, Specialist in African Affairs

Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs

Nicolas Cook, Specialist in African Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.