



Trapping the illegal **WILDLIFE TRADERS**

Members of the air cargo community have led the way in denouncing the illegal wildlife trade, estimated to be worth USD19 billion a year, and pledging to work with authorities in the fight against traffickers, reports Yvonne Mulder.

Several weeks ago, shockwaves were sent around the world after poachers forced their way into a Paris zoo and shot a rhinoceros three times in the head before removing its horn with a chainsaw.

The act, which took place at Thoiry Zoo, is thought to be the first time in Europe that a

rhino living in captivity has been killed by poachers, and adds a startling new dimension to the growing problem of illicit trade involving wildlife.

Rhinos are far from the only victim of this trade – the issue extends to countless animal and plant species on every continent, with more

than 7,000 species in 120 countries at risk, according to the World Wildlife Crime Report.

According to wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC, around 20,000 African elephants are killed by poachers each year. In 2011, ivory estimated to weigh more than 23 tonnes – a figure that represents 2,500 elephants – was seized in the 13 largest seizures of illegal ivory.

Companies and personnel in the air freight industry can play a significant role in helping prevent this illegal trafficking of wildlife and wildlife products, said Michelle Owen from TRAFFIC.



Pictured here are some of the illegal animal products seized by UK border agents.

USEWVS



It is very easy to detect ivory, so the issue is often with corrupt officials turning a blind eye.

“Technically, the main responsibility lies with the Customs authorities in each country, but it is fantastic that the airline industry is stepping up to help. They are the people with the experience to know when a shipment just does not sound or look right,” she said.

According to the conservation body WWF, the term ‘wildlife trade’ actually refers to a mostly legal practice. For instance, it includes wood used for furniture or building materials; exotic flowers, plants, or pets; ‘wild’ ingredients sourced for food, medicines, and cosmetics; and clothes or bags made from, for example, reptile skins.

Wildlife trade only becomes a problem “when the trade becomes unsustainable and/or illegal, and puts the future survival of specific species at risk”, it explained.

IATA pledge

Last year, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) unanimously endorsed a resolution denouncing the illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products, estimated to be worth about USD19 billion a year, and pledged to partner with government authorities and conservation organizations in the fight against the traffickers of protected species.

It was one of 40 public and private sector bodies to sign the United for Wildlife initiative at Buckingham Palace, UK, which was hailed as a major step forward for environmental protection.

IATA explained that the industry had collaborated to address noise in the 1990s, and to manage its impact on climate change

more recently, and now it extended that commitment to playing an active role in reducing illegal trafficking of wildlife.

London Heathrow was the first airport to sign the declaration “because it was the right thing to do”, according to Nick Platts, Head of Cargo. “We are launching a new sustainability strategy and that already included prevention of illegal trafficking of people, so it made absolute sense to also include wildlife trafficking.”



You can have illegal animals mixed in with legal ones, and wildlife products that have been mis-declared.

– Michelle Owen, TRAFFIC

He sees one of Heathrow’s main roles being to raise awareness and encourage other airports and partners to sign the Buckingham Palace declaration. “Our role is supporting our partners, bringing people together, as well as collaboration and engagement.”

Platts explained that the airline industry already has systems in place to look for illegal shipments of drugs and guns, as well as explosives, so it is not an alien concept to look for illegal wildlife shipments.

While much of the smuggling is done by passengers, in their clothing or luggage,

increasing numbers of shipments involving both live animals and animal products have been discovered in cargo holds or at origin airports.

“Our best assets are the staff working at the coalface – those sorting in the warehouse, the people who touch it, building up pallets, stacking into containers or checking the documentation. They do it every day so they can recognize unusual patterns, or declared contents not matching the usual weight, for instance.”

Platts said it is vital to empower staff so that they know what to do if they suspect something is wrong – and know that they will be supported in their actions.

Owen, who works as the lead for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership, said the partnership is developing training for the aviation sector to help raise awareness of ways that traffickers abuse transport infrastructure.



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“You can have illegal animals mixed in with legal ones, and wildlife products that have been mis-declared. We are working with industry to see how changes in policies/procedures can reduce gaps that can be taken advantage of.”

Grant Miller, Border Force Senior Officer, National Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Team, at London Heathrow, said it is important that the air cargo community be “the eyes and ears” to help the law enforcement agencies.

“We encourage freight and courier companies to look at their screening process. For instance, ivory shows up beautifully in X-rays. But some freight companies seem to think they are only looking for bombs. So, it can be challenging to get them to look for illegal wildlife as well.”

He explained the regulations were very straightforward to follow. For instance, concerning ivory, shippers are asked if the shipment is ivory and whether or not they have



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a permit. “If they do not have a permit, the goods become seizable. It is very easy to detect ivory, so the issue is often with corruption.”

He cited another example of Nile crocodiles that had been taken from the wild, which face a much more stringent set of rules in order to obtain a permit than Mississippi alligators. “However, sometimes Nile crocodiles are mislabelled as Mississippi alligators, due to the fact it is much easier to obtain a permit for them,” he said.

“You also have occasions where a box or cage is labelled with a legitimate cargo, maybe a type of venomous snake, and then there is a hidden compartment underneath with something completely different inside.”

Of course, it is also in an airline's own interests to know what it is carrying in its aircraft. Apart from the security aspects, unauthorized animals could be carrying disease or present

other bio-hazards that could endanger staff as well as the wider public. Some Customs authorities will penalize the airline carrying trafficked wildlife under all circumstances. Others will relent if an airline can prove due diligence in making all reasonable checks.

It is also a matter of reputation and corporate responsibility, said Miller. Governments and the public are becoming much more aware of the issue and of the consequences if endangered species become extinct in the wild.

Much of the work needs to be done in the countries of origin. An assessment tool, developed by IATA in partnership with the World Customs Organization (WCO) and with support from the ROUTES Partnership, has been piloted at Maputo International Airport in Mozambique and Hanoi Airport in Vietnam.

Global roll-out

The tool helps airport management assess the supply-chain security, intelligence, risk management, staff awareness, and reporting processes, alongside air cargo and passenger screening policy and procedures. A global roll-out is planned later this year.

IATA believes new technology such as e-documentation, online check-in and automated baggage drops could also play a role in fighting illegal wildlife shipments.

Alexandre de Juniac, IATA's director general and chief executive, said: “These technologies can help government authorities to build accurate risk assessments of travelers and cargo shipments. Whether it is combating terrorism, stopping the illegal drug trade or putting an end to wildlife trafficking, governments must share information among themselves and with industry. We share a common goal and we must work together to achieve it.”

IATA's advice on wildlife trafficking

What can airlines do?

- Raise awareness of wildlife trafficking with staff, passengers, and cargo customers;
- Encourage reporting of suspicious passengers, baggage, and cargo consignments to authorities;
- Participate in industry initiatives;
- Engage with other transport and logistic stakeholders.

What should airline staff look out for?

- Suspicious passenger behavior such as nervous body language/speech and

oversized clothing;

- Unusual multi-leg routings and checked-through baggage requests;
- Suspicious baggage and cargo consignments including unusual smells, sounds, shapes, and weights.

What should airline staff do?

- Report suspicions to supervisor and/or authorities (police and Customs);
- Do not open suspicious baggage or cargo consignments;
- Do not confront a suspicious passenger.