Introduction:

The illegal trade in wildlife is a most attractive crime. But it is highly destructive, and its scale is threatening the extinction of some of the world’s most iconic species.

It is also grotesquely cruel: poachers slice off the faces of live rhinos to steal their horns; militia groups use helicopters to shoot down elephants for their tusks; factory farmers breed captive tigers to marinate their bones for medicinal wine and fry their flesh for the dinner plate; bears are kept for a lifetime in tiny cages to have their gall bladders regularly drained for liver tonic. But for any criminal who wants maximum money for minimum risk, it is most attractive.

At every stage in the supply lines, the systems that are supposed to defend the animals against this global butchery are no match for the organised crime groups that dominate the trade.

This is a vast business, valued by the UN Environment Programme at $23bn (£18bn) a year – twice the gross domestic product of poached countries such as Tanzania or Kenya. The profit margins are enormous. The poacher in Africa sells ivory at up to $150 a kilo. At the other end of the supply line, in Beijing, it sells for well over ten times as much, with some sales reaching $2,025 a kilo, according to research by Chatham House. The markup is even bigger with rhino horn: from $1,000 for a pair of horns (average weight 6kg each) at poacher level to upwards of $66,000 a kilo in China.

The Issue:

The world is dealing with an unprecedented spike in illegal wildlife trade, threatening to overturn decades of conservation gains. Ivory estimated to weigh more than 23 metric tons (a figure that represents 2,500 elephants) was seized in the 13 largest seizures of illegal ivory in 2011. Poaching threatens the last of our wild tigers that number around 3,890.

Wildlife crime is a big business. Run by dangerous international networks, wildlife and animal parts are trafficked much like illegal drugs and arms. By its very nature, it is almost impossible to obtain reliable figures for the value of illegal wildlife trade. Experts at TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, estimate that it runs into hundreds of millions of dollars.

Some examples of illegal wildlife trade are well known, such as poaching of elephants for ivory and tigers for their skins and bones. However, countless other species are similarly overexploited, from marine turtles to timber trees. Not all wildlife trade is illegal. Wild plants and animals from tens of thousands of species are caught or harvested from the wild and then sold legitimately as food, pets, ornamental plants, leather, tourist ornaments and medicine. Wildlife trade escalates into a crisis when an increasing proportion is illegal and unsustainable, directly threatening the survival of many species in the wild.

Stamping out wildlife crime is a priority for WWF because it’s the largest direct threat to the future of many of the world’s most threatened species. It is second only to habitat destruction in overall threats against species survival.

Profits have increased dramatically over the past decade, driven by the wealthy new elites in Asia, accumulating ivory carvings and tiger skins as status symbols for their homes; buying ground powder of rhino horn and tiger-bone wine as traditional remedies for almost every ailment from hangovers to cancer, none of it based on any scientific evidence. This is a demand driven by two things: greed and superstition.
For a gangster, these animals are like bundles of cash lying almost unprotected in the wilderness. This is a profit-hungry global crime conducted by some of the same ruthless and violent groups that traffic drugs and guns. And up against this collection of highly organised and well-resourced criminals, we currently deploy some of the world’s weakest law enforcement.

The only global body tasked with protecting the world’s wildlife is a network of officials in each of the nations signed up to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), which is co-ordinated by a small secretariat in Geneva.

CITES

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

CITES was drafted as a result of a resolution adopted in 1963 at a meeting of members of IUCN (The World Conservation Union). The text of the Convention was finally agreed at a meeting of representatives of 80 countries in Washington, D.C., the United States of America, on 3 March 1973, and on 1 July 1975 CITES entered in force.

CITES is an international agreement to which States and regional economic integration organizations adhere voluntarily. States that have agreed to be bound by the Convention ('joined' CITES) are known as Parties. Although CITES is legally binding on the Parties (in other words they have to implement the Convention) it does not take the place of national laws. Rather it provides a framework to be respected by each Party, which has to adopt its own domestic legislation to ensure that CITES is implemented at the national level.

TRAFFIC

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, is the leading non-governmental organization working globally on trade in wild animals and plants in the context of both biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

TRAFFIC specializes in:
- Investigating and analysing wildlife trade trends, patterns, impacts and drivers to provide the leading knowledge base on trade in wild animals and plants;
- Informing, supporting and encouraging action by governments, individually and through inter-governmental cooperation to adopt, implement and enforce effective policies and laws;
- Providing information, encouragement and advice to the private sector on effective approaches to ensure that sourcing of wildlife uses sustainability standards and best practice;
- Developing insight into consumer attitudes and purchasing motivation and guiding the design of effective communication interventions aimed to dissuade purchasing of illicit wildlife goods.

Key events:
- 1700s: Poaching starts in Europe as poorer people cannot find another way to get food to survive.
- 1880s: Peasants are allowed to hunt small game that is on their farms as a means of survival in Europe.
- 1900: The United States passes the Lacey Act making it illegal to sell a poached animal in one state to someone in another state for a profit.
- 1918: The Migratory Bird Treaty Act is implemented between the United States, Great Britain, Mexico, Japan, and Russia, protecting migrating birds from being killed, hunted, exported, or sold for profit.
- 1940s: Hunting and deforestation in Russia leads to a 40% decline in the Siberian tiger population.
- 1960s: CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is formed as an international agreement to protect animals in trade so that their survival is not threatened.
1973: The Endangered Species Act provides conservation for threatened and endangered plants and animals in their respective habitats in an effort to keep populations stable and protected.

1989: A global ivory ban is created by CITES in an effort to reduce poaching and stop the decreasing number of elephant populations.

2006: Elephant poaching spikes and 120 carcasses are found in a national park in Africa.

2013: Around 2000 dead pangolins, a very rare mammal, are seized from a fishing vessel headed towards China.

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking

On 26 February 2016, the European Commission adopted a Communication on the EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking which sets out a comprehensive blueprint for joined-up efforts to fight wildlife crime inside the EU, and for strengthening the EU’s role in the global fight against these illegal activities. The plan has three main strands – greater enforcement, better cooperation, and more effective prevention. The Action Plan is to be implemented jointly by the EU (Commission services, EEAS, Europol, Eurojust) and its Member States until 2020.

UN General Assembly and wildlife

General Assembly resolutions on the topic include:
- General Assembly resolution 69/314, Tackling illicit trafficking in wildlife, adopted 30 July 2015
- General Assembly resolution 68/205, proclaiming 3 March as World Wildlife Day, adopted 20 December 2013

During the 68th and 69th sessions of the General Assembly, Gabon and Germany coordinated high-level side events on Poaching and Illicit Wildlife Trafficking:
- 26 September 2014: Poaching and Illicit Wildlife Trafficking: Towards Joint Action by the International Community (A/69/430)

In addition, a high-level side event was held at the 13th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, held in Doha from 12 to 19 April 2015 (A/CONF.222/17).
- 13 April 2015: Wildlife and Forest Crime: A Serious Crime

Possible solutions:

It is estimated that in the last century we have lost 97 percent of the world’s tigers. In just the last 13 years there has been a 76 percent decline in the elephant population. In 2014 alone, there were over 1,200 rhinoceros killed in South Africa. Each of these animal populations are being severely depleted in large part due to illegal wildlife trafficking.

Wildlife trafficking has become one of the most lucrative types of transnational organized crime in the world, with annual revenues conservatively estimated to be worth billions of dollars per year. With such a lucrative market, this has led many criminals to engage in this illicit activity, driven by high demand and high profits for illegal wildlife as well as a low risk of detection. The items illegally traded include tiger bone, elephant ivory, bear bile and fish bladders, rhinoceros horn, sea turtle shells, pangolins, and more.

Despite the conservation concerns, there are people who knowingly purchase such items, but there are also those consumers who buy the products unknowingly, thus further contributing to the issue. They may purchase wildlife products, such as tortoise shell hair clips or elephant ivory carvings, without any awareness of the impact it has on the poaching situation in local communities.

The U.S. government is taking a strong stand in the fight against wildlife trafficking, through the recently released Implementation Plan for the President’s National Strategy for Combating Wildlife
Trafficking. The Plan includes such directives as strengthening domestic and global enforcement, reducing demand, and expanding international cooperation.

Buyers can play a role in helping to combat this global problem, starting with not purchasing any wildlife or wildlife products. When the demand for the products stops, so too will the number of animals being poached. Consumers can also learn about the issue, share that information with family and friends, and drive retailers to stop carrying illicit wildlife products.

Bibliography:

TRAFFIC, www.traffic.org

CITES, www.cites.org
