

Interventions to tackle the illegal trade in endangered species have focused traditionally on reducing the supply of wildlife specimens, parts, products and derivatives into the market. These have taken a variety of approaches: for example, by protecting flora and fauna in range countries, closing legal gaps and loopholes, enhancing law enforcement effort, increasing seizures and prosecutions and strengthening the suite of penalties and other deterrents aimed at poachers and traffickers.

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Despite such efforts, however, during the past decade there has been a significant increase in the volume of illegal wildlife trade for some species, and a shift in the dynamics underpinning it. Factors driving this include a surge in demand, largely from East and South-east Asian markets, for endangered species products such as elephant ivory, rhinoceros horn, Tiger bones and skins, luxury woods, reptile skins and species used in traditional medicines.

Since 2008, sustained economic growth in parts of Asia, China in particular, has provided a counterbalance to a period of increased volatility and widespread recession in Europe and North America. Three decades of unprecedented social, political and economic transformation have also generated important opportunities for improvements in quality of life and increased purchasing power across the majority of Asian economies. This has also given rise to trends such as the conspicuous consumption of unique and precious luxury goods, including rare wildlife products.

TRAFFIC's trade and market monitoring shows that products derived from particular species of wild fauna and flora, many long-venerated, pervasive and deep-rooted in Asian countries' cultural history, are part of that general profile of status-driven consumption.

When juxtaposed against increasing species scarcity, this rising demand has made wildlife crime a lucrative endeavour, and thus an attractive prospect for well-organized criminal syndicates. Interventions to disrupt these will only be effective if an integrated approach to doing so is adopted; i.e. by reducing the demand for endangered species products while concurrently pursuing ways to increase law enforcement effectiveness and limit the supply of products into the market.

Recognizing the magnitude of the challenge, TRAFFIC and WWF convened at the end of 2011 a group of "creative experts" to coalesce ideas and experience on influencing public behaviour. Success factors and challenges common across fields beyond nature conservation were explored in depth, e.g. environmental economics and public healthcare. Representatives from the media, public relations, management advisory and other companies, as well as Inter-Governmental Organizations, academia and government, agreed that "demand reduction" interventions to dissuade consumption would only work if accurately targeted, based on empirical evidence about purchasing motivations, and with messaging delivered by those persons and vectors influential with key audiences.

A clear consensus was also expressed: to be effective, demand reduction messaging should be tailored to people's interests, attitudes, values and desires—for example, their hopes of attaining social status and reinforcing self-worth. Conservation messaging has historically emphasized the need to protect animals instead, e.g. by urging compassion for their plight or to protect the planet for future generations. Expert opinion recognized, however, that this was unlikely to resonate with those whose behaviour and leadership would be essential to drive change in consumption patterns.

Building on this set of insights, TRAFFIC has since developed a five-step process grounded in social science principles, led by statutory authorities and engaging a wide variety of stakeholders, as a framework for future demand reduction initiatives. Two years on, this structure has been endorsed by both the Global Tiger Recovery Programme and the Rhino Working Group established under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) with respect to framing both species-specific and systemic interventions.

TRAFFIC has also begun to apply the framework through initiatives in China and Viet Nam. Market research conducted in these countries has confirmed the specific behaviours (Step 1) and consumer segments (Step 2) that need to be targeted. Insights have been gleaned into whether people are consuming endangered species products for themselves, or as gifts to others, and what their motivations are for doing so. A rich mix of "emotional motivators", including the demonstration of status, prestige or to adhere to some form of social norm, and "functional motivators"—including perceived medicinal purposes—has become apparent.

Such perceptions have been cross-referenced with models, concepts and theories from fields including behavioural economics, psychology and sociology (Step 3), and are informing the development of marketing frameworks (Step 4) that will guide activities to change the behaviour of consumers (Step 5). Examples of these include inviting influential business leaders to develop Codes of Conduct to reduce the corporate gifting of products.

In order to ensure this type of insight-led approach is delivered at sufficient scale and for a significant duration, TRAFFIC is facilitating collaborations amongst key stakeholders, including government, corporate leaders and those influential in society. This is helping to foster strong "thought leadership" around demand reduction interventions, which are a relatively new field of conservation interest. Such approaches will be critical if we are to implement an optimized suite of interventions, and employ effectively the agents of change that will realistically undermine the factors driving serious organized wildlife crime. Only then will we begin to change patterns of over-exploitation towards a collective security—environmental, economic, food, health and overall national and international aspects—that will ensure a long-term future for wild populations of endangered species.

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