

It's not all about tigers and criminals – illegal wildlife trade responses need nuance

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Bruno considers the collard peccary (Pecari tajucu) brought back by his uncle from a hunting trip, Arapiuns River, Brazil. In this reserve small-scale hunting for household consumption is legal, while hunting with dogs or for sale is illegal. Credit: Rachel Carmenta

Responses to illegal wildlife trade need to be more nuanced and not only

focused on high-profile species if we are to truly tackle the problem, say researchers.

Across the globe, the [illegal wildlife trade](#) threatens thousands of species, including fish, fungi and plants, along with the more familiar 'charismatic' animals such as tigers, rhinoceroses and elephants.

Despite widespread recognition of the problem, science and policy has concentrated on a few high-profile species.

A Lancaster University-led study, published in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, argues there is a need to recognize the diversity of products - from medicinal plants to elephant tusks – as well as the complex and diverse networks of people involved in the trade. It provides some of the terms and tools that policy makers and researchers need to better making these distinctions.

The international research team reviewed trade across species and regions, highlighting seven examples where more detailed analyses of [illegal trade](#) revealed diverse potential solutions. These ranged from education targeting gardeners who unintentionally buy rare orchids, to supporting legal trade in farmed rhino horn to reduce lucrative black market prices.

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Dr Jacob Phelps of the Lancaster Environment Centre led the study. He said: "For many species, our existing approaches to illegal trade are failing. We tend to discuss illegal wildlife trade as it were a single phenomenon, and seek to resolve it with the same types of

interventions—usually new laws that forbid trade.

"In fact, I would argue that trade in African ivory, rare Burmese turtles for pets and South American peccaries for meat have comparatively little in common. We need better analyses to inform more tailored strategies for responding to each of these cases."

The authors of the report say one of the problems with existing policy is that the debate is very much focused on the high-profile species while the vast majority of traded species are overlooked.

Similarly, policy debates about trade often label the people involved, placing them in to overly simplistic categories of "poachers", "perpetrators" and "criminals".

But, as Dr Phelps highlights from his own field research on the trade of wild orchids in Southeast Asia, this often fails to capture the realities on the ground.

"The focus on criminal elements is understandable. However, it overlooks the vast majority of wildlife trade contexts, including those of many of the people I have interviewed: for example enthusiastic market traders who engage not only for money but because of their passion for the plants; rural residents looking to make a living, and people who encounter wildlife while they are out cutting down trees.

"We can't rely on caricatures of 'bad guys' involved in trade. Instead, we have to recognize and plan around these realities of the species, people and trade patterns we encounter on the ground.

"We urgently need better, more nuanced approaches to specific types of illegal wildlife trade and we need to focus on more than tigers if we are to truly understand the complexities of this widespread, diverse and

often damaging trade."

More information: Jacob Phelps et al. Tools and terms for understanding illegal wildlife trade, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/fee.1325](https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.1325)

Provided by Lancaster University

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