

Wildlife traffickers carried on their illegal trade during COVID lockdown—what can we learn from their resilience?

May 14 2024, by Annette Hübschle and Meredith Gore



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The world literally [stopped](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. But while countries locked down to keep coronavirus at bay, wildlife traffickers carried on their illegal activities. Global risk governance and criminology academics Annette Hübschle and Meredith Gore [studied](#) the traffickers' methods and share lessons from their resilience.

How did wildlife traffickers continue their trade?

Many wildlife traffickers adapted their operations. From mostly air cargo and [commercial flights](#), they changed to transportation by foot, bicycle, motorcycles and, in some cases, government vehicles.

We learned of some instances where they used hearses and caskets of COVID-19 victims, exploiting the cover of funeral events to transport and distribute illegal wildlife products such as ivory and rhino horns.

They also shifted their activities online. They created new digital marketplaces that allowed direct interactions with buyers. Online platforms helped wildlife traffickers avoid intermediaries.

Finally, we heard multiple reports of stockpiling products which they then moved swiftly once restrictions were lifted.

What made them resilient?

Their adaptability was remarkable. They innovated by diversifying transport methods and routes. To evade detection, they used less monitored routes. And their swift adoption of [online platforms](#) enabled them to reach a wider audience and conduct discreet transactions despite lockdowns and travel restrictions.

Stockpiling products during the lockdown allowed them to resume trade quickly when conditions improved.

How did you find out about their illegal activities?

Many of our insights come from reviewing existing studies on resilience and illegal markets, and conducting extensive field research. We undertook detailed case studies in South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia. We focused on how responses to the pandemic affected people operating in the illegal wildlife trade.

Our methods included interviews with people directly involved in the trade and local community members. We also spoke with law enforcement officers and NGO workers. We employed participatory mapping to understand trade routes and methods, analyzed documents and gathered statistical data.

Why are your findings important?

They provide deeper insights into how people operate in illegal economies. By examining how the illegal markets adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown, we can learn how to improve the resilience of legal economies. This can help policymakers develop more effective strategies for managing environmental, social and [economic challenges](#).

Our research emphasizes the importance of considering diverse perspectives and unconventional sources of resilience in addressing complex environmental issues.

One of the most critical aspects of our research is the expansion of the Frictions and Flows framework. We originally designed it to analyze the

dynamics of illegal wildlife trade. It was built on research about [illegal rhino horn flows](#). Now it has evolved to take a broader perspective, helping us understand both legal and [illegal wildlife trade](#).

By observing how these markets adapt, innovate and keep going, we gain insights into the underlying mechanisms. These can be applied to improve resilience in legal economies facing global challenges. For example, the framework could help legal economies to cope with other shocks such as extreme weather events or sea level rise.

The framework allows one to identify specific pain points. Supply chain disruptions during hurricanes or floods would be an example. Then it's possible to come up with strategies to manage the problem. That could involve, for example, diversifying supply sources or improving logistics networks to maintain trade flows.

This shift in thinking provides a roadmap through immediate impacts and can help prepare for long-term challenges.

The way traffickers adapted during the pandemic highlights the challenges that law enforcement and regulatory agencies face in disrupting wildlife trafficking. The approach to these challenges should combine:

- [whole of society responses](#) (diverse stakeholders)
- [strengthened international cooperation](#)
- targeted interventions to [disrupt](#) trafficking networks, in particular their sources of funding
- addressing the factors [driving](#) demand for illegal wildlife products (for example, urbanization, increased middle-income populations with dispensable income).

Strategies must consider the broader impacts of wildlife trafficking too, such as undermining sustainable development investments. This is particularly true for [vulnerable members of society](#) (like women and youth), [local communities](#) and [Indigenous peoples](#) who are often severely affected by crises but have developed complex coping mechanisms.

Efforts to stop wildlife trafficking must consider the links between [environmental conservation](#), [public health](#) and socioeconomic factors. By recognizing the connections between legal and illegal markets and integrating health, environmental and social policies, countries can develop more robust systems to protect wildlife and support communities against future crises.

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