

Over-exploitation of Biological Resources

Illegal wildlife trade. The ASEAN region has long been targeted by illegal wildlife traders as a hotspot in the lucrative, multi-billion dollar global trade of wildlife, in which both live and processed goods of most species are traded, ranging from tigers and elephants to rare orchids and indigenous medicinal herbs, from rare marine species to endemic reptiles and songbirds.

The illegal wildlife trade has esoteric economic implications for the region, involving broad and complex networks of sourcing and marketing. It engages a diverse range of actors including rural harvesters, professional hunters, and an array of traders from wholesalers to retailers, up to the final consumers.

While all ASEAN Member States are signatories to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the poaching, trafficking and illegal consumption of wildlife parts and products remain rampant. The scale of illegal wildlife trade is alarming. Due to the illicit nature of the trade, it has been hard to obtain exact figures, but experts estimate the value of illegal wildlife trade at USD10 to 20 billion annually¹.

Data from the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) show the rich biodiversity of Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar as being particularly targeted. Smugglers have been frequently caught utilizing transport links through Thailand and Viet Nam. However, poaching, transit and consumption occur in all countries in varying degrees. A significant proportion of wildlife trafficked through the ASEAN region is purchased by wealthy consumers from outside the region, i.e., China, Europe and the United States².

Almost all wild species, including illegally cut timber, birds, reptiles and mammals, are traded in the ASEAN region. The pangolin is the most heavily traded exotic mammal. ASEAN-WEN estimates that 13,000 metric tons of turtles are shipped to China every year from ASEAN countries, where approximately three-quarters of freshwater turtle species are already considered threatened. Illegal wildlife traders have also exported snakes in large numbers to China from Viet Nam, resulting in an explosion of the local rat population in the latter, which subsequently affected crop production.

Illegal wildlife trade will result in massive and irrevocable biodiversity loss if left unchecked. The ASEAN-WEN cites that, "If trends continue, scientists predict that 13 to 42 per cent of the region's animal and plant species could be wiped out this century. At least half of those losses would represent global extinctions."

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The World Bank highlighted the devastating effects that the illegal trade and exploitation of wild animals and plants are having on Southeast Asia's biodiversity. "There has been a drastic decline in the population of many wildlife species with high commercial value, many of which

Over-exploitation

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are now rare, endangered, or locally extinct – such as the tiger, Sumatran rhinoceros, Javan rhinoceros, Asian elephant, pangolins, freshwater turtles and tortoises, agarwood, and numerous wild orchid species,” the study stated

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Illegal-unreported-and-unregulated fishing

. In addition to threats brought about by known and quantifiable stresses, illegal-unreported-and-unregulated (IUU) fishing is a blatant aggravating factor, posing impediments to all attempts to manage fisheries resources and fish stocks in the region

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. Fish populations tend to remain constant under normal conditions and decline, in most cases, due to overfishing

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. The growing demand for fisheries resources, the increase in the numbers of fishers and vessels, and the improving efficiency of fishing gears drive the collection of these resources way beyond their capacity to recover. Moreover, the reduced availability of fisheries resources increases competition and, thus, prods players to resort to illegal, and often, more efficient forms of fishing. The lack of capacity of the ASEAN Member States to monitor highly mobile fishing vessels and deliberate poaching from both in-country (local fishers) and those coming from neighboring countries makes it next to impossible to quantify the level and extent of IUU fishing. Wide-ranging estimates, however, are available. A recent report estimated the value of IUU fishing at the global scale to be between USD10 to 23.5 billion annually

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. Information in the same report attributes Philippine losses in 2008 to the amount of Php26.5 billion to poaching by foreign vessels and blast- and cyanide-fishing

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Bushmeat Crisis

. The Bushmeat Crisis Task Force

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reported that while habitat loss is often cited as the primary threat to wildlife, commercial hunting for the meat of wild animals has become the most significant immediate threat to the future of wildlife all over the world. The task force refers to bushmeat hunting as a crisis because it is rapidly expanding to countries. Species which were previously not at risk are now threatened due largely to an increase in commercial logging, opening up an infrastructure of roads and trucks that links forests and hunters to cities and consumers.

Over-exploitation

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Humans are extracting wildlife from forests at more than six times the sustainable rate¹⁰

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The Asia-based wildlife trade monitoring network, TRAFFIC, contends that increasing affluence in major consumer markets, particularly China, together with huge improvements in transportation infrastructure, are resulting to a heightened demand for many wild animal species for bushmeat consumption.

Pangolins are the most frequently found mammals seized from illegal traders in the region. In June 2008, TRAFFIC convened a pangolin experts meeting in Singapore. The group concluded that despite adequate 'paper protection', the illegal trade in Asian pangolin meat and scales has caused the disappearance of the scaly anteaters in the region

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Current human lifestyle and consumption patterns are now, more than ever, critically incompatible with sustaining the world's remaining natural flora and fauna. Unless serious modifications are made in the realm of human consumption, the degradation of wildlife will gather momentum before it may still be slowed down, rendering the extinction of wildlife inevitable.

Endnotes

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Over-exploitation

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Wednesday, 16 November 2011 09:44 - Last Updated Wednesday, 16 November 2011 13:29

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The Bushmeat Crisis Task Force is a Washington-based organization which works on building a public, professional and government constituency aimed at identifying and

supporting solutions that effectively respond to the bushmeat crisis in Africa and around the world.

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Over-exploitation

Written by

Wednesday, 16 November 2011 09:44 - Last Updated Wednesday, 16 November 2011 13:29

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