

Stopping wildlife crime across the airways

With World Animal Day on 4 October, we look at the devastating impact of wildlife trafficking and the efforts being made to halt this global crime

If you ever thought that wildlife trafficking was a small-scale issue not worthy of your consideration then here are some statistics that might just change your mind. Close to 55 elephants are killed every day for their ivory in Africa, and in South Africa alone, one rhino is killed every eight hours for its horn. More than 7,000 animal and plant species – including songbirds, big cats and exotic reptiles – are victims of this illegal trade.

In short, it's a global issue and something that all of us – as world travellers – will have been exposed to at one time or another in a bustling foreign marketplace or exotic store. The thriving market for illegally trafficked wildlife – to be used as everything from pets to medicine to decoration – has grown into a \$20 billion-a-year industry, making it the world's fourth most lucrative illegal activity after drugs, counterfeiting and human trafficking.

We hope we've got your attention now – especially as the situation is worsening. To meet international demands, wildlife traffickers are getting

smarter, utilising a variety of extreme methods to smuggle wildlife and wildlife products, such as ivory and rhino horn, through airports and on to commercial flights.

According to a 2017 report from the USAID Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership, 114 countries have recorded cases of wildlife trafficking at their airports in the past decade. The top five locations for trafficking of ivory, rhino horn, live birds and live reptiles (which collectively make up about two-thirds of all trafficked wildlife) are China, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Kenya and India.

By looking at wildlife trafficking instances at airports over several years, the report identifies common smuggling methods that traffickers use to avoid detection during their journey. Nearly half of all attempts are through checked baggage, while 14 per cent are through freight and another five per cent as carry-on.

Red flags such as an unusually high number of bags, abandoned luggage,



and custom-made clothing with extra pockets are all common indicators. Many of the identified methods are also typically used by traffickers of drugs, arms and other illicit goods.

So what can be done? In response to the global issue, airlines, airports and other members of the air transport industry are stepping up to put an end to wildlife trafficking in the skies.

Airline and airport staff are working with ROUTES and TRAFFIC – the wildlife trade monitoring network – to complete trainings, improve protocols and raise awareness of how to identify and stop wildlife traffickers

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The pangolin lives in burrows or hollow trees, coming out at night to eat insects with its long tongue

Wildlife trafficking is a \$20 billion-a-year industry – the world's fourth most lucrative illegal activity

disguised as general passengers. Staff such as baggage handlers and cabin crew members spend more time with passengers and luggage than customs or security officers and can help act as the ears and eyes for alerting enforcement officials to suspicious behaviour.

In addition, over 85 organisations from across the transport sector, including Etihad Airways, have signed the United for Wildlife Transport Taskforce Buckingham Palace Declaration, which commits signatories to 11 commitments aimed at disrupting wildlife trafficking.

Illegal trade is a transport-intensive activity, and everyone involved has a role to play in combating these crimes. Wildlife trafficking directly threatens human health, international security and local livelihoods by fuelling corruption, backing organised criminal activities and degrading important environmental resources.

If we act now, it can make a difference in protecting global communities and sustaining wildlife for generations to come.



The pangolin, the world's most trafficked mammal

Pangolins – also called scaly anteaters – are considered the world's most trafficked mammal, with demand for its meat and scales. Although pangolin scales are made of similar material to human fingernails, some cultures believe them to have healing power; between May and August 2017, more than 1.7 tonnes of pangolin scales were seized in Malaysia alone.