

Grassroots tactics could improve global environmental policies

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Grassroots tactics are needed to improve global environmental policies to protect forests, lemurs and more. Credit: MSU

Much of the world may cringe as lemurs are hunted and killed or when entire forests are burnt and harvested for charcoal. However, if local residents don't perceive the actions as crimes or they believe there's a low risk of getting caught, then poaching and deforestation will continue.

A new study led by Michigan State University and featured in the current issue of *PLOS ONE* provides a crucial missing piece to solving this policy puzzle - empirical evidence documenting local people's attitudes toward the risks of breaking laws and the value of preserving their environment.

"Global [illegal wildlife trade](#) has increased dramatically in the last decade," said Meredith Gore, associate professor of fisheries and wildlife and lead author of the study. "Our research is the first to explore local perceptions of illegal biodiversity exploitation and environmental insecurity. Understanding local perception of policies can help predict buy-in for current and future risk-management strategies."

Environmental insecurity means not having enough food, water and natural resources to live. The definition also can be influenced by the absence of a reliable or stable government to protect natural resources or not having the ability to recover from natural disasters, such as tsunamis or earthquakes.

Growing environmental insecurity can fuel increases in wildlife crime, which has many ramifications outside of nature. Wildlife crimes can be politically destabilizing, subvert the rule of law, undermine sustainable development investments and generate funds for other organized crime

and conflict.

"It's an important issue to address, but traditional methods to stop these activities take a top-down approach, and they don't always play out as planned at the local level," said Gore, who's also part of the School of Criminal Justice. "To improve efforts, taking a grassroots approach by factoring in local attitudes and behaviors should be included as part of the policies."

For example, recruiting local people to monitor illegal activities may make sense. However, underestimating social norms to protect relatives conducting criminal activities may do little to protect the resources or the broader communities that have access to them, Gore added.

The study was conducted in Madagascar, which holds the distinction of being one of the world's biodiversity hotspots while having 75 percent of its population living in poverty. Here and elsewhere, poaching can be highly localized yet directly feed the global wildlife trafficking supply chain.

"It's against the law to hunt lemurs in Madagascar," Gore said. "But many [local residents](#)' don't necessarily see it as a crime, perceive the activity as risky or see it as exploiting the area's biodiversity."

Communication and outreach directed specifically to changing locals' attitudes could be one possible tool in solving this disconnect, she added.

"If the goal is to reduce deforestation and charcoal production in a protected area, it is essential to focus on the psychological aspects of the associated risk perception," Gore said. "This approach could be more effective than focusing on the socio-environmental dimensions such as access to land to grow food or having a reliable source of [clean drinking water](#)."

Provided by Michigan State University

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