

WWF report says online wildlife trade on rise in Myanmar

March 31 2022, by Elaine Kurtenbach



In this undated photo released by the World Wildlife Fund, a woman displays monitor lizards, squirrels and wild birds for sale at an open air market in Attapeu, Laos. A report released by the World Wildlife Fund, Friday, April 1, 2022, shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species. Credit: K. Yoganand/World Wildlife Fund via AP

A report by the World Wildlife Fund shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species.

The [report issued Friday](#) found that enforcement of bans on such transactions has weakened amid political turmoil following a 2021 military takeover.

The number of such dealings rose 74% over a year earlier to 11,046, nearly all of them involving sales of live animals. For the 173 species traded, 54 are threatened with global extinction, the report said.

Researchers identified 639 Facebook accounts belonging to wildlife traders. The largest online trading group had more than 19,000 members and dozens of posts per week, it said.

The animals and animal parts bought and sold involved elephants, bears and gibbons, Tibetan antelope, critically endangered pangolins and an Asian giant tortoise. The most popular mammals were various species of langurs and monkeys, often bought as pets.

Most of the animals advertised for sale were taken from the wild. They also included civets, which along with pangolins have been identified as potential vectors in the spread of diseases such as SARS and COVID-19.

Shaun Martin, who heads the WWF's Asia-Pacific regional cybercrime project, said monitoring of the online wildlife trade shows different species being kept close together, sometimes in the same cage.



In this undated photo released by the World Wildlife Fund, a customer browses through products on sale at a shop selling elephant ivory amulets and trinkets in Bangkok, Thailand. A report released by the World Wildlife Fund, Friday, April 1, 2022, shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species. Credit: James Morgan/World Wildlife Fund via AP

"With Asia's track record as a breeding ground for many recent zoonotic diseases, this sharp uptick in online trade of wildlife in Myanmar is extremely concerning," he said.

The unregulated trade in wild species and resulting interactions between wild species and humans raise the risks of new and possibly vaccine-resistant mutations of illnesses such as the COVID-19 that could evolve

undetected in non-human hosts into more dangerous variants of disease, experts say.

COVID-19 is one of many [diseases traced back to animals](#). The killing and sale of what is known as bushmeat in Africa was thought to be a source for Ebola. Bird flu likely came from chickens at a market in Hong Kong in 1997. Measles is believed to have evolved from a virus that infected cattle.

"Illegal wildlife trade is a serious concern from the point of view of biodiversity preservation and conservation and its potential impact on health security," said Mary Elizabeth G. Miranda, an expert on zoonotic diseases and illness and CEO of the Field Epidemiology Training Program Alumni Foundation in the Philippines.



In this undated photo released by the World Wildlife Fund, a rhino horn and tiger teeth for sale sit on display in a black market animal trader at his home in Hanoi, Vietnam. A report released by the World Wildlife Fund, Friday, April 1, 2022, shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species. Credit: Robert Patterson/World Wildlife Fund via AP

Social media and other online platforms have joined a worldwide effort to crack down on the thriving trade in birds, reptiles, mammals and animal parts. In Myanmar, much of the trade in wildlife is through Facebook, which as a member of the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking online has taken action to block or remove accounts of people engaged in such transactions.

But as is true elsewhere, new accounts often pop up just as soon as old ones are shut down, hindering enforcement, the report noted. Easy online access to the animals also is driving up demand, worsening the problem.

Discussions of purchases of protected species often took place in open Facebook groups, suggesting that such dealings remain "largely risk-free," the report said. Since payments and deliveries often are done using messenger apps, controlling the problem is doubly difficult.



In this photo released by the World Wildlife Fund, one of 16 tigers cubs seized from smugglers on Friday, Oct. 26, 2012, has blood samples taken from veterinary team from the wildlife forensic unit to trace the DNA in Chaiyaphum province, Thailand. A report released by the World Wildlife Fund, Friday, April 1, 2022, shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species. Credit: James Morgan/World Wildlife Fund via AP



In this photo released by the World Wildlife Fund, dead civet cats lie on display at a market in July 2021, Khammouane province, central Laos. A report released by the World Wildlife Fund, Friday, April 1, 2022, shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species. Credit: World Wildlife Fund via AP



In this undated photo released by the World Wildlife Fund, Sulphur crested cockatoos, and other various birds are seen being sold in a bird market in Bangkok, Thailand. A report released by the World Wildlife Fund, Friday, April 1, 2022, shows illegal purchases of wildlife online are growing in Myanmar in a threat both to public health and to endangered species. Credit: Michele Depraz/World Wildlife Fund via AP

Highlighting the lack of enforcement, people in the illegal wildlife trade in Myanmar often use rudimentary methods of moving the animals and animal products around—with buses being the usual form of transport.

The study by WWF in Myanmar focused on trade online of animals and other creatures inside the country, though there were some imports from neighboring Thailand, mainly of birds such as cockatoos and parrots and of crocodiles, to India.

Some deals might involve animals or parts being sent into China, it said.

The conservation group said it plans future studies to better understand Myanmar's role in the global trade in endangered species.

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