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Letter to the Editor

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Concerted action needed to combat wildlife crime

More action and less talk is required to combat wildlife crime. Several species are becoming severely depleted and may disappear if more is not urgently done by Governments.

High value seizures of contraband ivory, rhino horn, tiger parts and pangolin scales dominate media headlines every week. Many live animals are traded with impunity - tigers, orangutans, pangolins, monkeys, birds, etc etc. Asia, particularly China and Southeast Asia are the main points for the supply and demand of many of the endangered species of wildlife.

Despite national rules and regulations related to wildlife conservation as well as international commitments, widespread illegal wildlife trade is still continuing throughout the region. Wildlife that has been illegally removed from the wild is sold domestically in its source country or moved through countries and across borders and sold both openly and covertly. Much of the trade goes on undetected and so it is difficult to quantify the enormous extent of illicit wildlife shipped and sold internationally. An increase in seizures does not necessarily mean that law enforcement and customs officials are more alert - it often means that there has been an increase in smuggling and that illegal products are flooding the ports due to increase in poaching and consumption. Currently there is more demand than there is supply.

All key countries in South East Asia are already signatories to international conventions on transnational crime and species trafficking. They are also members of international enforcement agencies and networks - in South East Asia, the Asean Wildlife Enforcement Network (Asean-Wen). The tools for turning the tide against wildlife crime already exist but there is still an urgent need for rapid high-level commitment to real action, to reverse the current high profit-low risk nature of wildlife crime.

Logistic companies that facilitate the import, transit, and export of goods must focus on stronger enforcement measures and tougher restrictions to prevent and penalise the abuse of their services for illicit wildlife trafficking.

Trade kingpins are often involved in multiple businesses – both legal and illegal - and must be monitored. Pet shops and zoos must be scrutinised and detailed investigations conducted as some of these are fronts for illegal activities.

Investigation into the illicit financial flows related to individuals and companies suspected of involvement in wildlife trafficking, money laundering and other related crime is another aspect that should be looked into. Corruption in the enforcing agencies is of course a major concern.

In combating wildlife trafficking, Asean member countries must make a much stronger commitment to addressing wildlife crime as serious transnational organised business, and must further scale up efforts to combat it. Equally important is strong collaboration across source, transit and destination countries to ensure that criminal activities along the entire enforcement chain are addressed and neutralised from source to final destination.

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