
LONDON CONFERENCE

**MARKS TURNING POINT IN
WILDLIFE PROTECTION**



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February 13th, 2014 will be remembered as a day that the world made great strides towards protecting iconic endangered species including elephants, rhinos, tigers and pangolins. On this day, over 40 countries signed a declaration which recognised “the significant scale and detrimental economic, social and environmental consequences of the illegal trade in wildlife” and made a set of political commitments to bring the trade to an end.

East Africa was well represented with Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda all supporting the Declaration.

The ‘London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade’ came about after a group of African presidents – in particular the President of Gabon, Ali Bongo Ondimba - approached Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, with a plea to help them with the escalating poaching crisis that they were facing. With the support of his son Prince William, the Prince mustered support for many initiatives that preceded the Heads of States conference, hosted by the United Kingdom government, which they both attended along with Prince Harry.

So what changes should the Conference Declaration bring about?

Perhaps the most significant development is the recognition that the illegal wildlife trade is a “serious crime” which has far reaching consequences. As the Declaration puts it: “the illegal wildlife trade robs states and communities of their natural capital and cultural heritage, with serious economic and social consequences. It undermines the livelihoods of natural resource dependent communities. It damages the health of the ecosystems they depend



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLICKR.COM

Top: President Ian Khama of Botswana at the London Conference on The Illegal Wildlife Trade, 13 February 2014.

Left page: The Prince of Wales, The Duke of Cambridge and Prince Harry work together to highlight Illegal Wildlife Trade.

on, undermining sustainable economic development. The criminal activity and corruption associated with trafficking restricts the potential for sustainable investment and development which is needed in new economic activities and enterprises.”

The illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products has become the fourth most important criminal activity after drugs, arms and human trafficking valued at up to US\$20 billion a year.

It has latterly been embraced by transnational criminal networks and terrorist organisations. As such, it can only be effectively tackled with the involvement of ministries and agencies beyond the wildlife conservation sector and not just on a national basis but also trans-nationally.

Governments will have to be fully engaged for this very significant change to succeed but it is not really that difficult to get started as there



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLICKR.COM

Foreign Secretary William Hague answers questions from the media at the end of the London Conference on The Illegal Wildlife Trade, 13 February 2014.

Corruption; the United Nations Environment Programme; the United Nations Development Programme; the African Development Bank; the Asian Development Bank; the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and regional Wildlife Enforcement Networks.

So, the infrastructure largely exists but what actions now need to be put in place to prevent illegal trade in wildlife? There is generally a sense of realism within the conservation community that total eradication of illegal trade is an unrealistic objective and that a real achievement would be to firstly stop the current escalation of the killings – currently at some 22,000 elephants and over 1,000 rhinos per year – and then limit the killings to the lowest level possible.

There are two sides to the killings/trade – on one hand there is the supply of the products while on the other there is the demand for the products. This creates a continuum from the poacher to the end user. At each end there are large numbers of people involved (and therefore more difficult to tackle in the short term) than in the middle

are already many bodies that support governments in the other fields of international crime, in particular: the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL); the World Customs Organization; the World Bank; and the Convention on International

Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (which together comprise the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime); the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice; the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention against



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLICKR.COM

The Prince of Wales, The Duke of Cambridge and Prince Harry with delegates in session at the London Conference.

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Top: HRH The Duke of Cambridge with actor Jackie Chan at the reception for the London Conference.
Below: Prince Harry listens to speeches by foreign leaders at the Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference at Lancaster House on February 13, 2014 in London, England.

where the number of wholesalers and traders, often referred to as “kingpins” are few (where strong action can lead to immediately effective results).

Many countries have regarded illegal wildlife trade – from poaching to using – as a minor crime and either have weak penalties or judiciary that give minimal penalties for those prosecuted.

This is already changing with South Africa announcing some recent heavy sentences to guilty persons and Kenya adopting a new wildlife bill that enables the judiciary to give significant fines and prison sentences to perpetrators. The Declaration calls on other countries to follow suit and adopt stringent deterrent sanctions implementing “the UN Conventions against Transnational Organized Crime, and ensure that their domestic offences involving wildlife trafficking fall within the definition of “serious crime” in Article 2 of the Convention”.

Prior to prosecution, there has to be evidence. Many of the early prosecutions of poachers and traders fell down for lack of, or incorrectly collected, evidence. But first there needs to be more law enforcement officers at

key sites who should be well equipped and well trained to catch the poachers before, during or after an incident. The ability to link a poacher or a trader to an individual killing is essential for a successful prosecution and this requires appropriate investigative tools and techniques including intelligence networks, traceability systems like micro-chipping rhino horns, detector dogs, ballistic analysis and the use of existing forensic technology. The newly opened KWS forensic laboratory in Nairobi, for example, offers increasing capacity to obtain evidence against poachers and traders as will wider use of the ICCWC Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytical Toolkit.

The Conference acknowledged the role that corruption and bribery was playing in facilitating the illegal trade

PHOTO BY: JOHN STILLWELL - WPA POOL/GETTY IMAGES





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HRH The Duke of Cambridge speaking at the London Conference on The Illegal Wildlife Trade at the Natural History Museum, 12 February 2014.

in wildlife at all levels in the chain and requested a zero tolerance policy. The Declaration urges “all governments to become parties to, and implement, the UN Convention against Corruption, which can be a valuable tool to prevent corruption and foster international cooperation in corruption cases, including extradition, mutual legal assistance and asset recovery”.

If there was no, or at least a much reduced, market for wildlife products the killing would also stop.

Key to demand reduction is raising awareness and changing behaviour. The Declaration states that Government support is important to ensure that demand reduction efforts are implemented on the scale and in the time-frame needed to have a meaningful impact. However it then states that “actions should be scientific and clearly evidence based, building on research into users’ values and behaviour”. The two actions may be in conflict as research results that are approved by

the scientific/academic community can often be time consuming. Some short cuts may have to be taken to avoid lengthy delays in getting evidence that all agree on.

What will clearly be to some a controversial action in the Declaration is the encouragement of Governments “that have stockpiles of illegal products, particularly of high value items such as rhino horn or elephant ivory, to destroy them”. There are conservationists that believe that destroying stockpiles sends

the wrong message to the illegal traders in so far as it reduces the (potential legal) supply thereby possibly increasing the value of remaining stocks with a consequent increase in poaching. It seems illogical to suggest on one hand that demand eradication actions are evidence based and then, on the other, to encourage an action that has no evidence base.

In addition, the clause goes on to “renounce, as part of any Government procurement or related activity, the use of products from species threatened with extinction, except for the purposes of bona fide scientific research, law enforcement, public education and other non-commercial purposes in line with national approaches and legislation”. This seems to stamp out any future requests for a legal trading system without any credible research being available to show evidence that such a system would cause potential harm.

The countries most often implicated in the demand for illegal wildlife products - Vietnam, China and Laos – were represented at the Conference. Much of the resurgence in rhino poaching has been found to be due to the horn being used as a status symbol and gift to business partners and officials. As a counter to such uses, the



Foreign Secretary William Hague meeting President Ian Khama of Botswana at the London Conference on The Illegal Wildlife Trade, 13 February 2014.

Declaration calls on the private sector to adopt zero tolerance policies on corporate gifting or accepting of species threatened with extinction or products made from them. Status is often implied from the perceived value of a good and value may not simply be monetary. The product might have health or other

benefits. False claims as to the value of a wildlife product, (such as rhino horn is a cure for cancer), could stimulate poaching, trafficking or demand so, as the Declaration states it is important to “minimise speculation in endangered wildlife products by opposing the use of misleading, exaggerated or inaccurate information”.

In many wildlife areas, often adjacent to protected parks and reserves, there is no income generating opportunities for the surrounding communities. It is therefore vital for communities in these situations to be able to obtain a sustainable livelihood from the wildlife. If the wildlife disappears due to illegal trade, so does the livelihoods of the communities. Conserving wildlife through shared management responsibilities such as community conservancies, public-private partnerships, sustainable tourism and revenue-sharing agreements is seen in the Declaration as being essential to “increase capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities and eradicate poverty”. Governmental development policies and planning should also take account



Southwater Infant Academy, Horsham present a cardboard elephant to Foreign Secretary William Hague during the London Conference on The Illegal Wildlife Trade, 13 February 2014.



PHOTO BY: JOHN STILLWELL - WPA POOL/GETTY IMAGES

Prince Harry, Prince William, Duke of Cambridge and Prince Charles, Prince of Wales join other delegates for a family photo at the Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference at Lancaster House on February 13, 2014 in London, England.

of measures to address illegal wildlife trade.

So where do we go from here?

It was recognised that many of the political commitments made in the Declaration would require substantial funding. Donors were urged to “provide resources, support and technical assistance” to add to on-going financing from such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

The United Nations General Assembly was to be asked to establish a Special Representative to the Secretary General to further the fight against illicit wildlife trafficking. It has been suggested that such an office would be ideal to act as a monitor of the progress being made by individual countries in living up to their commitments and reducing illegal wildlife trade.

Most important will be to base all decisions on good and accurate information – of the markets and

dynamics of illegal wildlife trade and the progress in combating it. A lot more needs to be known - on the links between wildlife crime and other organised crime and corruption, the links to terrorism, the underlying causes and implications of trade, including the effects on regional stability and security, the environment, socio-economic development, and on international relations.

Time is of the essence for many endangered species. ‘Actions speak louder than words’ and it is now essential to see the actions agreed at

the London Conference being rapidly implemented so that come early 2015 when there is to be another high-level conference, this time in Botswana, real progress is made in countering the illegal wildlife trade.

The Conference also heard first-hand from the Presidents of Botswana, Chad, Gabon and Tanzania, and the Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, who announced the proposal of an Elephant Protection Initiative to secure new funding from private and public sources for the implementation of the African Elephant Action Plan. ●

The Declaration can be downloaded in full free on the web at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/illegal-wildlife-trade-2014>

The Elephant Protection Initiative can be downloaded free on the web at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/decisive-action-agreed-on-illegal-wildlife-trade>