

Wildlife 'WikiLeaks' targets Africa poaching elite

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Kruger National Park staff walk near the carcass of a three-day-old rhinoceros killed by poachers at Houtboschrand in the southern part of Kruger National Park, northeastern South Africa, on November 27, 2013

Poachers slaughtering Africa's elephants and rhinos with impunity are often shielded from police by powerful connections, but a group of conservationists has turned to the anonymity of tip-offs to try to stem the killing.

The founders of WildLeaks— a sort of WikiLeaks for the environment— say it is the first secure, online whistle-blowing platform dedicated to wildlife and forest crime.

While wildlife rangers face gun battles in national parks with poachers carrying out the slaughter, the online project hopes to target the top-end traffickers who cream off millions of dollars in profit.

"We got, for example, a very interesting leak on a very powerful individual in Kenya, linked to the government, who is behind the ivory trade," said founder Andrea Crosta, a former security consultant and longtime conservationist.

This kind of person "will never be taken out from within. They're too powerful. You need help from outside. So right now, we're trying to gather more evidence," he said in rapid-fire, Italian-accented English.

Targeting 'corrupt' officials

Poaching has risen sharply across Africa in recent years fuelled by rising demand in Asia for ivory and rhino horn, coveted as a traditional medicine and a status symbol.

Interviewed in the lobby of an upmarket hotel in Tanzania's main city Dar es Salaam, Crosta is fervent in his belief the online platform can be part of the war against poaching.

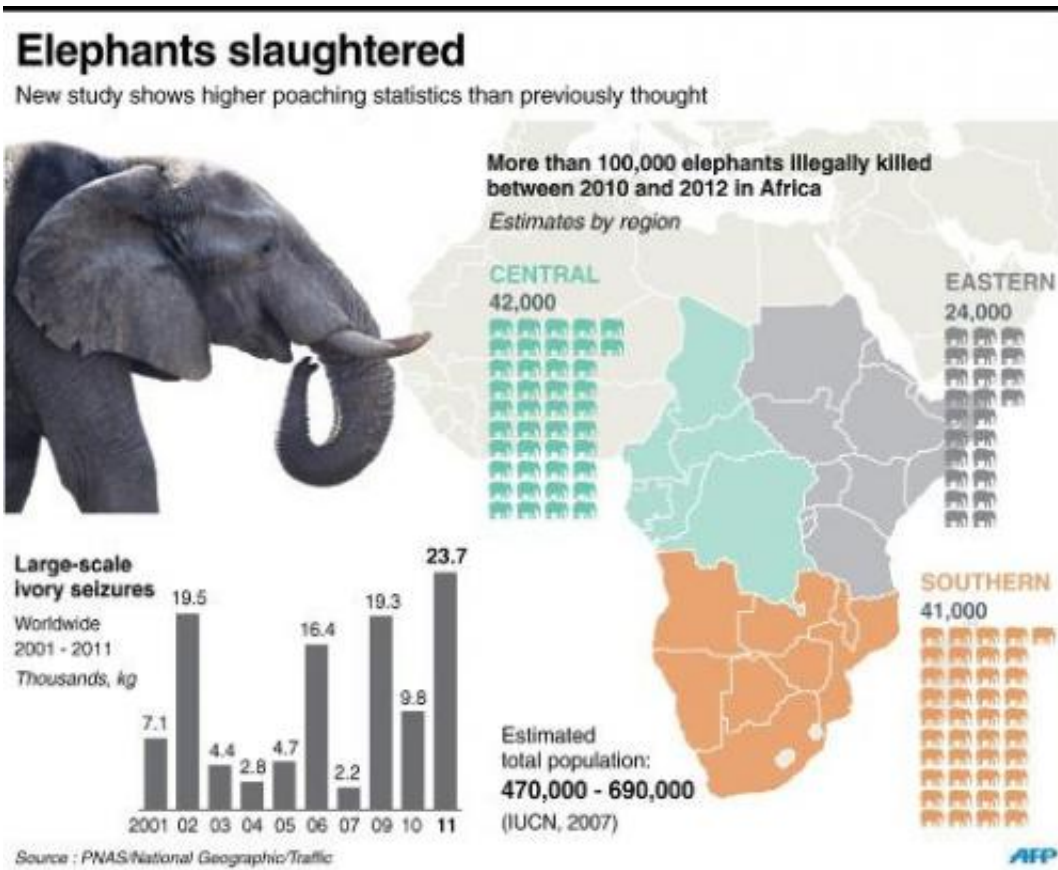
Launched in February, WildLeaks received its first tip within 24 hours.

Since then the project has gotten over 45 tips and leaks, with at least 28 deemed to be useful.

The information involved a range of topics from around the world

including tiger poaching in Sumatra, illegal logging in eastern Russia and Mexico, and the smuggling of wildlife products into the United States.

WildLeaks passed on some tips to law enforcement agencies, while others were shared with trusted conservation organisations that specialise in the area.



Graphic showing the estimated number of African elephants killed by poachers during the period 2010-2012

Some were also investigated in house. Two WildLeaks probes have already been launched, with another two set to begin in September.

WildLeaks uses encryption and anonymity software to allow those with information to send it safely to those who can do something about it.

It is a new way to tackle a long-standing problem, and other conservationists have offered a cautious welcome.

"It does appear to be a new approach within the wildlife crime sector," said Richard Thomas from TRAFFIC, the world's leading wildlife trade monitoring network.

"It could prove its worth over time, if useful information is received and directed towards appropriate professional enforcement agencies for follow-up action."

Representatives from the Conservation Group of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, which has partnered with WildLeaks to fight the sale of great apes in Central and West Africa, are also positive about the project.

"I think that it's a really smart idea," said Mimi Arandjelovic, a member of the group.

"There are also a lot of taboos that people might feel about reporting these sorts of things, so having an anonymous way of reporting it can only be positive."

'Endless supply' of poachers

But the problem with WildLeaks, Crosta admitted, is that in order for the project to be successful, the public needs to know about it - and trust the people who are involved.

Crosta was in Dar es Salaam to meet potential partners and spread the

word about his project.



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WildLeaks has yet to receive a leak from Tanzania, even though the east African nation struggles with wildlife crime.

A third of all illegal ivory seized in Asia has come through Tanzanian ports.

Crosta, 45, has a background in both business and security consulting, often for governments and multinational companies.

In 2011, he said he self-funded an 18-month investigation, going

undercover to find sources and meet with traffickers. His probe led him to suggest ivory was providing key funding for Somalia's Al-Qaeda-linked Shebab insurgents.

While UN experts disputed the findings, many would back WildLeaks' message: stopping poaching requires action against the wealthy and influential bosses of often extremely well connected organised crime gangs.



A Kenya Wildlife Services photo shows ivory seized at Mombasa port on July 8, 2013

"Unlike others operating in the field... we are not after small-time poachers or traffickers, but the people above them, including corrupt

government officials," he said.

No arrests have yet been made, but Crosta attributes this to the newness of the project and the fact that it is aiming for the bigger players in poaching networks.

The spike in poaching, with animals slaughtered even inside heavily guarded national parks or conservation areas, shows that poachers have little fear of tough new laws designed to end the killing.

"You can't just keep going out catching and jailing poachers because there's an endless supply out there," he said, motioning towards the villages of rural Tanzania. "That is not the solution."

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