

Target 15.7 – The end of poaching and trafficking

Areas with a high density of species are at risk and Sustainable Development (SDG) target 15.7 states that we need to take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products. Earlier, this was an essential target for animal rights activists and those afraid that some species would go extinct. In recent times, zoonoses occurred as one of the most urgent topics, which are heavily linked to poaching and illegal hunt of wildlife species. In our paper, we choose to define wildlife trade, legal or illegal, as “the exchange or sale of a wild animal or plant resources”. This includes live animals and plants, animal body parts such as skins and feathers, and any products made from or including a wild animal or plant. Poaching will be used here as “illegally hunt or catch on land that is not one’s or in contravention of official protection”. This paper will discuss the aspects of wildlife trading and poaching, what is trafficked wildlife used for, and why is it still a problem, furthermore, how trafficking of wildlife species indirectly affects the society and economy.

Effects of poaching, consuming and trading wildlife species

Threats to global health and risk factors for developing infectious diseases run the spectrum from climate change to poverty and security issues. However, few are as directly manageable as the global trade in wildlife [1]. The illegal trafficking of wildlife trade has long been a problem that only recently has captured the attention of the public [2]. Trafficking in wildlife and plants, along with poaching provides disease transmissions at levels that not only cause human disease outbreaks but also threaten livestock, international trade, agricultural livelihoods, native wildlife populations and the health of ecosystems and biodiversity. The global wildlife trade is almost impossible to quantify since it ranges in scale from the local exchange to major international routes, where much is illegal [1].

Each year, billions of plants and animals are traded to meet consumers' demand for trophies, food, clothing, decorative items, pets and traditional medicine [3]. If these numbers are combined, it is suggested that at least 1 billion direct and indirect contact between wildlife, humans and domestic animals, as a result of wildlife trade annually [1]. As the world became more globalized in the later decades of the 20th century, so did the illegal wildlife trade. Species once poached for local or national demand are now trafficked through multiple countries and ports to reach markets on the other side of the globe [2]. Animals have always been a vector of diseases. The rate of disease passed from animals to humans is not alarming in developed countries with high hygiene rules and a safe environment. However, in underdeveloped countries where populations are often overcrowded and live close to livestock, the reality is different. It is estimated that the world population will reach 11 billion by 2100. One of the consequences in rising human populations is the risk and challenges in controlling disease outbreaks. The population rise is likely to boost the increasing rate of infectious diseases from wildlife – a trend that has already been observed over the past decades [4].

During the last century, multiple diseases have transmitted from wildlife to humans. The flu pandemic in 1980 killed an estimated 50 million to 100 million people, and the swine flu in 2009 took thousands of lives. Different strains of influenza viruses have caused some of the deadliest outbreaks of the past century [4]. For instance, SARS coronavirus infected 8000 people worldwide, and about 800 of them died. Scientists have traced this virus back to bats, and it is thought that the virus found its way into the human population through livestock markets in China [4]. A direct connection with livestock markets and wildlife diseases passed on to humans. Since the 1980s, HIV/AIDS has infected 60 million people and caused an estimated 30 million deaths. Scientists think that HIV/AIDS made the jump from chimpanzees to humans sometime in the mid-20th century [4]. HIV/AIDS is a virus that still affects many people in the present time. Even with all these past infectious diseases spread from wildlife, the trafficking and the danger associated with it is still not at an end. We are now in 2020 and stand in a global crisis due to COVID-19, which is correlated with wildlife trade and consumption in China. This crisis will not only take thousands of lives, but it will also affect the economy significantly in many countries which we have already seen.

Rules of trading and breeding wildlife animals in China

Illegal wildlife trade is considered the fourth most lucrative global crime with an estimated value between \$7 billion and \$23 billion each year [5]. The three main elements which serve as the driving force consists of poaching, trafficking and demand. Species such as elephants, tigers and rhinos have been mainly targeted. Slaughtered for their ivory, bones, pelts and horns, unfortunately, the blood trail often leads to the Chinese markets. The industry has its roots deeply embedded in Chinese history and culture, and animals have been viewed as a source of food, medicine and income. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a common factor for the trafficking-machinery, as it requires thousands of wildlife species [6]. Products that lack a viable substitute for raw materials, even though the medicinal effects from these materials are not supported or proven. From a TCM perspective, wild animals are a resource to be exploited for human consumption, not something that requires protection or contains the intrinsic value. As the Chinese economy has been propelled forward, increasing the citizens purchasing power, the demand for rare animal parts grows. Paradoxically, as the awareness of the massive declines of endangered species populations rises, so does their value as “status symbols”, ornaments or investments, adding further fuel into the illegal wildlife trade [6].

Although the recent bans on international and domestic wildlife trade seem to work, the ones who benefit from the commercial wildlife trade continue to exploit loopholes and derivatives in these same laws. Most of the laws are derived from "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Wildlife" [7]-[8], and as most of the articles claim to motivate protection of wildlife, some of them favors the wildlife trade. According to this, wildlife is a natural resource for human consumption, and the people utilizing it should be protected. This can be dangerous as it may blur the lines between what species are to be protected or to be categorized as a natural resource free for consumption. While the State Council of China banned the buying, sale and use of tiger bone more than twenty years ago, sizable industrial tiger farms have emerged in the country with the sole purpose of farming tigers for the trade-in their parts and products. Recognizing the massive destruction of biodiversity, and the mounting pressure from other governments globally due to several pandemics traced back to the wildlife markets and damages to the international image of the Chinese government. China has had no other choice other than to take stricter measures to the prevention and punishment of illegal trading [8].

While the State Council of China banned the buying, sale and use of tiger bone more than twenty years ago, sizable industrial tiger farms have emerged in the country with the sole purpose of farming tigers. Issuing licenses for “tiger farms” and giving approval for commercial trade in tiger bone for wine and tiger pelts for home décor, and what relation it has with the wild population of tigers and biodiversity in general. China argues that breeding tigers in captivity have significantly raised the species population. Unfortunately, the legalized breeding program of captive tigers has done nothing to stop the killing of wild tigers. Instead, the industry has stimulated and further fueled the demand for animal parts, driving the trafficking and poaching of wild animals. Poaching and trafficking are also more lucrative since capturing and killing a wild species are more financially rewarding than raising bred animals [9]. Funneling illegal products through licensed breeders and factories have given rise to a new kind of market called “grey markets”. The rising pressure from CITES and Chinese policies as a cause of the recent pandemic, further fuels the demand for “legal sourced” products [9].

How could we possibly solve Target 15.7?

In the wake of the Coronavirus, there have been debates about zoonotic diseases and their relationships to illegal wildlife trade. In many ways, no country in the world was adequately prepared for what occurred. After all, the measures used to handle the situation was to close down borders, strict restraining orders and less travelling. Many believe that it is essential to ban Chinese wet markets. Scientists who specialize in emerging infectious diseases think one possible place the novel coronavirus may have jumped from animals to humans was at one of those wet markets [10]. Nevertheless, in reality, this is much more complicated than it seems. After the outbreak, China closed down much of the wet markets and banned the sale of wildlife for consumption. Both the poaching and illegal trade got reduced significantly. Now, the country has reopened some markets, even though the global uproar is massively increasing. Animal rights activists, academics, and other laypeople have been advocates against these forms for trade and actively support a global ban.

The situation is complicated, and simply banning the markets will not be the most feasible way to handle this particular situation. One issue is the socioeconomic factors that are necessary to keep in mind [11]. With a total ban of the wet markets, some experts warn that millions of low-income people would lose access to cheap sources of food. This would be the direct opposite of that UN - and the SDG - want if they are going to tackle poverty. Additionally, in the case of a ban on wet markets, many farmers would lose out a needed income. These types of markets are not unique to China and exist all over the world. Singapore is another case where they have banned the trade of wild animals and slaughter in markets. Now the National Environment Agency has issued advisories for “high standards of hygiene and cleanliness” in similar markets as we see in China [12]. This should be the main focus in the markets as well. A higher focus on hygiene and cleanliness will work better than a total ban.

Concluding remarks

We are reminding that target 15.7 states that we need to take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products. This target is even more relevant today than it was previously, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to humans' demand for wildlife products, we are exploring flora, fauna and the biodiversity of natural wildlife that they sustain. We are merely threatening biodiversity along with the health of humans and livestock. As seen previously, diseases have been transferred from wildlife to human populations such as the HIV/AIDS virus, which is still causing problems to this day. Therefore, in recent events, it is natural to bring up China's wet markets and their demand for wildlife products and the hygienic associated with it. Many wild animals are killed only for their valuable parts, such as bones, fur etc. This has left many wildlife species endangered, such as the tiger and rhinos. The trading and poaching of wildlife are, however, a part of the Chinese culture - and has been for generations. Even though these trading markets are unsustainable, it is, however, part of the Chinese culture and a way for farmers to earn money and is both cultural and socio-economic importance. Therefore, it is not ideal with a full-on ban, but rather a stricter focus on animal rights, hygiene and cleanliness. In that way, we can take both fauna, wildlife and humanity into account.

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