

The Illegal Wildlife Trade is Flourishing on Facebook

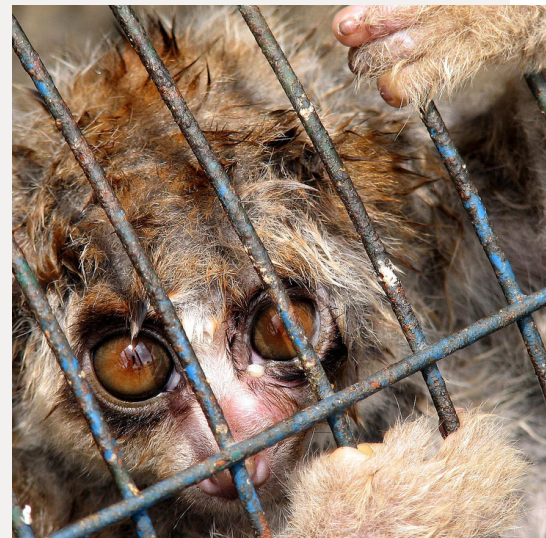
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Illegal wildlife trade of live specimens and their products is driving many endangered species to the brink of extinction. This illegal trade has reached the Internet, and is one of the cybercrime activities being investigated by national and international police bodies. Before the Internet, buyers would have had to go out to a store or market, or travel overseas, to find illegal wildlife specimens or their products for sale. Today illegal wildlife trade can be carried out over social networks. The largest of these is Facebook.

Except in countries such as China where it is banned, Facebook is the most popular social network worldwide, with 2.19 billion monthly active users.¹ The top 10 countries with the most Facebook users are:

India	270 million
United States	240 million
Indonesia	140 million
Brazil	130 million
México	85 million
Philippines	69 million
Vietnam	58 million
Thailand	52 million
Turkey	52 million
United Kingdom	45 million²

Facebook has brought illegal wildlife trade into the homes of billions of users, and this trade is booming. Today, tens of thousands of wildlife specimens worldwide are traded illegally on Facebook.³

In May 2018, The Species Survival Network (SSN) conducted an informal survey of its Member Organizations, who are experts on illegal wildlife trade in their countries, to get an indication of the status of illegal wildlife trade on Facebook. Responses included information about 13 countries (USA/Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, South Africa, Germany, India, Hong Kong SAR and Vietnam).

In general, Facebook personal, open group, closed group, and business pages are all being used to sell illegal wildlife in the countries for which information was obtained. Responses indicated that, to our respondents' knowledge, users are offering illegal wildlife for sale on personal Facebook pages in all countries surveyed except India and Chile, on open group pages in all countries about which information was received except India, Chile, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, and on closed group pages in all countries except Honduras (Chile could not be confirmed). Business pages are used to sell illegal wildlife in all countries except Costa Rica, Chile, Honduras, Guatemala, and India (Peru could not be confirmed).

Many of the species being traded illegally on Facebook are classified as Endangered or Vulnerable internationally (IUCN Red List) or nationally (official country lists). Due to its notoriety, illegal trade in products such as elephant ivory, rhino horn, and tiger bone dominates the attention of the media,⁴ and even of government authorities.⁵ Nevertheless, it appears that trade in live wildlife was the most prevalent category in most countries surveyed, except for Hong Kong SAR, South Africa, Costa Rica, USA, and Canada where trade in wildlife products is equally prevalent, and in Vietnam where it is the most prevalent. It appears that animals are the most abundant species being sold in all countries, except for South Africa and Chile where plant sales are equally abundant.

¹ <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

² <http://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>

³ <http://www.traffic.org/home/2018/1/19/facebook-dominates-as-the-main-market-place-for-illegal-live.html>

⁴ <http://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/10/facebook-puts-ads-on-pages-illegally-selling-animal-parts.html>; <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/nov/14/wildlife-smugglers-using-facebook-sell-ivory-rhino-horn>

⁵ CRS International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy July 23, 2013; CRS Report for Congress International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy March 3, 2008

Hundreds of species are being traded on Facebook pages, but the species involved vary considerably from country to country. Examples of species commonly traded on Facebook in the countries from which information is available are listed below (note that because not all sellers use precise names it is not always possible to determine which exact species are being traded):

- » **Chile**
birds, tarantulas, reptiles, cacti
- » **Costa Rica**
songbirds, reptiles in general (snakes, lizards), amphibians (frogs), tarantulas
- » **Germany**
From common species such as Python regius or Boa constrictor to rarities (i.e. endangered and/or endemic species) such as Morelet's tree frog, sword-tailed newt, arboreal alligator lizards, psychedelic gecko, Burmese and Indian star tortoise, armadillo girdled lizard, hornless adder, golden lancehead, barbary macaque, slow loris, ring-tailed coati, threatened species of cacti and orchid.
- » **Guatemala**
parrots, iguanas
- » **Honduras**
parrots, toucans, spider monkeys
- » **Hong Kong SAR**
stingrays, various lizards, turtles
- » **India**
star tortoise, parakeets, munias, shikra, red sand boa
- » **Mexico**
military macaw, yellow-headed parrot, white-fronted parrot, yellow-cheeked parrot, orange-fronted parakeet, peregrine falcon, American kestrel, barn owl, great horned owl, spiny-tailed iguana, desert tortoise, boa snake, Morelet's crocodile, king snake, jaguar, spider monkey, howler monkey, grey fox, coatimundi, tarantulas, tiger, lion, monkeys, lemurs, pythons, tortoises
- » **Peru**
squirrel monkeys, tamarins, capuchin monkeys, parrots
- » **South Africa**
caracal, serval, hedgehogs, tenrecs, meerkats, reptiles, arachnids, parrots, tropical fish, primates, banded mongoose, genets, bushbabies, plants
- » **USA/Canada**
macaques, lions, macaws, grey parrot, iguana
- » **Vietnam**
African elephant ivory, moon bear bile, pangolin scales, boar tusks, crocodile skins

Even though illegal trade in wildlife is a crime punishable by imprisonment in all countries surveyed, we believe that the legal framework in each country is not sufficiently comprehensive to put a stop to the illegal sales of wildlife on the Internet, except possibly in Hong Kong SAR. For example, in Mexico, Internet trade is

not regulated and offering illegal wildlife for sale on the Internet is not a crime.⁶ It appears that all of these countries' authorities may be unable to stop illegal wildlife trade on Facebook. Some Members consulted consider that it is more difficult to stop illegal wildlife trade on Facebook than in pet stores, markets, or any other outlet, except in Hong Kong, USA, and Canada where some SSN Members can alert authorities to illegal trade on Facebook and authorities are responsive.

In most of the countries for which we have information, monitoring illegal wildlife trade on Facebook pages is more difficult than doing so in open markets, pet stores, wildlife trade fairs, or any other site where illegal wildlife is sold. This is especially true for closed group pages because these are designed for participants selected by the creators or administrators of the group page and they do not allow strangers to the group to enter and monitor their activities. Nevertheless, SSN Members believe that in the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, and South Africa, monitoring illegal trade on Facebook is easier because monitoring can be done from a computer.

Except in the European Union where Facebook has a new policy prohibiting the sale of wild animals, SSN Members consulted believe that Facebook has not taken any action to stop illegal trade of wildlife. In fact, Members believe that traders circumvent the policy in Europe by renaming Facebook groups and avoiding the mention of prices and terms such as "for sale."

In closing, illegal wildlife trade on Facebook pages involves hundreds of wild species that are either endangered, vulnerable, or protected by national and international laws. Animals are being sold, frequently illegally, as live specimens for the pet trade, for collections, as ornaments (including live plants or their products), for medicinal purposes, for manufacture, etc. This illegal trade is helping to drive these species to extinction, and social media, including Facebook, are helping to undermine national and international efforts to curb it.

Most countries do not have the legal framework to address the illegal sale of wildlife on Facebook, and may face considerable difficulty in changing their laws regarding commerce on social networks to address the problem. In addition, enforcement agencies do not have the capacity and expertise to scan hundreds of Facebook pages containing thousands of offers for a broad range of species. It would be much easier and more effective for Facebook to ban the trade in wild animals and exclude any entity that offers wildlife and/or wildlife products.

SSN notes that more data are needed from individual countries to qualify the levels of illegal trade present, not only in relation to Facebook, but also on other social media sites. SSN urges Facebook to prohibit sale and advertising of wildlife and wildlife products in all countries and create an easy method for users to report to both Facebook administrators and related government authorities those involved in the illegal trade of wildlife.

⁶ CÓDIGO PENAL FEDERAL Nuevo Código Publicado en el Diario Oficial de la Federación el 14 de agosto de 1931 Última reforma publicada DOF 15-06-2018

SSN Statement of Purpose

The Species Survival Network (SSN) is an international coalition of organizations committed to the promotion, enhancement and strict enforcement of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Through scientific and legal research, education and advocacy, the SSN is working to prevent over-exploitation of animals and plants due to international trade. The Network strongly believes that such trade can occur only when evidence positively demonstrates that survival of the species, subspecies or populations and their role in the ecosystems in which they occur will not be detrimentally affected by trade and when trade in live animals minimizes the risk of injury, damage to health or cruel treatment. The species must always receive the benefit of the doubt if available evidence is uncertain.

Member Organizations of the Species Survival Network

- AAP, Sanctuary for Exotic Animals (NL)
AARANYAK (IN)
ACRES-Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (SG)
ACTAsia (UK)
Africa Kambe Shumpe Fellowship (KE)
Alive-All Life in A Visible Environment (JP)
Animal Alliance of Canada (CA)
Animal Conservation and Welfare Foundation (PL)
Animal Defenders International (UK)
Animal Welfare Institute (US)
Animals Asia Foundation (CN)
Annamiticus (US)
APAR-Romanian Alliance for the Protection of Animals
Asociación Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre (GE)
Big Cat Rescue" (US)
Bird Protection Society (BE)
Born Free Foundation (UK)
Born Free USA (US)
British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (UK)
Campaign Against Cruelty to Animals (CA)
Campaign Whale (UK)
Care for the Wild International (UK)
Caribbean Conservation Corporation (US)
Center for Biological Diversity (US)
Cetacean Society International (US)
Co-Habitat (UK)
Conservacion de Mamiferos Marinos de Mexico A.C.,
COMARINO (MX)
Center for Biological Diversity (US)
Conservation Justice (GA)
Czech Animal Protection Trust (CZ)
David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (UK)
Defenders of Wildlife (US)
Dierenbescherming (Dutch Society for The Protection of Animals)
(NL)
EMS Foundation (ZA)
European Alliance of Rescue Centres and Sanctuaries (EARS)
Earthtrust (US)
Eastern Caribbean Coalition for Environmental Awareness (MQ)
Elephant Family (UK)
Elephant Specialist Advisory Group (ZA)
Environmental Investigation Agency (UK/US)
Eurogroup for Animals (EU)
European Alliance of Rescue Centres and Sanctuaries (EARS) (EU)
Fast Forward Foundation (NL)
Fondation Brigitte Bardot (FR)
Franz Weber Foundation (CH)
Freeland Foundation (TH)
Friends of the Elephant (Vrienden van de Olifant) (NL)
Fundación Cethus (AR)
Future for Elephants e.V. (DE)
Gesellschaft zur Rettung der Delphine (DE)
Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries
Greenpeace International
Humane Society of Canada (CA)
Humane Society of the United States (US)
Humane Society International/HSI Australia
International Animal Rescue Malta (MT)
International Environmental Law Project (US)
International Primate Protection League (US)
International Ranger Federation
Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund (JP)
Japan Wildlife Conservation Society (JP)
Kimya Institute (US)
Hong Kong Shark Foundation (HK)
Last Great Ape Organization (IL/CM)
Life Conservationist Association (TW)
Lilongwe Wildlife Trust (MW)
Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (KE)
Marine Connection (UK)
National Council of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty
to Animals (ZA)
Natural Resources Defense Council (US)
OceanCare (CH)
One Voice (FR)
Orangutan Foundation International (UK)
Organization for Respect and Care of Animals, ORCA (RS)
Outraged South African Citizens Against Poaching, OSCAP (ZA)
Pan African Conservation Network (KE)
Pan African Sanctuaries Alliance (US)
Performing Animal Welfare Society (US)
Pro Fauna Indonesia (ID)
Pro Wildlife (DE)
Rainforest Concern (UK)
Rede Nacional de Combate ao Trafico de Animais Silvestres,
RENTAS (BR)
Rettet die Elefanten Afrikas e.V. (REA e.V.) (DE)
Robin des Bois (FR)
Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (UK)
Save the Elephants (UK/KE)
Seal Protection Action Group (UK)
Shark Research Institute (US)
Teyeliz, A.C. (MX)
Thai Society for the Conservation of Wild Animals (TH)
Tigris Foundation (Stichting Tigris) (NL)
Tikki Hywood Trust (ZW)
Thin Green Line Foundation (AU)
Udruga "Zivot" / Society "Life" (HR)
Vier Pfoten / Four Paws (AT)
Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (UK)
Wildcoast/Costa Salvaje (MX)
WildAid (US)
Wildlife Action Group (ZA)
Wildlife Friends International
Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand (TH)
Wildlife Protection Society of India (IN)
Wildlife Trust of India (IN)
Wildlife Watch Group (NP)
World Animal Net
World Animal Protection
Zoocheck Canada (CA)