

Hong Kong failing to tackle wildlife smuggling epidemic: study

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Despite its comparatively small size, Hong Kong plays a "disproportionate" role in wildlife crime

Hong Kong must do more to crack down on illegal wildlife smuggling by ending legal loopholes and lenient sentences, conservation groups said

Monday, as they detailed the city's role in the lucrative trade.

Despite its comparatively small size, the bustling southern Chinese transport hub plays a "disproportionate" role in wildlife crime, researchers said, accounting for around a fifth of all global ivory seizures and nearly half of all pangolins seized in the last decade.

Yet authorities do not list wildlife trafficking offences under the city's organised crime legislation targeting drug traffickers and triad gangs—and the few who are caught rarely face stiff penalties, the report's authors warn.

"Wildlife crime in Hong Kong remains under-policed and under-investigated," said Amanda Whitfort, a professor at Hong Kong University's Faculty of Law and one of the report's authors.

"Wildlife smuggling is not regarded as organised and serious crime under Hong Kong law," she added.

The study by Hong Kong Wildlife Trade Working Group (HKWTWG), a coalition of local groups, offers one of the most detailed analyses yet on smuggling rackets in the city.

Researchers compiled and analysed 379 seizures from government departments, court cases, media reports and NGOs from January 2013 to December 2017 to assess the extent of the trade.

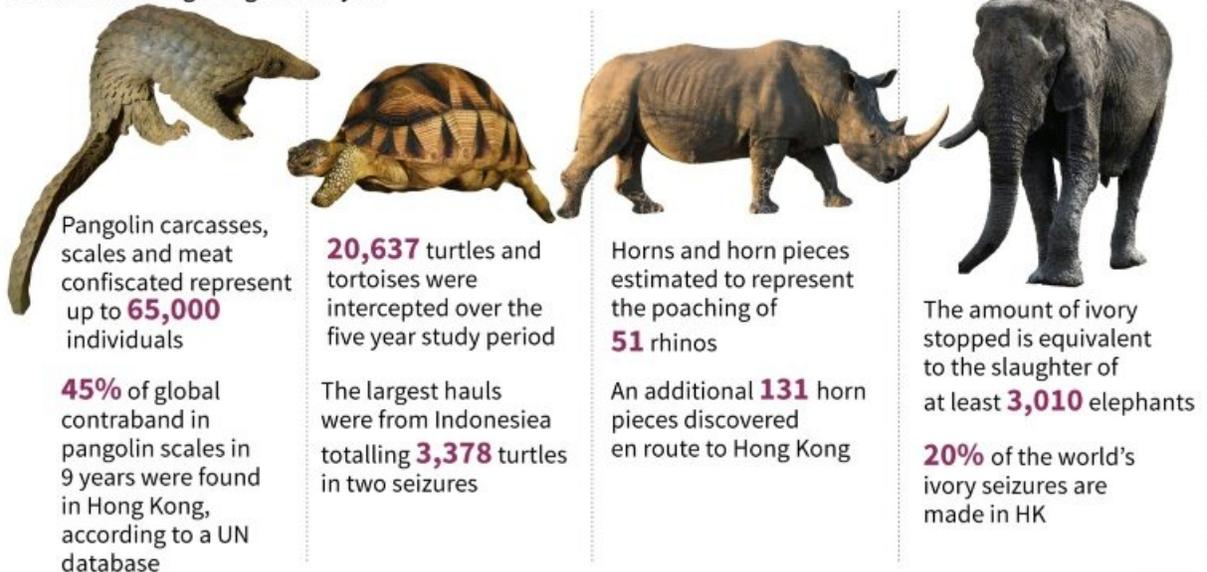
Researchers said the amount of parts seized in the city for three major trafficked species since 2013 could equate to the deaths of "3,000 elephants, 65,000 pangolins and 51 rhinoceros".

But they warned the actual volume being trafficked through Hong Kong could be 5-10 times the size of seizures.

Hong Kong: wildlife trafficking hub

Hong Kong with its 733km of coastline, remote beaches, and quiet coastal roads, is an ideal transit point for traffickers

2,011 wildlife seizures in 5 years, amounting to **1,456 tonnes** of products, according to a new report released in Hong Kong January 21*



Source: *Hong Kong Wildlife Trade Working Group -- Trading in Extinction: The Dark Side of Hong Kong's Wildlife Trade

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Pictures showing wildlife that being smuggled in Hong Kong

Over the last decade Hong Kong estimates the value of smuggling has grown by some 1,600 percent while the diversity of endangered species has increased 57 percent.

Hong Kong has long served as a key gateway to China's mainland where there is huge demand for illegal and endangered wildlife parts.

The report detailed many of the ways crime gangs have snuck their quarry into the city, from so-called "ant smugglers" who arrive by commercial airplane with as much as 30 kilos of ivory sewn into their

clothing, to loot hidden inside cargo ships heading to the world's fifth busiest port.

An analysis of convictions in the last five years showed sentences ranged from community service to eight months jail and fines of HK\$1,500 to HK\$180,000 (\$191 to \$22,900), far below maximum penalties.

Criminals who were prosecuted tended to be low-level carriers, leaving the kingpins untouched.

"It is evident that there are numerous operations relying on Hong Kong, at the very least as a transit port, and in the worst case as a base of operations and/or money laundering," the authors wrote.

China finally banned the ivory trade a year ago while Hong Kong began phasing it out a few months later.

The southern Chinese city has also recently increased the maximum penalties on smuggling to 10 years in jail and a HK\$10 million fine.

Sophie Le Clue, one of the report authors, said increasing the penalties available to prosecutors was a step in the right direction.

"But there's no point having a penalty raise if all you're going to do is take the mules," she told AFP.

"What we really want to see is those behind the syndicates in the courts to take down the networks."

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