

# Organized crime is wiping out wildlife

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This is a slow loris from an illegal wildlife market in Southeast Asia. A Wildlife Conservation Society paper says that organized crime is wiping out wildlife. Credit: Elizabeth Bennett/Wildlife Conservation Society

A paper by noted WCS conservationist Elizabeth Bennett says that an immense, increasingly sophisticated illegal trade in wildlife parts conducted by organized crime, coupled with antiquated enforcement methods, are decimating the world's most beloved species including

rhinos, tigers, and elephants on a scale never before seen.

The paper, published June 7 on the online issue of the journal *Oryx*, says that much of the trade is driven by wealthy East Asian markets that have a seemingly insatiable appetite for [wildlife](#) parts.

According to the paper, organized [crime syndicates](#) using sophisticated smuggling operations have penetrated even previously secure wildlife populations. Some of the elaborate methods include: hidden compartments in [shipping containers](#); rapidly changing of smuggling routes; and the use of e-commerce whose locations are difficult to detect.

"We are failing to conserve some of the world's most beloved and charismatic species," said Bennett, who began her career in conservation more than 25 years ago in Asia. "We are rapidly losing big, spectacular animals to an entirely new type of trade driven by criminalized syndicates. It is deeply alarming, and the world is not yet taking it seriously. When these criminal networks wipe out wildlife, conservation loses, and local people lose the wildlife on which their livelihoods often depend."

For example, South Africa lost almost 230 rhinoceroses to poaching from January to October, 2010; and less than 3,500 tigers roam in the wild, occupying less than 7 percent of their historic range.

Bennett says an immediate short-term solution to stave off local extinction of wildlife is through enforcement of wildlife laws, and to bring to bear a variety of resources to supersede those of the criminal organizations involved. This would include everything from a sharp increase in the numbers of highly trained and well-equipped staff at all points of the trade chain, to [sniffer dogs](#), [DNA tests](#), and smart-phone apps with species identification programs.

"We have taken our eye off the ball," said Bennett. "Enforcement is critical: old fashioned in concept but needing increasingly advanced methods to challenge the ever-more sophisticated methods of smuggling. When enforcement is thorough, and with sufficient resources and personnel, it works."

On a larger scale, Bennett says that law enforcement agencies need to look at wildlife smuggling as a serious crime and its enforcement as part of their job. Encouragingly, Bennett points to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Asia, which has recently listed wildlife crime as one of their core focuses, and the potentially powerful International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime was signed into effect.

"Unless we start taking wildlife crime seriously and allocating the commitment of resources appropriate to tackling sophisticated, well-funded, globally-linked criminal operations, population of some of the most beloved but economically prized, charismatic species will continue to wink out across their range, and, appallingly, altogether."

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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