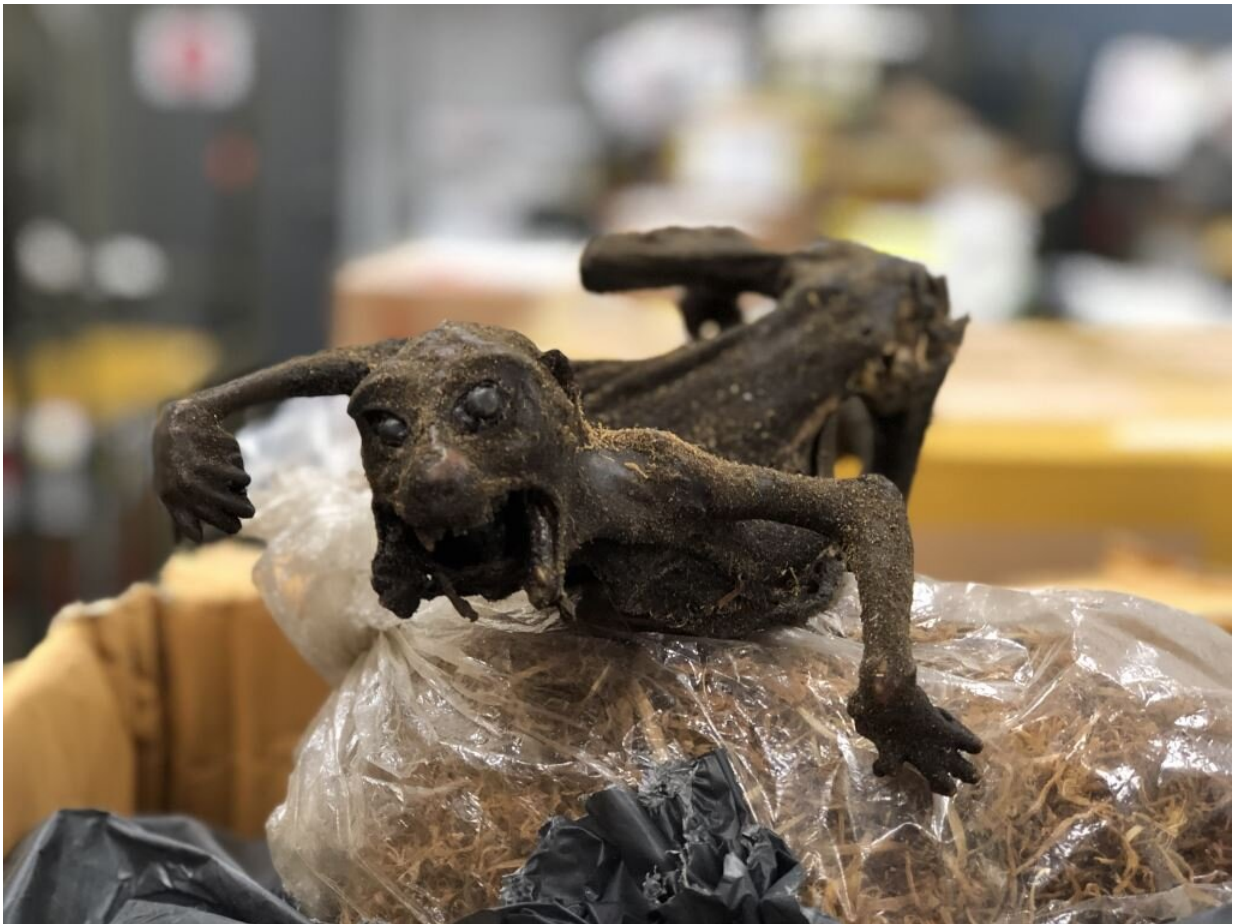


Wildlife trafficking and more hinder nations' sustainable development

August 12 2019



Credit: MSU

Transnational environmental crime—wildlife trafficking, illegal logging,

dumping hazardous waste and more—takes an estimated \$91 to \$259 billion bite out of the global economy and has strong ties to organized crime finance, says a new study from Michigan State University and published in *Nature Sustainability*.

"Transnational environmental crime, or TEC, has become the largest financial driver of social conflicts in the world," said Meredith Gore, MSU associate professor of fisheries and wildlife and co-lead author on the study. "If it's not addressed in sustainable development frameworks, these serious threats will undermine development in decades to come."

A high-profile example of TEC involved a recent joint customs and police sting called, "Operation Thunderball." The successful endeavor covered 109 countries and arrested 582 suspects. It recovered nearly 10,000 turtles and tortoises, 4,300 birds, 440 pieces of elephant tusks, the equivalent of 74 truckloads of timber and more.

While people and [government officials](#) are aware of some these more traditional crimes, they may be surprised to learn about other forms of TEC, and how it connects to peace and security.



Transnational environmental crime - wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, dumping hazardous waste and more - takes an estimated \$91 to \$259 billion bite out of the global economy and has strong ties to organized crime finance, says a new study from Michigan State University and published in Nature Sustainability. Credit: MSU

"Many of us are unaware of what happens when we throw things away, but in some instances [electronic waste](#) is illegally dumped in marginalized countries, and trafficked wildlife that gets past customs can spread zoonotic pathogens," Gore said. "People are aware of drug trafficking, but what they might not know is that it can be a key accelerant of deforestation; 'narco-deforestation' clears forests for covert roads and landing strips."

Other times, TEC rears its head in the form of illegal taxes.

Natural resources that [local residents](#) depend on for survival, such as clean water from wells, cooking charcoal and access to fish via docking fees for fishing boats, have become targets for extortion.

While TEC remains a large hurdle to overcome, the researchers point out potential ways to begin dismantling it.

Just as Operation Thunderball demonstrated, cooperation between agencies and sharing data can have positive results. Engaging local communities, reducing corruption, closing gaps in restorative and reparative justice, legislative reform and review and capacity building also can help, said Peter Stoett, dean of social science and humanities at Ontario Tech University and co-author.

"We have to evaluate the effectiveness of responses to environmental crime from a variety of perspectives. For example, are militarized responses that punish [local communities](#) counter-productive?" he asked. "Are campaigns to educate the public about these crimes too focused on charismatic wildlife species, ignoring corporate criminal activity, such as toxic waste dumping or illegal fisheries? How can countries better cooperate to promote biosecurity while going after those who benefit the most from environmental crime?"

In addition, strategic plans addressing environmental impact assessments can include analyses of potential criminal activity and incorporate measures of potential or actual economic damages related to human security risks.

"There are linkages between environmental security and TEC, and they have serious implications for [civil society](#), governments and international organizations pursuing the 2030 United National Sustainable

Development Goals," Gore said. "So, it's vital that all interested parties consider these complexities and mitigate the risks as they tackle their strategic sustainable development planning."

More information: Meredith L. Gore et al. Transnational environmental crime threatens sustainable development. *Nature Sustainability* 2019 [DOI: 10.1038/s41893-019-0363-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0363-6)

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Wildlife trafficking and more hinder nations' sustainable development (2019, August 12) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-wildlife-trafficking-hinder-nations-sustainable.html>

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