

Coronavirus lockdowns increase poaching in Asia, Africa

June 22 2020, by Aniruddha Ghosal and Michael Casey



In this July 2013 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India, forest guards check for snares during a patrol in the Manas National Park in northeastern India which is inhabited by tigers and elephants. Located in the Himalayan foothills, the protected forests are known for rare species like the golden langur and pygmy hog and the forests are contiguous with the Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan. (WTI via AP)

A camera trap photo of an injured tigress and a forensic examination of its carcass revealed why the creature died: a poacher's wire snare punctured its windpipe and sapped its strength as the wound festered for days.

Snare traps like this one set in southern India's dense forest have become increasingly common amid the coronavirus pandemic, as people left jobless turn to wildlife to make money and feed their families.

Authorities in India are concerned this spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive.

"It is risky to poach, but if pushed to the brink, some could think that these are risks worth taking," said Mayukh Chatterjee, a wildlife biologist with the non-profit Wildlife Trust of India.

Since the country announced its lockdown, at least four tigers and six leopards have been killed by poachers, Wildlife Protection Society of India said. But there also were numerous other poaching casualties—gazelles in grasslands, foot-long giant squirrels in forests, wild boars and birds such as peacocks and purple morhens.

In many parts of the developing world, coronavirus lockdowns have sparked concern about increased [illegal hunting](#) that's fueled by food shortages and a decline in law enforcement in some wildlife protection areas. At the same time, border closures and [travel restrictions](#) slowed [illegal trade](#) in certain high-value species.



This April 2010 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a tiger skin seized by the forest officials of Tamil Nadu state in southern India. Authorities in India are concerned a 2020 spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive. (WTI via AP)

One of the biggest disruptions involves the endangered pangolin. Often caught in parts of Africa and Asia, the anteater-like animals are smuggled mostly to China and Southeast Asia, where their meat is considered a delicacy and scales are used in traditional medicine.

In April, the China's 2017 ban on trade in ivory products. The pandemic compounded their plight because many Chinese customers were unable to travel to ivory markets in Cambodia, Laos and other countries.

"They are desperate to get it off their hands. Nobody wants to be stuck with that product," said Sarah Stoner, director of intelligence for the commission.

The illegal trade in pangolins continued "unabated" within Africa but [international trade](#) has been disrupted by port closures, said Ray Jansen, [chairman of the African Pangolin Working Group](#).



This November 2014 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a leopard caught in a trap in a forest in Karnataka, India. Authorities in India are concerned a 2020 spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive. (WTI via AP)

"We have witnessed some trade via air while major ship routes are still closed but we expect a flood of trade once shipping avenues reopen again," Jansen said.

Fears that organized poaching in Africa would spike largely have not materialized—partly because ranger patrols have continued in many [national parks](#) and reserves.

Emma Stokes, director of the Central Africa Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society, said patrolling national parks in several African countries has been designated essential work.

But she has heard about increased hunting of animals outside parks. "We are expecting to see an increase in bushmeat hunting for food – duikers, antelopes and monkeys," she said.

Jansen also said bushmeat poaching was soaring, especially in parts of southern Africa. "Rural people are struggling to feed themselves and their families," he said.



This July 2011 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a tiger skin that was seized by Indian law enforcement authorities at the border with Bhutan. Since the country announced its 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, at least four tigers and six leopards have been killed by poachers, Wildlife Protection Society of India said. (WTI via AP)

There are also signs of increased poaching in parts of Asia.

A greater one-horned rhino was gunned down May 9 in India's Kaziranga National Park—the first case in over a year. Three people, suspected to be a part of an international poaching ring, were arrested on June 1 with automatic rifles and ammunition, said Uttam Saikia, a wildlife warden.

As in other parts of the world, poachers in Kaziranga pay poor families paltry sums of money to help them. With families losing work from the lockdown, "they will definitely take advantage of this," warned Saikia.

In neighboring Nepal, where the virus has ravaged important income from migrants and tourists, the first month of lockdown saw more forest-related crimes, including poaching and illegal logging, than the previous 11 months, according to a review by the government and World Wildlife Fund or WWF.



This March 2011 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a tiger skin which was seized when it was being delivered to a suspected buyer in a hotel in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. Since the country announced its 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, at least four tigers and six leopards have been killed by poachers, Wildlife Protection Society of India said. (WTI via AP)

For many migrants returning to villages after losing jobs, forests were the "easiest source" of sustenance, said Shiv Raj Bhatta, director of programs at WWF Nepal.

In Southeast Asia, the Wildlife Conservation Society documented in April the poisoning in Cambodia of three critically endangered giant ibises for the wading bird's meat. More than 100 painted stork chicks were also poached in late March in Cambodia at the largest waterbird colony in Southeast Asia.

"Suddenly [rural people](#) have little to turn to but natural resources and we're already seeing a spike in poaching," said Colin Poole, the group's regional director for the Greater Mekong.

Heartened by closure of [wildlife](#) markets in China over concerns about a possible link between the trade and the coronavirus, several conservation groups are calling for governments to put measures in place to avoid future pandemics. Among them is a global ban on commercial sale of wild birds and mammals destined for the dinner table.



In this undated photo provided by the Wildlife Conservation Society in June 2020 community rangers dispose of the remains of a giant ibis in Cambodia. In April 2020, the WCS documented the poisoning of three critically endangered giant ibises for the wading bird's meat. "Suddenly rural people have little to turn to but natural resources and we're already seeing a spike in poaching," said Colin Poole, the group's regional director for the Greater Mekong. (WCS via AP)



This June 2015 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a tiger skull that was seized by Indian law enforcement authorities at the border with Bhutan. Authorities in India are concerned a 2020 spike in poaching not only could kill more endangered tigers and leopards but also species these carnivores depend upon to survive. (Jose Louies/WTI via AP)



This November 2017 photo provided by the Wildlife Trust of India shows a clutch wire snare which had been used to capture a leopard in Karnataka, India. Snares like this have become increasingly common in southern India's dense forest amid the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, as people left jobless turn to wildlife to make money and feed their families. (Jose Louies/WTI via AP)



This undated photo provided by the Wildlife Conservation Society in June 2020 shows a giant ibis in Cambodia. In April 2020, the WCS documented the poisoning of three critically endangered giant ibises for the wading bird's meat. "Suddenly rural people have little to turn to but natural resources and we're already seeing a spike in poaching," said Colin Poole, the group's regional director for the Greater Mekong. (Phann Sithan/WCS via AP)



In this Feb. 15, 2019 file photo, a pangolin looks for food on private property in Johannesburg, South Africa. Often caught in parts of Africa and Asia, the anteater-like animals are smuggled mostly to China and Southeast Asia, where their meat is considered a delicacy and scales are used in traditional medicine. In April 2020, the Wildlife Justice Commission reported traders were stockpiling pangolin scales in several Southeast Asia countries awaiting an end to the pandemic. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)



This undated photo provided by the Wildlife Conservation Society in June 2020 shows giant ibises in Cambodia. In April 2020, the WCS documented the poisoning of three critically endangered giant ibises for the wading bird's meat. "Suddenly rural people have little to turn to but natural resources and we're already seeing a spike in poaching," said Colin Poole, the group's regional director for the Greater Mekong. (Phann Sithan/WCS via AP)

Others say an international treaty, known as CITES, which regulates the trade in endangered plants and animals, should be expanded to incorporate public health concerns. They point out that some commonly traded species, such as horseshoe bats, often carry viruses but are currently not subject to trade restrictions under CITES.

"That is a big gap in the framework," said John Scanlon, former

Secretary-General of CITES now with African Parks. "We may find that there may be certain animals that should be listed and not be traded or traded under strict conditions and certain markets that ought to be closed."

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Coronavirus lockdowns increase poaching in Asia, Africa (2020, June 22) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-coronavirus-lockdowns-poaching-asia-africa.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.