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**MEDIA RELEASE**

**Measures to curb COVID-19 impact wildlife trafficking but organised criminal networks are still active and gearing up to increase operations, says new report**

The Hague, the Netherlands, 29 April 2020

The [Wildlife Justice Commission](#) has released today an assessment on the impact that global measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 are having on wildlife trafficking dynamics. The report, *Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on wildlife trafficking*, presents the organisation's findings from the trade between January and April 2020 and shows that the trafficking continues despite restrictions, albeit at a reduced scale, and that high-level criminal networks are actively seeking workarounds from the current blockages to resume operations to previous levels.

Intelligence collected by the Wildlife Justice Commission highlights that border closures and travel restrictions are having a significant effect on wildlife trafficking operations, especially in Asia, where traders are facing challenges to access Chinese markets and sell stock. Difficulties transporting ivory into China are resulting in the stockpiling of large quantities of raw ivory in Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia. This stockpiling trend in ivory trafficking, caused by the ivory ban in China (1) and increased law enforcement pressure in China and elsewhere, was already identified in 2019 (2) and has been exacerbated since January.

The Wildlife Justice Commission also believes that stockpiling of large quantities of pangolin scales is now occurring in Vietnam. During the first three months of 2020, Vietnamese traders offered more than 22 tons of pangolin scales to Wildlife Justice Commission investigators. With the growing difficulties and reduced profitability in ivory trade, pangolin scales could be substituting ivory in the illegal market in China (3).

The Wildlife Justice Commission has also observed changes in transportation methods of wildlife contraband. Security measures on air transport have impacted criminal dynamics, as traffickers are not guaranteed that the shipment or courier will arrive at their (air)port of choice. Sea and road transport remain as alternative options; products are still arriving or due to arrive via sea as some may have been sent pre-lockdown, as seizures have illustrated (4). "Brokers have been found to be keeping abreast of travel restrictions and are closely following developments at the Chinese border," says Sarah Stoner, Director of Intelligence at the Wildlife Justice Commission. China's law enforcement agencies have reported several seizures of wildlife commodities transported by road from Vietnam (5).

A major concern we are still assessing is that poaching incidents may increase during the lockdown period, as criminal networks will try to take advantage of the closing of parks, perceiving a reduced presence of law enforcement, now dealing with the COVID-19 emergency. "We are in receipt of intelligence that known poaching organisers operating across Southern Africa are intending to take advantage of the current situation," says Stoner.

"It is clear that COVID-19 prevention measures have affected wildlife trafficking operations," says Stoner. "It is likely that the current lull will only be temporary, as brokers have already made clear that they intend on returning their operations to previous levels as soon as possible. The stockpiling of huge quantities of wildlife





products in many of the key countries concerned presents investigative opportunities for law enforcement and there is an expectation that the movement of high-value wildlife commodities will resume, even at intensified levels, once restrictions are lifted.”

*The [Wildlife Justice Commission](#) operates globally to disrupt and help dismantle organised transnational criminal networks trading in wildlife, timber and fish. We do this by collecting evidence and turning it into accountability.*

**Notes to editors:**

- (1) China’s domestic ivory trade ban was brought into force on 1 January 2018.
- (2) Wildlife Justice Commission 2019, [Snapshot Analysis: Ivory Smuggling 2015-2019, Concealment, Routes and Transportation Methods](#)
- (3) Wildlife Justice Commission 2019, [Scaling Up: The Rapid Growth in the Industrial Scale Trafficking of Pangolin Scales \(2016-2019\)](#)
- (4) <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/02/rm78mil-of-pangolin-scales-seized>
- (5) Chinese law enforcement authorities have reported a range of wildlife seizures made during the first quarter of 2020. One case involved the seizure of 820 kg of pangolin scales and the arrest of nine alleged pangolin smugglers on 9 March 2020 in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Area and Anhui Province [https://k.sina.cn/article\\_6539404397\\_m185c7646d02000n01w.html](https://k.sina.cn/article_6539404397_m185c7646d02000n01w.html)

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