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Mr. Joao Miguel Santos
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Mrs. Michelle Owen, ROUTES Lead

THE RACE TO (WILD) LIFE

Michelle Owen, ROUTES Lead, explores the trends in global wildlife trafficking, giving the African perspective of what has been globally condemned as a force to exterminate some of the world's cherished species. In this exclusive interview with Aviation & Allied Business, Michelle describes the nexus and whopping market value of the heinous trade, and more.



Q : How would you describe the trend of illegal trafficking in wildlife, especially from the African perspective?

A: Estimated to be worth up to 20 billion U.S. dollars a year, wildlife trafficking has become one of the most prominent forms of international crime globally. In recent years, the poaching and trafficking of Africa's wildlife have reached record levels. Approximately 55 elephants are killed every day for their ivory and one rhino is killed every eight hours for its horn. The majority of wildlife products from Africa are smuggled into Asian markets where items like ivory are prized as decorative pieces and rhino horns and pangolin scales are incorporated into traditional medicines.

Often run by dangerous international networks, wildlife trafficking has been linked to other illicit activities, such as human and drug trafficking, with the profits being used for all manner of illegal activities. Trafficking crimes contribute to regional instability, armed conflict and corruption and drain communities of their natural resources and heritage. Without concerted action, some of Africa's most iconic species could be extinct within the next few decades.



Q: For some years now, airlines including those in Africa have been sensitized about the risk of knowingly or inadvertently promoting illegal trafficking of wildlife on their flights. How much impact has been made in this regard?

A: The aviation sector is particularly vulnerable to being unwittingly used by traffickers to transport illegal wildlife and wildlife products. Airports can act as bottlenecks, concentrating wildlife contraband in one place before it's carried or shipped to international buyers. This provides staff in the air transport sector a crucial opportunity to disrupt wildlife trafficking. Airport and airline staff spend more time with passengers, their baggage, and cargo shipments than customs and enforcement officers, and can help serve as the eyes and ears across transport supply chains.

While awareness-raising is essential, it's important that airlines continue to support measures that strengthen policies and protocols for preventing wildlife trafficking and train and empower staff to detect and report wildlife crimes. The USAID Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership recently released the most comprehensive assessment of wildlife

trafficking across the air transport sector to date, which provides a snapshot of local and global wildlife trafficking trends, and can provide recommendations, informational materials and training resources for airlines and airports to turn commitments and ambitions into concrete solutions.



USAID ROUTES

The USAID Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership brings together government agencies, transportation and logistics industry companies and representatives, international conservation, development and law enforcement organizations and donors in order to disrupt wildlife trafficking activities, and forms a key element of the concerted international response to addressing wildlife poaching and associated criminal activities worldwide.

At the heart of ROUTES is a core group of partners collaborating with the U.S. Government and the transport sector that includes the Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS), Freeland, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), TRAFFIC and WWF. The Partnership is funded by USAID and coordinated by TRAFFIC.

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Q: Would you say there is a spike or major reduction in trafficking of any particular species so far?

A: Wildlife traffickers are opportunistic and will adjust their methods and strategies to find the path of least resistance for the largest possible profit.

This can mean adjusting concealment methods, finding new routes to move contraband, or even targeting new species and markets for trade.

For example, there have been recent incidents of poaching of African lions as alternatives to tiger parts, which are used in traditional medicines but are becoming harder to obtain as tiger populations have plummeted. In addition, unexpected events can shift demand. For example, public attention on a species from a movie or social media trend can spike demand for a particular species. This is the case with cheetah cubs, which are being smuggled out of Africa to the Middle East where it is trendy in wealthy circles to keep Cheetahs as pets. It's important for airlines and airports to report any and all illegal wildlife seizures since this data can provide early warnings into changing trends within illegal wildlife markets.

Q: If there are no buyers there will be no sellers. What has been done to address the demand for such illegal products, probably by finding alternative products or somewhat, through wider global coalition, dissuading buyers?

A: An important advancement in reducing wildlife demand has recently come from China, who shut down its elephant ivory trade at the start of this year, effectively shrinking the world's biggest market for ivory and signaling to consumers a priority to move away from elephant ivory products. Shortly after, Hong Kong followed by announcing an ivory ban that will go into effect completely by 2021.



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Alongside policy changes to reduce demand, local and global organisations are working to shift consumer perceptions about wildlife products. For example, leading traditional medicine practitioners in Viet Nam have committed to refrain from using illegal wildlife such as rhino horn or tiger bone for medicinal uses. There are also a number of informational campaigns

aimed at consumers to influence buying behaviours and reduce demand for endangered wildlife. This is a rapidly growing and evolving field that has become a cornerstone of global wildlife conservation strategies.

Q: You may agree that poverty and quest to survive strengthens the sources of illegal wildlife products. Perhaps, through wide regional or global coalition also, what is being done to address socio-economic challenges in such environments?

A: The illegal wildlife trade is not just a threat to wildlife populations, it also robs communities of natural resources and harms local economies. Across Africa, elephant declines due to poaching cost local economies \$25 million USD per year in lost tourism.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but addressing illegal wildlife trade is recognised as a vital component of sustainable development efforts in Africa and worldwide. Recently, the United Nations made this connection explicit by writing wildlife directly into its Sustainable Development Goals agenda, setting targets to "take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products."

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Q: Intensive training and sensitization on wildlife tracking appears to concentrate in East Africa. What plans do you have for West Africa which is also a major gateway to and from Africa to global markets?

A: Wildlife trafficking is a global issue, affecting airports and airlines in every region of the world, especially across Africa and Asia. ROUTES conducted a study of wildlife trafficking hotspots within the air transport sector which has helped inform efforts for collaboration and intensive training. Nigeria, which has one of the largest airports in West Africa, was identified as a common source country for wildlife products, especially those on their way to Asia through Europe or East Africa. ROUTES has developed a suite of resources, guidance materials, and training modules to support transport companies in every region to combat wildlife trafficking in their supply chains. There is no fee to join the ROUTES Partnership or to access any of our resources.

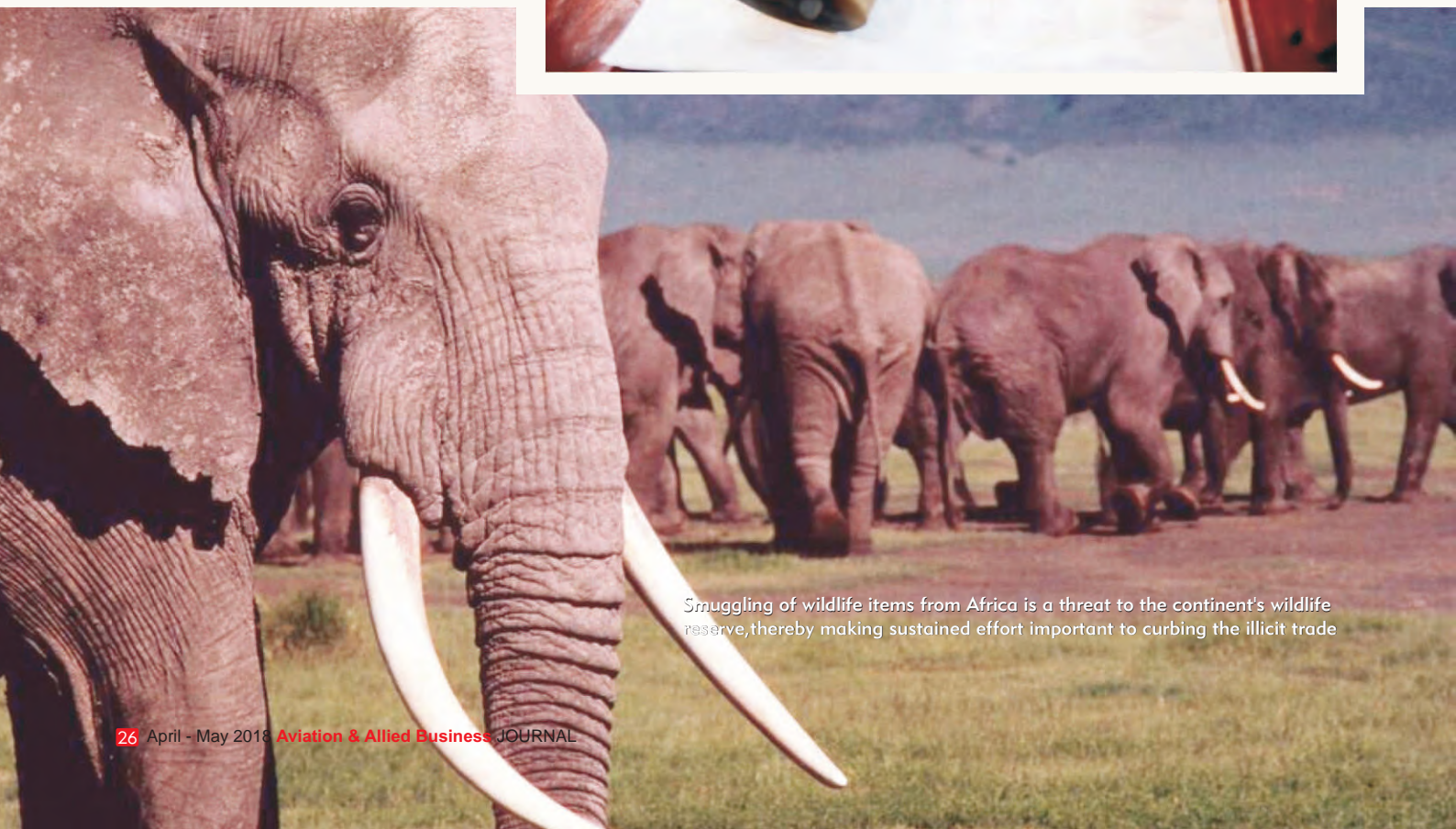
Q: How sustainable is the war against illegal trafficking of wildlife in Africa and globally, given the likely evolution and sophistication of perpetrators and their global networks?

A: Wildlife trafficking has reached industrialised levels of sophistication and will require a concerted global response at a scale that is capable of combating these widespread wildlife crimes. While the task may seem daunting, momentum and collaboration from a variety of sectors and areas of expertise are bringing us closer every day to addressing the drivers of illegal wildlife trade and clamping down on organised trafficking networks.

From the air transport sector, many airlines and airports have already

stepped up as early leaders in this fight. Over 85 companies have signed the United for Wildlife Transport Taskforce Buckingham Palace Declaration, which commits signatories to 11 commitments aimed to disrupt wildlife trafficking. In addition, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) created the IATA Wildlife Task Force to identify and review emerging wildlife conservation issues within the industry and to develop appropriate responses. ROUTES is able to provide support and resources to help the air transport sector make meaningful strides in eliminating illegal wildlife from their transport supply chains.

The conservation of wildlife is a shared responsibility, and something we can achieve by working all together. ▣



Smuggling of wildlife items from Africa is a threat to the continent's wildlife reserve, thereby making sustained effort important to curbing the illicit trade