

Crime Syndicates Smuggling Wildlife

By Arthur Max

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It could be ivory concealed in a container, cans of caviar in a suitcase or baby chimpanzees in a crate. The smuggling of wildlife goods is a low-risk, high-profit enterprise proving increasingly attractive to crime syndicates.

Exports of wildlife, including fisheries and timber, are estimated at \$150 billion to \$200 billion a year. The illicit side of the business is likely worth tens of billions of dollars, experts say.

"It's big, and it's getting bigger," says Peter Younger of Interpol, the international police coordinating agency.

Stacked against drug running or international terrorism, wildlife crime claims minimum priority with national police forces. If caught, smugglers often face little more than a fine or short jail term. In countries with weak judiciaries, suspects can stall their cases indefinitely while resuming their illicit business, he said.

"It's a business loss, and then you can go on with what you were doing," said Steven Broad, director of TRAFFIC, which monitors the international wildlife trade.

The United States also has a thriving black market in live animals, carved ivory, reptile skins, medicinal plants and illegally logged lumber, said Claudia McMurray, the assistant secretary of state for environmental affairs. Anecdotal evidence indicates it largely is supplied by organized crime.

"You have wildlife and drugs together," she told The Associated Press, citing one case in which a live snake was stuffed with small sacks of cocaine -- in the hope customs officers would not want to inspect the legally imported snake too closely.

"It's something we are pursuing quite aggressively," she said. "If you catch them on one activity, you're probably going to cut off some other activities and then you can put them in jail."

Poachers capture baby chimpanzees and gorillas and crate them north through Egypt and on to Europe, Younger said. Russian crime gangs smuggle beluga caviar in suitcases, fetching \$4,450 per kilogram in the retail market.

In raw ivory alone, Interpol made 13 major interdictions in the last two years worth \$26 million, said Younger.

Last year, Hong Kong customs officials discovered elephant tusks concealed behind walls of three shipping containers that had made a tortuous route from Africa through several Asian ports. Younger declined to give details of the ongoing investigation, but showed a diagram of an interlocking web of shell companies, suspects and interim destinations in a half-dozen countries.

Corruption is another problem, he said, recalling the case of a large shipment of ivory that "went missing" after it was seized by customs officers in the Philippines.

The problems of enforcement have shadowed this month's Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species meeting to review rules on cross-border trade in plants and animals threatened with depletion and sometimes on the verge of extinction.

Since the last conference of the 171-nation CITES in 2004, Europe and Asia have set up regional enforcement groups and some countries have tightened coordination among customs services, environmental bodies and police.

Interpol set up a one-man wildlife department last March, and its database tracks wildlife crime alongside drugs and counterfeiting.

But huge gaps remain. Southern African countries have come to grips with elephant poaching, but the illegal ivory trade is soaring in Central and West Africa.

Ivory and timber are the currency that funds coups and rebellions across an unstable belt of the continent.

Benson Okita, Kenya's Rhino Program Coordinator, underscored the high stakes involved in the business of rhinoceros horns.

"Last month three Kenyan rangers were shot dead by poachers and one was critically wounded" in a gun battle that also left four Somali poachers dead, Okita said.

Between 2003 and 2005, 60 percent of the rhino populations were killed by commercial poachers in the two African countries, according to a TRAFFIC report.