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Press Statement / Letter to Editor

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Wildlife Trafficking An Escalating Global Issue

Local media often display images of seizures of pangolin, ivory, rhino horn, tiger parts and testudines with headlines hailing the success of wildlife seizures by the Malaysian authorities. While these pictures depict the success of law enforcement in the crime against wildlife trafficking, it can be alarming due to the sheer quantity of wildlife products seized not only in Malaysia, but also those seized en-route to or re-exported from Malaysia.

Wildlife trafficking is thought to be the third most valuable illicit commerce in the world, after drugs and weapons. Discussions on combating wildlife trafficking have focused mainly on elephants, rhinos and tigers in Africa and Asia. Often forgotten, however, is the fact that wildlife trafficking occurs across all continents and threatens a wide range of imperiled species, including exotic birds, sea turtles, corals, caimans, iguanas, pangolins and the list goes on.

Illegal wildlife products are moved through countries and across borders and sold both openly and covertly. Much of the trade goes on undetected and thus it is difficult to ascertain the enormous quantity of illicit wildlife shipped and sold internationally. In some cases, wildlife is hidden and passes through checks unknown to Customs and border officials, or is accompanied by false documentation. Customs officials may also have turned a blind eye, give tip offs, or help conceal illegal wildlife in exchange for bribes or other benefits. The passage of illegal wildlife through checkpoints and borders may reflect a lack of capacity, training, or a low priority for preventing wildlife crime.

Globalization has increased opportunities for concealed transactions, especially where law enforcement and agencies charged with protecting wildlife are under-resourced and poorly supervised. In many countries, agencies responsible for combating wildlife crime, including addressing corruption in this area, lack the capacity and resources to do so. It may be due to a lack of priority for wildlife crime, a general lack of resources or infrastructure, or vested interest among decision makers in maintaining corrupt institutions, which allow them to enrich themselves illegally. There is also the perception that the problem is essentially victimless, and as a result governments tend not to give high priority to the issue of wildlife crime, including wildlife related corruption.

The global body—the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is tasked with regulating international wildlife trade, but is ineffective as it has no enforcement powers, meaning the slaughter of endangered species and their sale for profits continue unabated.

Transportation and logistics is not only the backbone of a modern economy but also a key enabler for trafficking wildlife animals and wildlife products. Therefore, the transportation and logistics sectors play a critical role in identifying and eliminating risks along the supply chain.

In the case of Malaysia, it has one of the best infrastructures in the region making it easy for smugglers to transport their animals. Reports of seizures at sea and airports are common especially in the area of Johore, Kuala Lumpur International Airport and the Penang International Airport. Malaysia has a big smuggling problem and is among the top ten smuggling hubs in the region together with Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. In addition there is also a new trend of trading through the internet where buyers are both local Malaysians and foreigners.

The question now is whether the legislation in our country is adequate to protect endangered species and to combat illegal wildlife trading. Does the law provide adequate sentences against illegal wildlife trader? What approach is taken by the judiciary in combating illegal wildlife trade? The main issue is with sentencing which usually means a small fine to the offender, or a day spent in jail because the judge or magistrate does not understand the seriousness of the crime.

The authorities need to fight tooth and nail to address wildlife crime in the region through information sharing as well as a joint effort across Government agencies and relevant other agencies and institutions. Strengthening wildlife law enforcement and fighting wildlife crime has to be given national, regional and global priority. Support of organisations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Interpol, World Customs Organisation and CITES are crucial to the success of such efforts.

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