

Wildlife internet trade in Viet Nam

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on businesses that engaged in the sale and advertising of wildlife, including restaurants, traditional medicine shops, pet shops, and markets. Many of these enterprises were forced to close due to restrictions on people’s movements. However, the online market is a different story.

Dung Nguyen | Vice-Director, Education for Nature-Vietnam ENV



As our Director of Policy, Bui Thi Ha, explains, “The Covid-19 pandemic may have resulted in the closing of a large number of wildlife-related businesses such as wildlife farms, souvenir shops, and restaurants, but social media provided a new alternative retail market for wildlife.” In fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic, we observed a disturbing trend for online markets. During 2021, at the height of Covid-19 restrictions in Viet Nam, we recorded a 41.3% increase in online wildlife crimes compared to 2020.

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These online markets have thrived as they offer a much lower risk of being caught, while simultaneously reaching a significant number of customers. Traders were able to break the law and make a living during the pandemic, all while hiding behind a screen. In this “anonymous” market, hundreds of opportunistic, amateur, and professional traders seized their opportunity to adapt to the new way of living, and this trend has continued.



Today, products derived from rhinos, bears, elephant ivory, tigers and pangolins are crowding online retail groups.

At ENV, we have been handling hundreds of new online cases every month, with 54.4% of all recorded cases in the first two quarters of 2023 alone being online. Our Cyber Crime team investigates violations and prioritises cases to be handed over to law-enforcement agencies, while lower priority cases are dealt with using a tailored response.

If subjects do not comply with warnings, our social-media partners support our work through account deactivation or link removal. In recent years, we have witnessed the excellent efforts of our partners at TikTok, Zalo, Google, and Facebook in responding to wildlife violations in Viet Nam. In fact, thanks to their collaboration, thousands of social media accounts advertising endangered wildlife have been deactivated, and owners sent warnings.

On the law-enforcement front, authorities face numerous challenges in dealing with internet wildlife crime, mostly due to the level of complexity involved in these cases and their inability to identify physical crimes and subjects. Many law-enforcement agencies have also historically been reluctant to consider virtual violations as serious enough to warrant concerted efforts or strict punishment.

However, since 2022, we have witnessed a great improvement across agencies in their efforts to deal with internet crime. In many cases, prompt detection combined with appropriately strict punishments for illegal online wildlife traders have been adopted. In one case, a report to our Wildlife Crime Hotline about an online trader led to the seizure of 164 g of black rhino horn and an arrest. The individual was sentenced to 12 months in prison by Yen Thanh District Court in November 2022.

The illegal wildlife trade will undoubtedly continue to evolve as traders find new ways to operate in the face of mounting obstacles. It’s therefore critical that law-enforcement authorities can rapidly learn and understand wildlife traffickers’ new tactics, so that they can promptly and continuously develop effective measures to fight wildlife crime.