

The trade that never sleeps

On the surface, Viet Nam's streets and businesses appear quiet, as the fourth and current Covid-19 wave in the country has stalled the economy and social life. No tourists, stores shut... not even a pedestrian on the street. However, underneath the silent landscape is a bustling illegal wildlife trade that never sleeps.

Quyen Vu | Executive Director and Founder, Education for Nature – Viet Nam

Education for Nature – Viet Nam (ENV) has been fighting the illegal wildlife trade since 2005. In the beginning, illegal wildlife products and wildlife consumption could be seen anywhere, as the public and authorities alike accepted long-standing traditions involving wildlife use. After more than 15 years though, people now seem to be more aware of the negative consequences that stem from continuously poaching, trading and consuming wildlife and their products, and are actively working with ENV to end the destructive industry.

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The biggest challenge has always been eliminating the major transnational wildlife trafficking networks that flood the market with endangered species products, in addition to ending demand for wildlife amongst the Vietnamese. However, the challenges posed by Covid-19 rank among some of the most difficult to date.

Cooperation from the Government and authorities is key to effecting change in the wildlife trade in Viet Nam, though, understandably, the country's attention in the last year and a half has been focused on curbing and containing the spread of the virus. Each time a new lockdown or restriction is announced, momentum towards Government cooperation on specific wildlife issues is put on hold. And though the authorities remain busy

with pandemic measures, the wildlife trade has not stopped. Reports continue to flood in from the public – at even higher rates than usual – but it becomes a waiting game on the other side of the equation, where authorities are unable to act on reports due to social distancing. These limitations even reach as far as the judicial system, where criminal investigations are delayed and court dates are being pushed back. Most significantly, fieldwork and meetings, such as those with judiciaries to discuss important wildlife crime cases, have moved online. While virtual meetings have become the new norm for many, when trying to harness government support on wildlife trade issues, the lack of personal touch has not gone unnoticed.

Among its numerous challenges, the Covid-19 pandemic has also presented a singular opportunity for global wildlife conservation by shining a spotlight on humans' relationship with wildlife. When Covid-19 first hit Viet Nam, it opened a channel of communication to educate people about the health risks associated with the wildlife trade. In partnership with major media corporations GoldSun Focus Media and Chicilon Media, ENV released several public service announcements and viral films that reached millions across the country and broadcast the message to millions more through ads in residential areas, on the radio and public transport. The message was clear. The Government began to take a more serious stance against wildlife trafficking cases, and individuals across the country reported more wildlife crime than ever before. In 2020 alone, ENV's Wildlife Crime Hotline received 2,216 public reports of wildlife crime, and the average number of daily reports doubled.

We are proud of the progress that has been achieved in the face of the pandemic's challenges, and thus far in 2021, ENV is on track for another record-breaking year. In these first six months, ENV has already recorded 1,645 wildlife crime cases. From these cases, our Wildlife Crime Unit has maintained an 81.3% success rate in facilitating an effective law-enforcement response. What's more, the continued rise in public reports can be attributed to our consistent public awareness approach that aims to reduce demand for wildlife and increase public participation in ending the wildlife trade.

ENV's team in Viet Nam remains steadfast in the non-stop work to end demand for wildlife products, strengthen law-enforcement response to wildlife crime, and consistently create deterrents for wildlife trafficking by making arrests, prosecutions, and prison sentences a reality for Vietnamese wildlife traffickers. Viet Nam's illegal wildlife trade may never rest, but neither does ENV.

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Wildlife trafficking kingpins imprisoned by ENV investigation and prosecution

2018
Hoàng Tuấn Hải
4 yrs 6 months

Buying, selling and storing 10+ tonnes of sea turtles

2019
Nguyễn Mậu Chiến
23 months

Trafficking 23kg rhino horn

2020
Nguyễn Văn Nam
8 years

Buying, selling and storing 10+ tonnes of sea turtles

2020
Nguyễn Hữu Huệ
6 years

Buying, selling and transporting 200kg ivory

2021
Phún Nhị Tắc
12 years

Buying, selling and storing 39 sea turtle trophies