

ANIMALS REFERENCE

Poaching animals, explained

Illegally taking animals from the wild threatens many species with extinction.

BY JANI ACTMAN

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Wild animals are being poached on a massive scale, with millions of individual animals of thousands of species worldwide killed or captured from their native habitats. Poaching poses a growing threat to elephants, rhinos, and other charismatic animals, as well as to smaller and more obscure creatures, like certain lizards and monkeys.

Why animals are poached

Poachers sometimes kill or capture animals to sell them locally or for the global trade in wildlife. Wildlife trading is a major black market that has increased alongside rising wealth in Asia—a major consumer of wildlife—and the advent of e-commerce and social media websites.

Some animals, such as birds, reptiles, and primates, are captured live so that they can be kept or sold as exotic pets. Slaughtered animals, on the other hand, have commercial value as food, jewelry, decor, or traditional medicine. The ivory tusks of African elephants, for example, are carved into trinkets or display pieces. The scales of pangolins, small animals that eat ants, are ground into powder and consumed for their purported healing powers. The meat of apes, snakes, and other bush animals is considered a delicacy in parts of Africa.

In addition to killing for direct profit, poachers target animals to prevent them from destroying crops or attacking livestock. This happens to lions and elephants in Africa, as well as to wolves, coyotes, and other predators in North America and beyond.

The effects of poaching

Poaching has devastating consequences for wildlife. In some instances, it's the primary reason why an animal faces a risk of extinction. This is the case with the African elephant, more than 100,000 of which were killed between 2014 and 2017 for ivory. Poaching has also had a catastrophic impact on rhinos, with more than a thousand slaughtered a year for their horns.

Poaching for the exotic pet trade affects an animal's welfare in addition to its numbers in the wild. Most wild animals eat specialized diets found in nature, and they need space to fly, roam, and swing from branches. Captured animals are stuffed into boxes, suitcases,

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Park, one of the continent's most dangerous, at least 170 rangers have been killed during the past two decades.

What's more, poaching has been linked to armed militia groups in Africa suspected of trafficking ivory to fund their operations, and it often occurs alongside other crimes including corruption and money laundering. And poached animals can spread disease, such as Ebola and SARS.

Efforts to stop poaching

In addition to providing on-the-ground protection for animals, many countries make poaching an offense punishable by prison or monetary fees. Because poachers in Africa and Asia are often impoverished local people who make small profits in comparison to traders and kingpins, penalties for poaching wildlife are generally less severe than those for trafficking wildlife.

There are also numerous nonprofits around the world working to end wildlife poaching. Some of these groups have helped to promote alternative, more sustainable ways for poachers to earn a living. Another way people are working to end poaching is by trying to decrease demand for illegal wildlife and wildlife parts. If no one's buying the products, there will be no need to kill the animals.

Read more about poaching and wildlife crime at National Geographic's Wildlife Watch. See all of National Geographic's videos about poaching here.

Jani Actman is a freelance journalist based in California. She is a former staff reporter for Wildlife Watch.

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