



Tackling Illegal Wildlife Trade in the Eastern Himalayas

WWF solutions through people, partners and policies

Few places on Earth can match the breathtaking splendor of the Eastern Himalayas. The land boasts the world's highest mountain peaks and tallest grasslands, tranquil forests, savannas and rich alpine meadows. These diverse habitats are home to irreplaceable species, many under threat of extinction, including Bengal tigers, greater one-horned rhinos, Asian elephants, snow leopards and red pandas.

The Eastern Himalayas is also home to a fast-growing human population that is dependent on the region's natural resources. Agricultural expansion and uncontrolled grazing are some of the unsustainable practices that have taken a toll on the land. Global climate change is affecting the Himalayas as well, with devastating changes in freshwater flows that affect all of South Asia. However, illegal wildlife trade poses the greatest threat, causing already shrinking species populations to decline even more rapidly.

In this region almost all wildlife trade is illegal and unsustainable, driven by voracious consumer demand. Although international trade in them is banned, rhino horns and tiger skins are among the products sold across Asia, Europe and North America, primarily for use in traditional Chinese medicine and as luxury goods among the newly affluent. This large-scale demand has led to the Eastern Himalayas emerging as a major source and supply route for organized wildlife crime. Traders yield high profit margins with a low risk of being caught.



The decline and loss of flagship species affects not only the balance of nature, but also the livelihoods of people who depend on intact ecosystems. WWF works closely with government officials to protect the landscape, and involves local communities in creating sustainable approaches to economic development.

WWF Results

- **1970s:** Initiated Project Tiger, securing government commitment to species protection and establishing tiger reserves.
- **1980s:** Reestablished the rhino population by translocating rhinos from Chitwan to Bardia National Park in Nepal.
- **1991:** Involved in the conceptualizing and launching of the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environment Conservation, the first of its kind in the world.
- **1993:** Assisted the Bhutanese government in the revision of a national system of protected areas to include all the major representative ecosystems of the country.
- **2000:** Established network of biological corridors, connecting protected areas in Nepal, Northeast India and Bhutan.
- **2006:** Influenced Nepal's government to turn over to local communities the conservation of the wildlife and habitats surrounding Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain.
- **Today:** We continue to work from grassroots to government levels to secure a future for wildlife and people.

Photo credits. Clockwise from top: Women harvesting rice on the outskirts of Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal – © Michel Gunther / WWF-Canon; Indian tiger – © Martin Harvey / WWF-Canon; Two young Indian rhinos – © Michel Gunther / WWF-Canon.

EASTERN HIMALAYAS

ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE

Targets



Tigers

Tigers continue to be killed because their body parts can be sold for high prices by smugglers and medicinal traders.



Rhinos

Rhino horns are valuable ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine to treat fever, delirium, high blood pressure and other ailments.



Red Pandas

Red pandas are prized for their beautiful fur, making them victims of illegal wildlife trade.



An Organized Crime

Illegal wildlife trade is a multibillion dollar business. Organized criminal networks operate across the Eastern Himalayas, aided by corruption, poverty and weak laws. The complex systems used by the traders begin with gathering local intelligence and end with a very profitable final sale, almost always in another part of the world.

Bengal tigers and greater one-horned rhinos are the prime targets in trade operations. The process begins with the recruitment of a local individual who is familiar with the forest and location of the animal. These details are then passed to a poacher who sets up a trap. After a rhino is killed, the horn is sawn off and the carcass is usually buried. When a tiger is killed, a separate group cures the skin, packs the meat, and stores the bones and claws – all at the site of the killing.

Locals who know the border areas are paid to transport the illegal wildlife products. After the illegal wildlife reaches the country of demand, the product is sold to the highest bidder. Money from the transaction is laundered, often within federal tax and revenue agencies, before beginning the next cycle of supply and demand.

Breaking the Cycle

There are no simple solutions to something as complex as illegal wildlife trade. For over four decades, WWF has embraced a multipronged approach that targets the critical areas of the cycle.

Locally, we work with communities on antipoaching activities and intelligence networks that have already successfully nabbed many poachers. WWF has also partnered with national governments to strengthen wildlife laws and their enforcement, and funded antipoaching equipment and operations in protected areas.

As a global conservation organization, we have also campaigned against the demand for illegal wildlife trade in various countries and contributed to important international conventions on the issue.

Results on the Ground

Operation Unicornis

Chitwan National Park is a magical place, nestled in the Terai grasslands and tucked away in the shadow of the Himalayas. For nearly 40 years, WWF helped keep rhino poaching at low numbers throughout Nepal. But due to an armed rebellion, poaching in Chitwan increased dramatically in the late 1990s.

As anticipated, after the conflict ended in 2004, the number of rhinos being poached declined. So it was a shock when 13 rhinos were poached in 2005, and 20 more were lost a year later. WWF decided to take a new approach to the ongoing problem by developing Operation Unicornis – a plan for rhino protection through government support and community mobilization.

WWF identified areas with weak security arrangements and pulled together government and community members to carry out solutions. The number of security posts was increased from 8 to 20, and former Army and police members patrolled outside the protected area. Local youths volunteered to guard individual rhinos through the night. WWF relayed the information collected by these allies to key government departments so they could take action where needed.

The number of rhinos poached in and around Chitwan in 2007 fell to only one. WWF is now expanding Operation Unicornis to protect the diminishing rhino population in Bardia National Park, the second-largest stronghold for rhinos in Nepal.

Operation Tigris

In 2005, 20 to 50 tigers were living within Nepal's Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve, but poaching was identified as the cause of declining numbers. Armed international gangs were killing the tigers and smuggling them to China, where a lucrative black market exists for tiger bones, teeth and internal organs. In 2007, a 30 percent decline in the tiger population was recorded. A sustainable population in the reserve is crucial for maintaining the genetic diversity of tigers in the region. So, building on the success of Operation Unicornis, WWF took action to combat Suklaphanta's tiger crisis.

Through funding for patrols, WWF strengthened the reserve staff and set up new posts in strategic locations. Community members raised awareness about poaching in the villages and pressured government officials to take immediate action. WWF brought together officials from Nepal and India to secure an agreement on joint patrolling along the border, to stop poachers from taking advantage of the porous international boundaries.

Poachers and traders have been arrested, yielding encouraging results. Through the help of conservationists, communities and authorities, WWF remains committed to ensuring the roar of the tiger is never silenced in Nepal's Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve.

Results in Action



Chitwan National Park, Nepal

Greater one-horned rhinos graze in the Baghmara Community Forest outside Chitwan National Park in Nepal. In the forest, ecotourism serves as one way to bring people and nature together. Local people work hard to protect the rhinos and earn money by taking tourists on elephant-back to see them. The communities surrounding Chitwan National Park are pivotal in conserving the rhino population.



Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve, Nepal

Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve lies in the Terai Arc Landscape in the far-western part of Nepal and covers an area less than half the size of New York City. As the tiger population started to decline there, WWF set up camera traps – a noninvasive way to estimate the number of tigers in the reserve by taking pictures when movement is sensed. Ironically, poachers were photographed through these traps.



Global Solutions

CITES

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is a treaty administered by the United Nations to ensure that international trade in wild plants and animals does not threaten their survival. CITES includes varying degrees of protection to more than 30,000 species of animals and plants, whether they are traded as live specimens or as products such as fur coats or dried herbs.

CITES is an international agreement to which countries adhere voluntarily. It does not take the place of national laws, but provides a framework to guide countries as they adopt their own domestic legislation.

TRAFFIC

The wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC works to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature. A joint program of IUCN and WWF, TRAFFIC does groundbreaking work on species trade. Through its policy work, TRAFFIC impacts market dynamics, always seeking solutions to the threats of illegal trade. TRAFFIC also works closely with CITES to support the protection of animals and plants sold on the international marketplace.



A Collaborative Effort

In February 2008, government representatives from eight countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—committed to tackling illegal wildlife trade on a regional level. This South Asia Wildlife Trade initiative was a crucial step in taking on a global challenge. Through this effort agencies are able to combine information and resources such as early warning systems, invest in effective legislation, and improve enforcement of policies and laws. WWF is proud to have been part of this initiative right from its inception, and has extended both technical and financial support to various governments.

WWF takes great satisfaction in the tremendous conservation achievements made in the Eastern Himalayas since we first started our work there in the 1960s. We remain committed to saving this truly unique piece of the world's natural heritage by working with partners from the local to the national level.



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