

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and wildlife trafficking



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The ongoing Covid crisis has brought renewed attention to the global problem of wildlife trafficking. The World Health Organization has determined that COVID-19, just like SARS, Ebola, Bird Flu, and MERS, originated from an animal. In a recently published [Nature article](#), scientists claim that smuggling of pangolins in South-East Asia could be one of the triggers of the current crisis, as these smuggled animals carried viruses closely related to coronavirus. In fact, pangolins are the most-commonly illegally trafficked animal in South East Asia, used both as food and in traditional medicine.

The OECD Task Force on Countering Illicit Trade has been looking at the threat of wildlife trafficking. In a 2019 report [The Illegal Wildlife Trade in Southeast Asia](#), the OECD has reported that, after pangolins, the other most traded illegal wildlife products in South East Asia were good such as carved ivory, big cats, rhino horn and various live animals. The Task Force finds that several complex trade routes are used to smuggle wildlife products such as pangolins, and that Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam are the key transit countries for these illegal wildlife trade products. Illegally smuggled wildlife products arrive into the Southeast Asian region via air and sea, and subsequently transit through complex and organized routing processes. Poachers sell pangolins mostly in regional markets in Viet Nam and China where their consumption as food is appreciated, and their scales are used for medical purposes.

The OECD identifies three areas where greater institutional capacity is urgently needed to counter illicit trade, including illicit wildlife trafficking. A study [Governance Frameworks to Counter Illicit Trade](#), identifies three such areas including: (i) enhancing the effectiveness of penalties and sanctions, (ii) improving the screening of the rising volume of small shipments for illicit products, and (iii) eliminating criminal activities related to illicit trade that are carried out in free trade zones.

In addition, the OECD recommends that countries should develop a national strategy on countering the illegal wildlife trade, and budget sufficient resources to monitor the implementation of actions it calls for. Some key aspects of such strategy should include:

- Strengthening of co-operation between law enforcement and wildlife conservations authorities, through the drafting of strategic objectives and joint-investigations.
- Call for the conduct of anti-corruption investigations by police and anti-corruption authorities on the back of arrests for wildlife crimes to identify and prosecute related criminal networks.

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- Reinforce the engagement of financial intelligence units in follow-the-money investigations related to wildlife crime, both at national level and in co-operation with international partners.
- Foster international co-ordination and operations with relevant counterparts.

Through its Task Force on Countering Illicit trade, OECD works with member countries to address these gaps, and promote clean trade through enhanced transparency. For example, the 2019 [OECD Recommendation of the Council on Countering Illicit Trade: Enhancing Transparency in Free Trade Zones](#), designed to ensure transparency in FTZs, is part of the broader effort to counter illicit trade, including countering illicit wildlife trafficking.