



Wildlife Justice
Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ah Nam: The Downfall of Vietnam's Wolf of Wall Street

September 2022

Acknowledgement

The information presented in the following pages is the culmination of three years of work, only made possible thanks to your generous donations. Flexible funding in support of these operations has enabled us to increase capacity and cover the cost of such a long-term investigation.

The Wildlife Justice Commission is sincerely grateful to the Nationale Postcode Loterij, Arcadia, a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, the Oak Foundation, the Adessium Foundation, the Elephant Crisis Fund, the Fred Foundation, and to our major donors who wish to remain anonymous.



Executive Summary

From humble beginnings as a low-level wildlife trader in 2016, Nguyen Van Nam rose to prominence rapidly. By 2019 he had asserted his position as one of Vietnam's top wildlife criminals, the lead broker for a sophisticated criminal network responsible for trafficking vast quantities of elephant ivory and rhino horn from Africa to China via Vietnam. However, he is now languishing in prison, having fallen prey to his own arrogance, poor criminal tradecraft, and effective police work.

Nguyen Van Nam was arrested in Hanoi on 30 September 2019 in connection with the illegal trade of 204 kg of ivory; and on 16 July 2020 was convicted and sentenced to 11 years in prison.¹ The deceptively small quantity of ivory he was in possession of belies the volume of wildlife products he is known to have trafficked during the three years he was under investigation by the Wildlife Justice Commission. In that time, the Wildlife Justice Commission documented his access to a minimum of 17.6 tonnes of raw ivory valued at more than USD 9 million, and 477 kg of rhino horn valued at more than USD 8 million, **based only on what operatives directly observed and verified during that period.** This quantity of product is estimated to equate to the killing of approximately 1,760 elephants and more than 106 rhinos,² and represents only a fraction of what he is likely to have trafficked. To illustrate the level Nguyen Van Nam operated at, in August 2017 he provided an undercover operative with an image of 76 rhino horns. This was the largest number of raw

rhino horns the Wildlife Justice Commission has ever been offered in one single transaction.

The trial received limited media coverage both within and outside of Vietnam, the significance of the event going largely unnoticed. However, the arrest and imprisonment of Nguyen Van Nam represents a meaningful and encouraging step forward for Vietnam's law enforcement authorities in combating organised wildlife crime. The removal of one of the most prolific wildlife traffickers has not only severely disrupted his criminal network, but due to the major role Vietnam plays in the international illegal wildlife trade, the impact has extended across the region and globally.

The Wildlife Justice Commission initiated Operation Medusa in 2016 to delve into the illegal ivory and rhino horn trade in Vietnam and gain a deeper insight into the Africa-Asia supply chain. Nguyen Van Nam (hereafter referred to by his criminal alias Ah Nam) was first introduced to Wildlife Justice Commission operatives in June 2016, and by January 2017 he had become the key subject focus of Operation Medusa and related investigations due to his growing criminal role.

The Wildlife Justice Commission's investigations into Ah Nam and his network were intensive, resulting in the collection of a wealth of intelligence and evidence. Intelligence on Ah Nam and his key associate Duong Van Phong (hereafter referred to by his criminal alias Ah Phong) was compiled in a detailed

¹ <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/204-kg-ivory-haul-lands-three-traders-in-jail-4132021.html>

² Based on the estimated average weight per tusk of 5 kg, and therefore 10 kg of ivory (one pair of tusks) is equivalent to one elephant. Rhinos are estimated to carry 4.5 kg of horn each, based on an average of 4 kg for the front horn and 0.5 kg for the back horn (if the rhino species grows a back horn).

Case File and provided to the Vietnam Environmental Crime Police and the Anti-Smuggling Bureau of China Customs in December 2017. The two men were partners in crime for the entire period of the investigation and were eventually arrested and convicted together. During the course of operations to infiltrate and dismantle the network, at least 15 individuals were arrested in Vietnam – 13 of whom have been imprisoned (including Ah Nam and Ah Phong), and two were released without charges – and at least 1,632 kg of ivory and 18 rhino horns were seized. Further arrests and wildlife seizures relating to Ah Nam's network were also made in China and Malaysia, showing the international reach and consequences of his operations.

Although valuable opportunities were missed to investigate the illicit financial flows associated with Ah Nam's criminal activities, his conviction and the heavy penalty nevertheless sends an important message: the risk-reward ratio for wildlife crime is beginning to change in Vietnam. This has also carried positive implications more broadly in the region and globally, due to the key role of Vietnam in the illegal wildlife trade. Analysis of published court judgements in China shows that additional cases linked to Ah Nam have continued to be prosecuted and convicted, while the Wildlife Justice Commission's investigations have found many Vietnamese traders are no longer operating due to the increased fear of arrest and difficulties in smuggling products across the border into China.

Now that the case against Ah Nam is closed and other related investigations and court matters are finalised, this report aims to bring some of that intelligence to light. Examination of Ah Nam's profile is useful to expose key aspects of the criminal dynamics of ivory and rhino horn trafficking in Vietnam and to recognise the efforts of Vietnamese law enforcement authorities in bringing Ah Nam to justice.

Ah Nam investigation outcomes



3-year investigation



Documented Ah Nam's access to over **USD 17 million** worth of wildlife products



Product quantity equated to the killing over **1,760 elephants** and more than **106 rhinos**



Law enforcement agencies in three countries made **15 wildlife seizures** connected to Ah Nam's network



Estimated **USD 5.57 million** worth of wildlife products seized, including:
 → **3,892 kg** of ivory
 → **192.9 kg** of rhino horns
 → **28.5 kg** of pangolin scales



47 individuals imprisoned, sentences ranging from 9 months to 15 years



49 individuals arrested

Ah Nam Investigation Timeline

The following timeline illustrates the key product sightings, seizures, and arrests related to Ah Nam's network that occurred in Vietnam during the Wildlife Justice Commission's investigation.



WJC sighting of 440 kg of ivory in Bai Uyen village.
The WJC's first encounter with Ah Nam and Ah Phong.

JUN 2016



Police seize 250 kg of ivory in Nhi Khe village; four suspects arrested.

NOV 2016



WJC sighting of 20.9 kg of rhino horn in Hanoi.

APR 2017



Record quantity of rhino horns available (76 horns).

AUG 2017



WJC sighting of 600 kg of ivory in Khanh Ha village.
Police seize 971 kg of ivory; four suspects arrested.

FEB 2018



Police seize 204 kg of ivory in Hanoi.



Ah Nam, Ah Phong, and Nguyen Van Hung (Ah Nam's cousin) are arrested.

SEP 2019

OCT 2016

WJC sighting of 480 kg of ivory in Nhi Khe village.



DEC 2016

WJC sighting of 8 ivory tusks in Hanoi.
Cancelled rhino horn sighting.



MAY 2017

WJC sighting of 28.5 kg of rhino horn in Hanoi.
Police seize 13.9 kg of rhino horn (18 horns); one suspect arrested.



DEC 2017

The WJC provides a confidential Case File to Vietnam Environmental Crime Police.



JUN 2019

WJC sighting of 200 kg of ivory in Hanoi.
Police seize 207 kg of ivory; three suspects arrested.



JUL 2020



Ah Nam, Ah Phong, and Nguyen Van Hung convicted; sentenced to prison.



Law enforcement and legal experts fighting transnational organised wildlife crime.



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