ANIMAL ORGAN TRAFFICKING: SILENT SLAUGHTER

Vedansh Garg*

ABSTRACT

Wildlife trafficking is now the fourth-largest crime in the world after arms, drugs, and human trafficking, with animal organ trafficking representing one of its most concealed and destructive branches. The market, fuelled by demand for luxury fashion, traditional medicines, and decorative products, contributes to biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and organised crime. India's expansive laws (the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, CITES, and the Export-Import (EXIM) Policy) bring some relief to this issue, but this potential could be stifled through enforcement and implementation. The seizures at airports throughout the country, as well as at international airports and outside markets in Kolkata, reveal a lack of strict law enforcement capabilities. The scale and nature of this crisis are evident in the cases of pangolin scales and tiger skins, elephant tusks and shark fins, as well as marine species. The trade is not only pushing endangered species to extinction, but also hindering international conservation efforts and facilitating wider criminal conspiracy schemes. A multi-pronged defence against animal organ trafficking must include the use of cutting-edge technology, public education, scientific observation tools, alternative animal-based supplies, and community-based initiatives. Without concerted global action, this illicit transnational trade will persist in causing devastating havoc to ecological systems and will undermine sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Wildlife Trafficking, Animal Organ Trafficking, Demand, Biodiversity Loss, Organised Crime.

INTRODUCTION

Wildlife trafficking is now the fourth-largest crime in the world after arms, drugs, and human trafficking; not only is it now in fact associated with some other serious crimes like fraud,

*BBA LLB, FOURTH YEAR, VIVEKANANDA INSTITUTE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES.

money laundering, and corruption.[1] Animal organ trafficking arising from the illegal wildlife trade is a relatively marginal and worrying aspect of the illicit wildlife trade that almost always goes unnoticed within the global black market. This is a common and lucrative system that results in much destruction of wildlife biodiversity and ecosystems through the trafficking of live animals (both domestic and pets) from various sources, including medicinal, sport, and illegal livestock as animal organs.

This market is driven by demand. Each species is targeted for a different purpose — elephant tusks for their ivory, rhino horns ground into powder for their purported medicinal uses, tiger bones used in tonics, shark fins incorporated into pricey soups, bear bile, and pangolin scales for traditional remedies. The repercussions are staggering. The species already teetering on the brink are driven even closer to extinction. Removing them from the wild destabilises entire ecosystems — predator-meets-prey interactions break down, some populations explode exponentially out of control, and others die out completely. What seems to be a single illegal transaction has ripple effects across forests, the oceans, and savannahs.

The crime extends beyond the trafficking of animals. And these are precisely the smuggling routes of tusks, horns, and bones at the same time that they are transporting weapons, narcotics, and people. The trafficking in animal organs operates within a worldwide organised crime network and is an environmental disaster, but a social, economic, and political one too.[2]

SOME OF THE MAJOR INCIDENTS OF SEIZURE IN INDIA

In the street corners of Kolkata's Barabazar, a shopfront huckster peddling "Tantra" products hid a dark backstory. In response to a tip-off, Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) officials went undercover as buyers and uncovered one of the most disturbing incidents of animal organ trafficking in the last few years. Two vendors, Bindeshwari Sau and Mohan, were arrested for what investigators found to be hidden occult goods that were actually trafficked wildlife. The haul was staggering: at least 60 monitor lizards' penises, 10 wild boar teeth, and 250 sea fans

[1] Saket Badola and Astha Gautam, '*High Flying: Insight Into Wildlife Trafficking Through India's Airports*' (TRAFFIC, 30 March 2022) https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/17503/high_flying_briefing_paper.pdf accessed 5 September 2025

[2] Ahana Bhattacharya, 'Wildlife organ trafficking ring under the guise of selling Tantra practice materials busted in Kolkata, two arrested' (The CSR Journal, 25 July 2025) https://thecsrjournal.in/wildlife-organ-trafficking-selling-tantra-practice-materials-kolkata-two-arrested/ accessed 5 September 2025

(Gorgonia ventalina) — the latter worth lakhs of rupees thanks to their use in black magic rituals. Wildlife derivatives have been illegally seized at Indian airports in many cases:

Three skins of the Tiger (Panthera tigris), four tusks of the Elephant (Elephas maximus), and 49 kg of feathers of the Indian Peafowl (Pavo cristatus) are protected under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act.

Up to 550 kg of Pangolin (Manis spp.) scales, one of the most threatened and trafficked animals, are considered protected animals in India and recognised under the CITES Convention (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna).

Marine fauna, including 373 pieces and 122 kg of Sea Cucumbers, 114 kg of Organ Pipe Coral (Tubipora musica), 36.3 kg of Sea Horses (Hippocampus spp.), and 532 kg of Green Turban (Turbo marmoratus) — all protected under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act.

Shark fins weighing 123.5 kg, a luxury item in the Southeast Asian food market, are selling at a high price; this product can only be exported under an export ban imposed by India's EXIM policy.

Bags made from skin from a monitor lizard and shawls, knitted, from the wool of the Tibetan Antelope (Pantholops hodgsonii) — a species recognised locally as Chiru.[3]

THE MARKETS FUELING THE GLOBAL ANIMAL ORGAN TRADE

Fashion: Wildlife has been interwoven into the fashion industry for a considerable time. The demand for animal products persists in luxury goods, from fur coats and crocodile handbags to python belts and alligator shoes. Consequently, it is no surprise that fashion companies rank among the top consumers of illegal wildlife trade (IWT). Although legal fur farming has decreased reliance on poached pelts, reptile skins tell a different story. In nations like Kenya, Nile crocodiles are cultivated legally; however, the export of python skins frequently surpasses breeding facility capacities, indicating that many are likely sourced from the wild. A reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*) requires years to mature to an appropriate size for leather production, rendering the breeding and feeding process economically unfeasible for farmers until they reach slaughter weight. Thus, wild capture remains prevalent. While fur constitutes nearly 90% of commodities traded legally within the fashion sector, illegal trade predominantly

[3] Badola and Gautam (n 1)

involves reptile skins used for leather goods. U.S. seizure records from 2003 to 2013 reveal a striking trend: six genera—including pythons, crocodiles, and monitor lizards—accounted for over 80% of wildlife confiscations related to fashion. Pythons alone were seized more than twice as frequently as any other species. Although recent trends indicate a slight decrease in wildlife trade linked to fashion, the exploitation of reptiles continues to be significant.

Traditional Medicine: This relates to traditional medicine that informs wildlife trafficking, which is a very complex profession that forms an internal part of the cultures and belief systems. It combines knowledge and beliefs passed down through generations to improve health, cure diseases, and perhaps even prevent calamity. Although they often are related to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) or similar Asian-based techniques, these products are also used worldwide. They are found on a variety of continents, ranging from Africa to the Caribbean, Latin America, Australia, Europe, and North America. The World Health Organisation estimates that approximately a quarter of modern medicines are from traditional herbal remedies. But demand reaches well beyond plant-based medicine; more than 500 different animal species are exploited for medicinal purposes worldwide. Bear bile, pangolin scales, tiger bones, and rhino horns are just some of the products sold as cures despite vast scientific evidence to the contrary. This is particularly troubling because polls have revealed that almost half of Chinese consumers have reported eating products that say they contain tiger parts, even when they know they are illegal. Wild harvesting outstrips cultivation by orders of magnitude and, as a result, is one of the great threats to biodiversity: animals are responsible for approximately 13 per cent of traditional medicines consumed in China. Notably absent in many tested animal-based traditional remedies—such as tiger plasters and pills—are detectable traces of tiger DNA. CITES has noted an evolving trend regarding tiger product demand; what once primarily motivated consumption for medicinal purposes is increasingly leaning towards use as extravagant items signifying economic status. This unyielding demand obscures distinctions between cultural customs and organised exploitation.

Decorations, Accessories, and Jewellery: The illegal wildlife trade extends beyond fashion or medicine; it also adorns homes with decorations and fills jewellery boxes while supplying tourist shops with souvenirs. From hunting trophies and exotic ornaments to luxuriant furniture crafted out of rare woods, the wildlife-related decorations market is both vast and extremely harmful. That choice is daunting: Elephant footstools, turtle shell bangles, tiger skins, and talismans formed from animal parts have long been on black markets. Souvenirs such as pinned

butterflies or coral ornaments are touted as cultural objects for potential buyers to purchase under misleading terms. Ivory is one common instance and is most common and used in jewellery and carved decorations—ivory products accounted for nearly one third of all wildlife seizures worldwide between 2009 and 2018, according to data released by the U.N. Despite decades of being vilified for its use, the appeal of ivory carvings continues to be one of the big motives for poaching. But the plant kingdom faces serious threats, too. The demand for orchids is high — orchids comprise more than 85% of the illicit ornamental plant trade. Behind every trinket, carving, or piece of furniture is a sobering reality: ecosystems ravaged, species pushed to extinction, and criminal enterprises profiting off nature's devastation.[4]

THE WAY FORWARD: COMBATING ANIMAL ORGAN TRAFFICKING

Harnessing Technology: Technology is taking control of the country in Kenya to combat poaching. But in 2020, there were no rhino poaching events in this country--thankful, in part, for some of the more sophisticated surveillance equipment. At conservancies such as Ol Pejeta and Solio Game Reserve, the introduction of state-of-the-art thermal cameras equipped with night vision and artificial intelligence (also described as the FLIR system) has already transformed ranger patrols. Installed in high-risk areas, such cameras monitor the movement of humans, animals, or vehicles at night and offer immediate alerts — enabling staffers to nip poachers before they strike. Public education campaigns remain critical.[5]

Educating the Public: Education campaigns are still hugely important. Consumers need to be educated on the ecological and ethical costs of buying animal parts, reducing the demand for products at source, such as rhino horn, pangolin scales, or bear bile.

Enhanced Monitoring: For instance, scientific tools, using DNA barcoding technology, can aid the authorities in finding and tracing trafficked organs back to their origin. It will also help the prosecution effort work better, and at least help to map out trafficking networks.

Promoting Alternatives: Supporting those alternatives, like those herbal substitutes for bear bile or tiger bone, may also help to change consumer behaviour in terms of wildlife

[4] Annika Mozer and Stefan Prost, 'An introduction to illegal wildlife trade and its effects on biodiversity and society' (2023) 3 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666937423000021?via%3Dihub accessed 6 September 2025

[5] Whitney Kent, 'How thermal cameras and AI are powering rhino conservation success in Kenya' (World Wildlife Fund, 14 May 2025) <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/how-thermal-cameras-and-ai-are-powering-rhino-conservation-success-in-kenya> accessed 10 September 2025

exploitation. Sustainable alternatives to such methods will also have better health, safety, and environmental benefits than those of conventional animal feedstocks.

Empowering Local Communities: Communities that are on the front lines of wildlife habitat protection will benefit enormously. Only when the locals are trained, equipped, and incentivised via ecotourism income can they save this wonderful environment, which feeds us. Their role is not to participate in its exploitation but to protect the things in it that sustain their livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

On paper, India does have some of the strongest laws guarding its wildlife. The Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 prohibits the illegal hunting, trade, and use of native species, as well as the categorisation of animals into different Schedule groups (the top priority of protected status). It is regulated around the world through the CITES Convention (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), where species are identified in three appendices for protection from the destruction of native or exotic species by trafficking them. Even more specifically, India's Export-Import (EXIM) Policy bans the importation and export of certain wild animals and their derivatives and requires all CITES-listed wildlife to be strictly followed. The framework is watertight on paper. But reality is a bit different. Yet even within these protections, wildlife trafficking flourishes. TRAFFIC analysis shows smuggling agents have started using airports to traffic wildlife over a wider variety of illegal wildlife corridors. Air travel — speedy and distant — is fast becoming one of the easiest and cheapest routes and increasingly the least monitored for a trafficker. It usually infiltrates contraband, from ivory to exotic pets, that is stored in passenger luggage or packaged in freight shipments. One thing is for sure: What the authorities catch is only the tip of the iceberg, as the study demonstrates. Much of the illegal wildlife trade remains unreported and unchallenged, leaving criminals as far above the law as possible. Not only is the trafficking of animal organs an environmental threat, but when you consider the further consequences, it requires a crackdown on governance, law enforcement, and international cooperation. Each horn, tusk, or scale taken represents decades of failed efforts to defend those animals and discourage appetite. It is damaging ecosystems, speeds the fates of at-risk stocks, and enables organised crime networks that are long after the animal wildlife. It was more than just a paper call for the law to be altered, experts said. The stronger enforcement regimes and improved international cooperation countries have, which raises consumer awareness, and the cheaper it will be to

decrease demand and dismantle trafficking. The message is apparent: without challenge, the illicit trade in animal organs is only going to wreak greater havoc on biodiversity and endanger any attempt at conservation. Responding appropriately does involve saving animals, but it is also the key to preserving ecosystems and forging a future that is safe, healthy, and sustainable for new generations.[6]

[6] Badola and Gautam (n 1)