

## Wildlife Trade Threatens Species Survival

Imagine being brutally taken from your home, forced to live in extremely poor conditions and to exist in misery. Imagine the neglect, the fear. Imagine the cold metal bars against your body. Imagine the carelessness with which you are regarded. Imagine pain. Imagine hopelessness. Imagine those around you dying and fearing you yourself will fall to the same fate. Imagine the wildlife trade... then open your eyes and realize imagination is unnecessary. This is reality.

The wildlife trade is the sale or exchange of live wild animals and plants, or products made from these. Live animals are sold as pets or fresh food, while others are killed, often for only a single body part, to be used in food, medicine, or as ornaments and collectibles. In many countries they are for sale in open markets.

Endangered animals like tigers, gorillas and chimpanzees are amongst those killed for the wildlife trade. Bear paws are dried and sold as ashtrays. Sharks are pulled from the ocean, their fins cut off for soup. Asian sun bears are hunted for their organs and gall bladders. An elephant's foot is used as a barstool. A young gorilla is advertised on the Internet for \$10,000. And elephants are still being killed just for their ivory tusks.

On top of all this, U.S. customs estimates that 90 percent of the animals smuggled in to be sold as exotic pets die before reaching their final destination.

Many of you may have watched the devastation and abuse of the wildlife trade aptly reported on CNN's recent *Planet In Peril* special, which focused on some of the major hubs for illegal wildlife trafficking, Thailand, Cambodia, and China. The documentary showed the terrible conditions in Bangkok's infamous Jatuchak market. Animals suffer or die from lack of food, dehydration, stifling heat and inhumane treatment. It named China as the number one destination in the world for illegal wildlife, stating that with a population of 1.3 billion people, China is a vacuum for the world's wildlife.

The wildlife trade is undeniably a problem of massive proportions. According to the World Wildlife Federation (WWF), "populations of species on earth declined by an average of 40% between 1970 and 2000 – and the second-biggest threat to species survival, after habitat destruction, is wildlife trade". The UN says we are now losing anywhere between 18-50,000 species of plants and animals every year, and estimates this to be 1000 times the natural rate of extinction.

As increasingly more land is being deforested and logging roads are being cut into previously unreachable areas, bushmeat (wildlife species used for meat), which was once eaten by only native peoples, has also become commercial, catering to the cultural preferences of many urban dwellers around the world. Reports show that over one million tonnes of bushmeat is taken from African forests alone each year - that's the equivalent of more than 9 billion quarter pound hamburgers!

The wildlife trade problem reaches far into the oceans as well. The Marine Aquarium Council (MAC) estimates that 20 to 24 million fish overall are harvested annually for worldwide trade in salt-water ornamental fish. And in China, exotic fish species on one's menu are a status symbol. With increased prosperity in China, the Live Fish Food Trade is now estimated at \$1 billion [SeaWeb]. "Reefs near Hong Kong have been depleted decades ago, and the trade has moved further and further away to source fish," says WWF Hong Kong director.

To supply both of these markets, in places like Indonesia and the Philippines, illegal cyanide poisons are squirted into coral reefs where fish are hiding, stunning and disorienting the fish. Many of the exposed fish die immediately, and those that survive end up dying from shock or digestive damage, days, weeks, or months later, something many aquarium owners may have

experienced. Even worse than the fish it kills, cyanide kills the corals, destroying the fish's habitat. It has the same effect on a reef's fish as clear-cutting forests has on forest animals. They just disappear.

America and the European Union have also been named as top importers for illegal wildlife. According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service documents, more than 650 million animals -- from kangaroos and kinkajous to iguanas and tropical fish -- were imported legally into the United States in the past three years.

And here in Canada, the Globe and Mail website reported that Montreal and Toronto's dining scenes have a bustling trade in bushmeat, making them prime destinations for over a thousand kilograms each month of slaughtered wild animals smuggled from Africa. Environment Canada cites a man in Richmond, B.C. who was prosecuted this October for illegally importing 30,000 pieces of African elephant ivory.

Though CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, currently protects roughly 5,000 species of animals, the illegal wildlife trade is valued at over \$10 billion. Overall, wildlife product sales around the world have been estimated at up to \$160 billion annually!

The latest issue of National Geographic addresses the consumption of bushmeat and our increasing contact with wildlife, linking it to deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Foot and Mouth disease. And human health, isn't the only issue, as diseases can go from humans to other species as well.

Facilitated by the ease of the Internet, the sale of illegal products is made even easier, as sites like eBay often provide auction for wildlife products.

Human life depends on the existence of other species. Careful and thoughtful use of wildlife and their habitats is required not only to avoid extinctions, but also to maintain the complex web of life.

As a consumer and an Internet user, you can contribute to stopping the trade in animals and animal products. If you come across online offers on eBay or elsewhere, write a letter and demand that they remove illegal wildlife offers from their auction site immediately. Don't buy or sell any wild animals or wildlife products. If you have an aquarium, when possible, buy only captive bred fish, otherwise ask for MAC Certified and labeled marine ornamentals, which ensures they are caught legally and with nets only.

Learn more about the trade in live animals, and the cruelty and suffering that is associated with it. Make others aware of this important issue. Join a wildlife trade prevention group or campaign yourself against this atrocity!

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