
A QUICK RUN THROUGH THE SCENARIO OF WILDLIFE CRIMES IN INDIA

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Email: madona2908mj@gmail.com, jitendra.yadav@mangalayatan.edu.in**Abstract**

India is noted for its diverse biodiversity, which includes a vast range of wild floral and faunal species. Because of massive poaching and illegal trading, this wildlife treasure of ours fears extinction. Poaching and trafficking of wild species for money and fashion has wiped off a variety of wildlife species, necessitating immediate action to combat this threat. Illegal wildlife trade (IWT) is a type of green crime or environmental crime, which is defined as "illegal activities harming the environment and aimed at benefiting individuals, groups, or companies through the exploitation, damage to, trade, or theft of natural resources." Many transit routes run through Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam, all of which are key sites for wildlife trafficking in both local and international markets. The paper deals with gathered wildlife crime data from various stakeholders, government agencies, and credible news sources, and discussed current crime trends, difficulties, and prevention techniques needed to regulate and restore animal biodiversity in India.

Keywords: wildlife crimes, forensics, illegal activities, trafficking

Introduction

India is one of the 12 mega-biodiversity nations, accounting for 8% of global biodiversity and home to 60% of the world's tigers, 50% of Asian elephants, 70% of Asian rhinos, and the only wild population of Asiatic lions.[1] India also features a unique mix of Palaeartic, Oriental, and Afrotropical fauna[2], with over 400 animal species.[3] We run the risk of losing all of our valuable species due to rampant poaching and the expanding illegal wildlife trade.

Mankind has been using wildlife and natural resources for food, clothing, medicine, pleasure, and profit since time immemorial, but commercial exploitation in recent years has destroyed certain species to the point of extinction.[4] As a result of continuing illegal trade, conservation of wild species is currently a severe concern.

As a result of the ongoing illegal traffic in animal parts and goods, conservation of wild species is currently a major concern.[4] The annual international trade in wildlife and its products is estimated to be around US \$20 billion, with illegal wildlife traffic alone accounting for \$5 billion, ranking second only to drugs in terms of economic value.[1] Because the majority of the trade is extremely clandestine, it is difficult to produce accurate estimates of its magnitude, and the true

amounts are likely to be very high.

Wildlife in India is protected by the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972. All creatures listed in Schedules I, II, III, and IV of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 are protected, and poaching is penalized under this act. India is also a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Despite such strict regulation, poaching has expanded rampantly over the years, decimating the population of various wild species and bringing their numbers to an alarmingly low level. It has been noticed that the conviction rate in most poaching instances is extremely low. Anon[5] blames this to the confiscated species' lack of competent species characterisation and identification techniques.

To prosecute a person under Wildlife Protection legislation, the species of the poached animal must be identified, which is impossible due to a lack of know-how, database, and experience in the subject. The dilemma is exacerbated further when finished products must be identified, and to make matters worse, there are fakes on the market. As a result, developing procedures for species characterisation from wildlife goods captured under wildlife protection legislation becomes critical.

Environmental crimes are defined as "illegal activities that harm the environment and are intended to benefit individuals, groups, or companies through the exploitation, damage to, trade, or theft of natural resources" [1]. IWT includes obtaining, capturing, poaching, smuggling, importing, exporting, processing, possessing, collecting, and consuming wild flora, fauna, and funga, whether aquatic or terrestrial, dead or alive, as well as derivatives, parts, and products of such species [2,3]. It is one of the world's most profitable criminal sectors, with an estimated annual worth of 7-23 billion USD roughly 10 years ago [1,4,5]. Since then, its annual value has most likely expanded significantly, and newer calculations are required to determine its present extent.

However, because IWT is illegal, determining its annual worth and extent is difficult, and it can only be estimated [1].

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that overexploitation of natural resources, including IWT, may be a more significant driver of present biodiversity loss than climate change [6]. Taking all of these elements into account, IWT is no longer a new issue, but is now recognized as a severe crime by organizations such as the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL; [4]) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC; [7]). The Convention on worldwide Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) governs worldwide trade in endangered species. It was established to ensure that international trade does not damage endangered species. Its appendices currently cover over 38,700 animal and plant species [8]. IWT includes more than only well-known iconic species like tigers, rhinos, and elephants.

India's current wildlife crime trend

Insatiable human greed and rampant poaching activities threaten indigenous and endangered species of flora and fauna in forest ranges; several animals, in particular, are on the verge of extinction (Ceballos et al. 2017; Karanth et al. 2010). According to data available from the WCCB and other police authorities, approximately 9253 poachers were detained in various poaching

instances in India between 2012 and 2018, however the conviction rate was only 2%. The wildlife crime data from the NCRB report (NCR Bureau 2014-2021) shows that the seven Indian states with the highest number of wildlife crime cases in the last eight years are Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Assam, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat. However, the number of species smuggled/poached in a single occurrence is still concerning. 50 tigers were poached in 2016, the highest number in a decade.

Between 2015 and 2016, the government seized 37,267 turtles, amounting to an average of 100 turtles every day. Over the last three years (2018, 2019, and 2020), more than two thousand cases for the slaughter or trafficking of wild animals were recorded across India, resulting in the arrest of approximately four thousand people for various wildlife crimes. The number of instances registered and people arrested in 2018, 2019, and 2020 was 648:1099, 805:1506, and 601:1231 accordingly, indicating that wildlife crime is either conducted alone or by a small group. In July 2020, exotic species viz. red kangaroo (*Macropus rufus*), aldabra tortoise (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*), blue macaws (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) and capuchin monkey (*Cebus capucinus*) were seized from Lailapur, Assam, for which there is no provision of punishment according to Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 Act and the poachers are using this amnesty route to smuggle-in these non-native species into India for money.

Airways are the most regularly used route by poachers in India for exotic species trafficking. According to the Trafic-India study, over 70,000 native and exotic species weighing 4000 kg were trafcked between 2011 and 2020. Poachers use various means and strategies (timing, networking, traps, nets, gunning down, poisoning, bombing, etc.) to bring wild animals to the market in disguise, convert the parts of the wild animals into finished products (statues, decorates, and ornaments), and sometimes paint them to hide their observable identity in order to bring them into the open market for sale (Naveen et al. 2021; Radhakrishnan 2018). Buyers employ animals/animal products for a variety of reasons, including passion, fashion, medicine, and sorcery. The WCCB group in practically all states, together with police department wings (SSB, CID, STF, DFO, CCF). Borders (Bureau 2013) are actively involved in apprehending poachers and confiscating wild animals. Star tortoise (*Geochelone*) species and goods from several Indian states pangolin and their scales, tiger/lion/leopard bones and skin, elephant tusk, deer and rhino horn, whale vomit (*Balaenoptera musculus*) known as ambergris, biles bear musk (*Atelope cervicapra*), chinkara (*Gazella bennettii*), spotted deer—chital (*Axis axis*), blue bull—nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), snake venom monitor lizard hemipenises, sea fans (*Gorgonia* spp.), porcupine (*Hystrix indica*) quills, Mongoose hair, Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*) guard hair called shahtoosh utilized in fabrics/shawls, parakeets, and so on.

Since 2016, the state of Uttar Pradesh in North India has recorded the largest number of wildlife crime cases, accounting for more than 25% of all instances in the country. According to the NCRB report (NCR Bureau 2014-2021), 190 of the 859 cases recorded in the country in 2016 under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 were registered in Rajasthan, while Uttar Pradesh alone had 302 cases. The STF of the Uttar Pradesh police recovered around 6000 endangered soft shell and fap

shell turtles (weighing over 4 tons) from a residence in the Amethi District on January 11, 2017, in the state's greatest wildlife haul.

The state of Uttarakhand also has a diverse wildlife, and there have been reports of wild animal trafficking across the Indo-Tibetan border, prompting the establishment of two seven-member Wildlife Crime Control Units (WCCU) to control poacher activity in its administrative divisions of Garhwal and Kumaun. The selling of monitor lizard penises in the disguise of Hatha Jodi (*Martynia annua*), a plant root kept at home for good luck charm, has been reported in the local market of Uttarakhand, as confirmed by mitochondrial DNA sequencing (Rajpoot et al. 2018). Since 2011, the state of Uttarakhand has recorded the majority of leopard poaching incidents, particularly those involving snow leopards living in the high Himalayas. Another example is elephant tusk hunting.

Rajasthan is the largest hub of wildlife crime in West India, with the most cases reported in 2014-2015. In order to combat wildlife crime in Rajasthan, control centers will be established at Ranthambore National Park and Sariska Tiger Reserve in 2020. Between July 2018 and June 2021, a total of 1,531 cases were reported in Gujarat under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, with an increasing trend.

During this time period, the Gir Somnath region had the most cases (358), followed by Junagadh (315). Gujarat is well known for its Asiatic lions, and the total number of Asiatic lions (*P. leo persica*) found in Gujarat's Gir National Park is approximately 100.

In Maharashtra in 2022, tigers were poached from the Arjuni-Morgaon Forest Range and the Pench Tiger Reserve, while ambergris seizures (sperm whale vomit) were reported from the Nagpur division forest zone. The Mumbai unit of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) rescued 665 exotic animals from the Air Cargo Complex on October 6, 2022. The DRI rescued these exotic animals (pythons, lizards, and turtles) in Mumbai after they were smuggled in from Malaysia under the guise of the aquarium fish. Poachers sell wild animal meat from monitor lizards, sambars, and wild boars brought from other states in the neighbouring state of Goa. Aside from meat, monitor lizard blood and oil are utilized in traditional oriental medicine.

Boa snakes (*Eryx johnii*) are transported to Maharashtra and utilized for sorcery and black magic. Over a 22-year period (2000-2021), the rhino state of Assam (home to 70% of India's rhino population) alone saw 191 poaching occurrences; however, no poaching activity was recorded in 2022. Rhino horn powder has traditionally been used as a Chinese/Vietnamese medicine to cure a variety of ailments. A considerable number of freshwater turtles are being poached for smuggling to other states and beyond. Nearly 2900 fresh water turtles were seized in eight recorded seizures during the last 1.5 years, largely by railway authorities and police. On March 15, 2019, the Crime Branch made a big seizure of four leopard skins in Kuchinda, Sambalpur District. The pangolin, the world's most trafficked wild species, is also often smuggled from Odisha and Jharkhand for its scales and meat. The Crime Branch of Odisha confiscated four kilograms of pangolin scales from the house of Shamsuddin Khan, the most popular wildlife smuggler, in June 2018. It is still in high

demand in China for its aphrodisiac and therapeutic properties.

The Indo-Nepal border, on the other hand, is porous and well connected by land routes, giving a profitable avenue for illegal wildlife traders to smuggle illegal wildlife items. Almost half of the 3000 estimated Gangetic River dolphins (*Platanista gangetica*) in India's Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna River system are found in Bihar, where they are constantly threatened by pollution, river traffic, riverfront construction, and are sometimes hunted for fishing bait for their oil (Kolipakam et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2021). However, as compared to Bihar, the bordering southern state of Jharkhand, which was divided from Bihar on November 15, 2000, is rich in forest land and wildlife. According to the NCRB report for 2021, Jharkhand reported 265 cases involving the Forest Act, an increase of 82.76% over the previous year.

There have also been unregulated poaching cases of pangolins from Chhattisgarh's forest area, involving officials such as a sub-inspector of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) who was arrested in Raipur in September 2021 for allegedly smuggling pangolin scales. In February 2022, the Bastar division of the forest department recovered 19 kg of pangolin scales, four star tortoises, and six leopard nails while holding four people under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. It has been shown that a drop in the number of pangolins, which eat on ants and termites, causes ground hollowing, which harms trees and plants in forests.

India's southernmost region

According to NCRB annual data (NCR Bureau 2014-2021), the rate of wildlife crime in the southern United States is increasing.

Consequences

IWT is sometimes deemed a "victimless" crime (e.g. [7,7]), particularly when wildlife are not considered victims [7]. Furthermore, the human effects may not be as direct or visible as in other crimes, but they do exist. Given the covert nature of illegal trafficking, determining the repercussions can be difficult. However, because illegal trade is not controlled and reported, the effects of IWT are equivalent, if not worse, than those of unsustainable legal wildlife trading [4]. Depending on the location and taxon, it is estimated that between 9% and 77% of the "legal" wildlife trade is illegal [2]. Overexploitation of natural resources, including IWT, is considered to be more damaging to biodiversity than climate change [6].

Major obstacles in combating wildlife crime in India

According to the 2021 demographic estimate, 65% of the Indian population (i.e., approximately 900 million) lives in rural areas that share space with protected areas (national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and biosphere reserves), which is approximately 5% of the total geographical surface area and three times lower than the global average of 16% (Carroll et al. 2021). This has created an environment of competition for space and food, primarily between marginal rural households and wildlife (Gulati et al. 2021), which is exacerbated by a lack of wildlife education, a lack of other livelihood alternatives, poor governance, ineffective conservation policies, unemployment, and socioeconomic inequalities (Dufy et al. 2015; Smith et al. 2003). The human-wildlife conflict

costs crop/livestock losses and human casualties; when the latter is worsened, the carnivore is deemed a man-eater and exterminated under normal guidelines. Conservationists and other wildlife stakeholders must collaborate with local rural communities (community-based approach) (Kifner et al. 2020), motivate them to participate in wildlife protection, provide incentives as a reward for ecosystem maintenance and associated biodiversity (Nelson et al. 2010), prevent wildlife hunting/atrocities, and raise awareness among rural populations about ideas like sustainable development and the One Health Mission (Buttke et al. 2014). One health strategy aims to improve global health security by focusing on interactions at the human-animal-ecosystem interface to address issues such as transmissible illnesses, drug resistance, and food safety.

The Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change (MoEFCC) budget increased to Rs 3030 crore in the last fiscal year (2022-2023) from Rs 2520 crore in the previous year (2021-2022), more of which needs to be channeled to wildlife projects, as rampant poaching remains a major challenge that may have an impact on the additional burden of wildlife management on police organizations.

Wildlife crimes (illegal trading of live animals and plants, dead animal and plant parts, and ornamental animal/plant parts) committed by poachers, mediators, and customers must be thoroughly handled and investigated. Some crimes are motivated by politics. Because parakeets are protected in India under Schedule IV of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, their sale or possession is unlawful. In addition to parakeets, some peasants near the jungle and some affluent individuals in India secretly keep wild and unusual animals such as tortoises, turtles, snakes, bears, deers, peafowl, and so on for prosperity charms or good luck, which forest officials should prevent.

Conclusion

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 currently includes only native species; therefore, changes to the existing six schedules (I-VI) to list alien/exotic species and to add penalty and punishment sections for wildlife defaulters involved in exotic wild/pet species trade are urgently needed. Any dealing with peacock tail feathers (*Pavo cristatus*) is also excluded from the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which has to be changed or brought under parts of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. The Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2022, which includes a new schedule of alien species (Schedule IV) listed under CITES and imposes higher penalties for wildlife defaulters, was finally enacted by both chambers of parliament in December 2022.

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