

On World Environment Day: Profiting from Death, Devastation and Destruction is the Norm

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The scaly anteater is considered to be the most trafficked mammal on earth. Over a million of these have been taken from the wild in the past decade alone. The illegal trade in live apes, including chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans, is also rife, and many other species across the planet are being trafficked. It is estimated that rhino poaching in South Africa increased by as much as 8,000% between 2007 and 2014. For every live animal illegally taken from the wild, there are many more killed during capture and transport.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement between governments that aims to ensure international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Secretary-General of CITES, John Scanlon, states that the current wildlife crisis is not a natural phenomenon, but the direct result of people's actions. [He argues](#), "People are the cause of this serious threat to wildlife and people must be the solution, which also requires us to tackle human greed, ignorance and indifference."

The nature of the crisis Scanlon speaks of is clear. The vast illegal trade in wildlife products is pushing whole species towards extinction, including elephants, rhinos, big cats, gorillas and sea turtles, as well as helmeted hornbills, pangolins and wild orchids.

Driven by a growing demand for illegally sourced wildlife products, the illicit trade has escalated into a global crisis. Thousands of species are internationally traded and used by people in their daily lives. The United Nations Environment Programme runs the annual World Environment Day (WED), which is celebrated each year on 5 June. The event aims to raise global awareness and sets out action to protect nature.

Angola is currently trying to rebuild its elephant population, which has been decimated by a decades-long civil war, and is hosting the 2016 WED celebrations. However, poaching in Angola is threatening the efforts to increase the number of elephants, and the government is committed to revising its penal code to bring in tougher punishments for poachers.

The illegal wildlife trade, particularly the trade in ivory and rhino horn, is a major problem across Africa. The number of elephants killed on the continent in recent years is over 20,000 a year, out of a population of around 4,20,000 to 6,50,000. According to data from the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, as many as 1,00,000 elephants were killed between 2010 and 2012.

The population of forest elephants in Central and West Africa declined by an estimated 60% between 2002 and 2011. Official reports show that 1,215 rhinos were poached in South Africa alone in 2014 — this translates to 1 rhino killed every 8 hours. The rapid rise in rhino

poaching, from less than 20 in 2007, has been driven by the involvement of organised syndicates in the poaching and trafficking of wildlife products.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called on UN agencies and various partners to provide a co-ordinated response to wildlife crime and spread the message that there should be zero tolerance for poaching. As part of a wider approach, a strategy is being developed to create greater public awareness of the issue at hand, which will hopefully lead to reduced demand for wildlife products.

As commendable as these aims are, however, on their own they will not be enough to save certain species. For instance, from 2000 to 2009, Indonesia supplied more than half of the global palm oil market at an annual expense of some 340,000 hectares of Indonesian countryside. Planned expansion could wipe out the remaining natural habitat of several endangered species.

This is a ludicrous situation considering that Brazil and Indonesia spent over [100 times more in subsidies](#) to industries that cause deforestation than they received in international conservation aid from the UN to prevent it. The two countries gave over \$40bn in subsidies to the palm oil, timber, soy, beef and biofuels sectors between 2009 and 2012, some 126 times more than the \$346m they received to preserve their rain forests.

If we want to see how not to manage the world's wildlife and natural habitats, we need look no further than India, which is now the world's [leading importer of palm oil](#), accounting for around 15% of the global supply. India imports over two-thirds of its palm oil from Indonesia.

Until the mid-1990s, India was virtually self-sufficient in edible oils. Then import tariffs were reduced, leading to an influx of cheap (subsidised) edible oil imports that domestic farmers could not compete with. This was a deliberate policy that effectively devastated the home-grown edible oils sector (see [this](#)) and served the interests of palm oil growers and US grain and agriculture commodity company [Cargill](#), which helped write international trade rules to secure access to the Indian market on its terms.

According to Vandana Shiva, the WTO and the [TRIPS Agreement](#), written by Monsanto, and the [Agreement on Agriculture](#), written by Cargill, was the beginning of a new [corporate imperialism](#). It came as little surprise then that in 2013 India's Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar accused US companies of derailing the nation's oil seeds production programme.

Indonesia leads the world in global palm oil production, but palm oil plantations have too often replaced tropical forests, leading to the killing of endangered species and the uprooting of local communities as well as contributing to the release of climate-changing gases (see [this analysis](#)). Indonesia emits more greenhouse gases than any country besides China and the US and that's largely due to the production of palm oil.

The issue of palm oil is one example from the many that could be provided to highlight how corporate imperialism drives wildlife and habitat destruction across the globe. Whether it is in Indonesia, [Latin America](#) or elsewhere, transnational agribusiness – and the system of industrialised agriculture it promotes – fuels much of the destruction that we see.

Powerful corporations continue to regard themselves as the owners of people, the planet and the environment and as having the right – enshrined in laws and agreements they wrote – to exploit, kill and devastate for commercial gain. Without addressing the impacts and

nature of corporate greed and a wholly corrupt neoliberal capitalism that privileges corporations and profit ahead of people and conservation, regardless of any success in the area of the trafficking of wild animals or plants, much of the world's wildlife and biodiversity will remain under serious threat. They will increasingly find themselves hemmed into smaller and fewer reserves surrounded by commodity plantations, industries, urban sprawl and barren, degraded landscapes.

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