

The Fight Against Rhino Poaching Needs To Be Stepped Up A Gear

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FULL TEXT

The United Nations Environment Programme issued the following news release:

World Rhino Day on 22 September celebrates the world's five species of rhinoceros. It is an opportunity to take stock of global poaching activities ahead of the Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference in London on 11 and 12 October.

"Rhino calf found cowering alongside mother killed for her horns by ivory poachers in South Africa."

These kind of headlines - this one from a newspaper on 31 August 2018 - are shocking and may be helping to change mindsets on poaching, but more needs to be done to tackle the root causes of the scourge: poverty and unemployment among burgeoning populations, weak judicial systems and a seemingly insatiable demand for rhino horn products.

There have been substantial increases in rhino poaching in Africa in the past 10 years - according to official reports, 1,338 rhinos were killed for their horn across Africa in 2015, the worst on record, and in 2016 the figure is believed to have fallen slightly, but poaching continues to be at an unacceptable level (IUCN, 2016). Black rhino populations are precariously low, hovering around 5,000.

The lives of those working hard to protect endangered wildlife are also at risk; in the last year, over 100 rangers have died in the line of duty, many at the hands of poachers (International Ranger Federation, 2017).

Rangers in African countries are beginning to share experiences to improve their anti-poaching techniques. Over 105 rangers from 14 different African countries came together at the Southern African Wildlife College in August for the first ever African Ranger Congress. The event was endorsed by the International Ranger Federation and supported by the Thin Green Line Foundation.

There are five species of rhinoceros, three in Asia and two in Africa; but most rhinos - white rhinos and the rarer black rhinos - are in Africa, and 75 per cent of Africa's rhinos are in South Africa. Rhino populations and sub-species have disappeared entirely from several Asian and African countries in recent years. In 2011, the western black rhino was declared extinct, and the last male northern white rhino died earlier this year. As populations in Asia have declined over the last few decades, so poaching in Africa has increased.

The illegal wildlife trade is an urgent global issue, which not only threatens some of the world's most iconic species with extinction, but also damages sustainable economic growth and the livelihoods of vulnerable people in rural communities. It robs countries of more than US\$20 billion per year and is the fourth largest transnational crime after drugs, weapons and human trafficking.

The criminals who run this trade do more than damage wildlife - they use networks of corrupt officials and agencies to undermine sustainable development and the rule of law, damaging the livelihood and growth of local communities.

The October 2018 Illegal Trade in Wildlife conference in London will seek to:

- * increase collaboration across continents to tackle the illegal wildlife trade
- * strengthen networks of illegal wildlife trade law enforcement experts, helping frontline countries to coordinate across trade routes
- * improve understanding of the linkages to wider security challenges
- * build coalitions
- * use levers of influence across illicit trade routes, through increased engagement with the private sector and non-governmental organizations, and by bringing in new partners

* harness technology; share and scale up successful and innovative solutions

* close markets and share successful approaches for reducing demand for illegal wildlife products

UN Environment will exhibit its successful Wild for Life campaign - supported by UN Environment Goodwill Ambassadors Ellie Goulding, Aidan Gallagher and Li Bingbing - at Heathrow Airport during the conference.

"Earth is experiencing a huge episode of [vertebrate] population declines and extirpations, which will have negative cascading consequences on ecosystem functioning and services vital to sustaining civilization," says research published in 2017 and titled Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signaled by vertebrate population losses and declines.

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