

# BIOSEC

## Notes on illegal wildlife trade



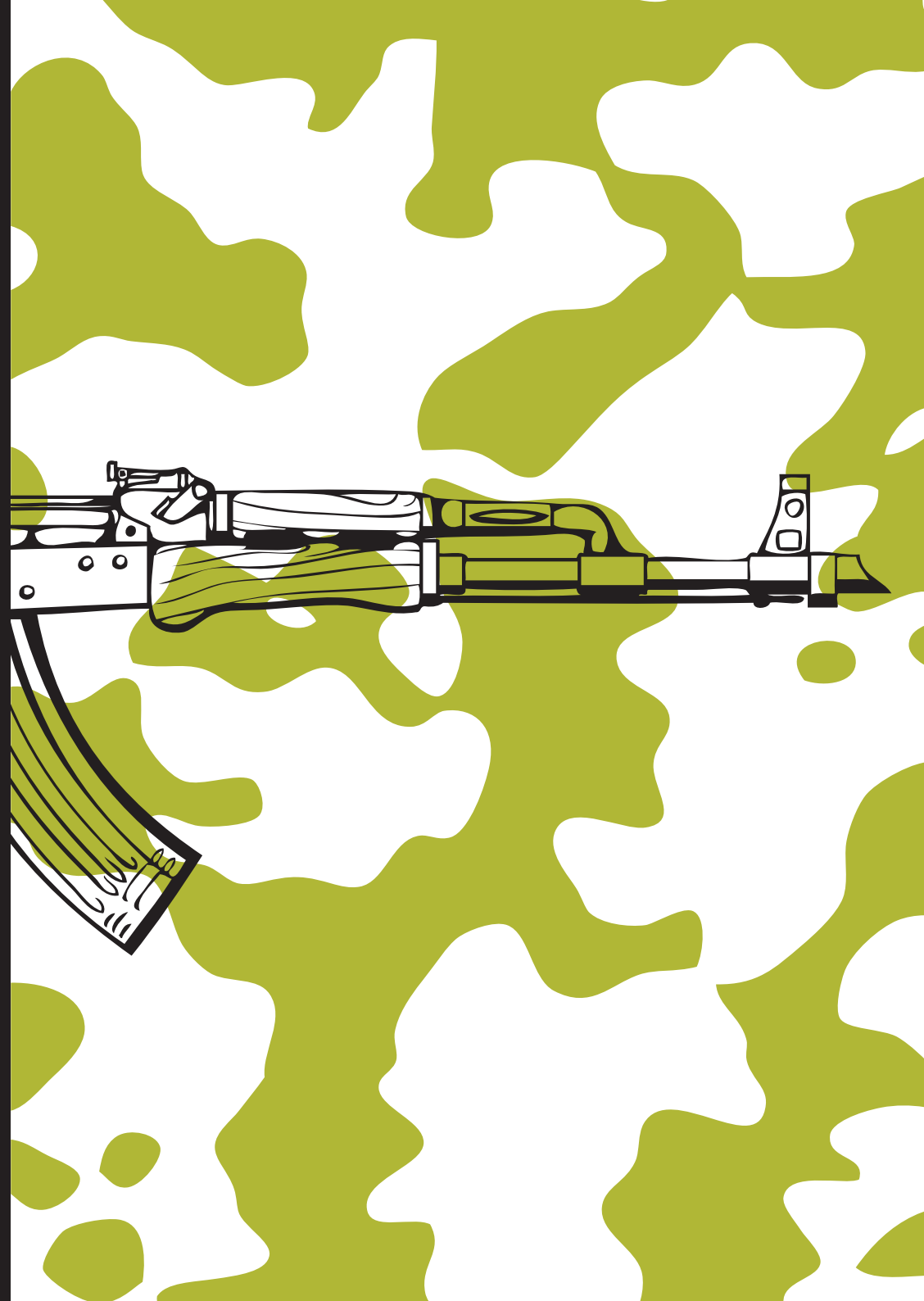
**What happens in conservation if we define the illegal wildlife trade as a global security threat?**

There is growing concern that poaching and trafficking could drive some species to extinction. Supported by finance from donors, philanthropists and the private sector, we have seen a shift towards techniques inspired by the security sector in conservation - intelligence gathering, surveillance techniques, partnering with private security companies and the military. Many conservationists point to the role of organised crime networks, armed militias and even terrorist groups in illegal wildlife trade.

But this focus too is narrow, missing the wider social, political, economic and ecological contexts of what drives and sustains the illegal wildlife trade.

Using a political ecology approach, our research focuses on the wider effects of the securitisation of conservation. Here, we illustrate these broader dynamics that characterise the illegal wildlife trade.

 @biosec\_erc



# Law enforcement




**Anti-poaching in protected areas. Search and seizure at border crossings. Laboratory forensic analysis. Informant networks. Transnational investigations. Prosecutions and courtroom sentencing. These are some of the expanding spaces and practices of conservation law enforcement.**

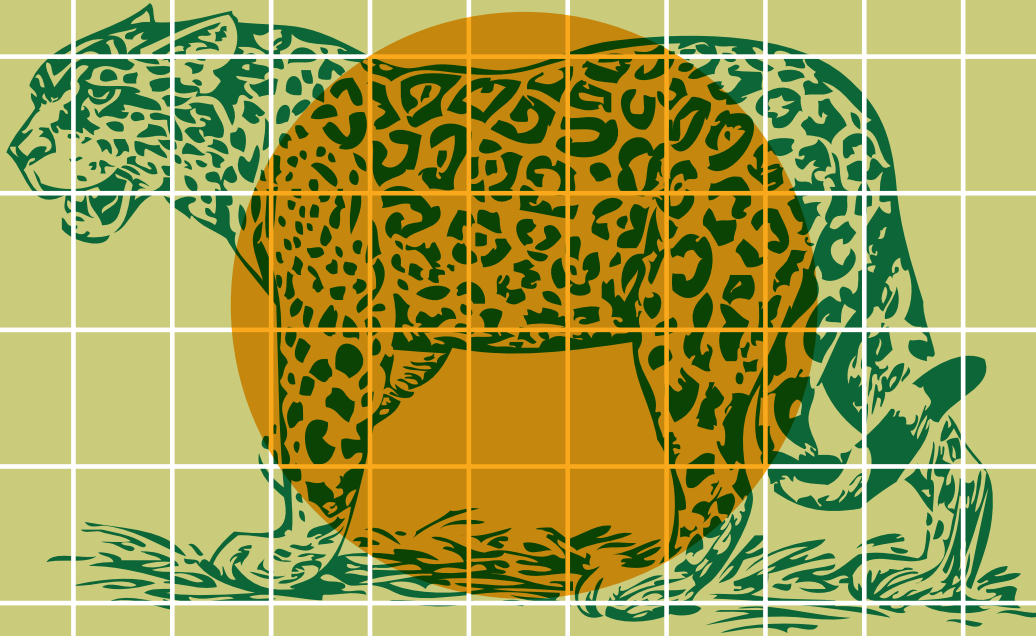
In the supply chain, wildlife and wildlife products flow through time and space, from point of extraction or harvest to end market, consumption, use. The flipside of the supply chain is the enforcement chain. The enforcement chain is being strengthened.

The objective: intervene along the supply chain to stop the flow of illicit wildlife and wildlife products. Reduce trafficking. Reduce wildlife crime. Protect species.

But what does this growing sphere of wildlife crime and enforcement mean for conservation priorities and practice?

 @GeoFrancisMasse

# Technology




**Locating, pinpointing, tracking, recording and analysing.  
To protect endangered wildlife in its habitat,  
conservationists want to know the where, when,  
who and whats.**

Where do big cats live? When did rangers last patrol? Who is clearing the forest? What equipment and techniques do poachers use? If you can't measure the problem, you can't solve it. So tools are developed, devices are built, software is coded to locate, pinpoint, track, record and analyse. Cutting edge, fast, efficient.

Is it?

Not always. Not if you forget the people behind the tech. Those whose time and labour is needed to put the technologies to use and those who might object to being monitored.

 @Laure\_Jny

# Birds



**Statistics and framings can convey a sense of urgency, to convince us that something needs to be done, right now. The population size of a species, along with its charisma, determines how much public attention it receives.**

Those who make and enforce conservation responses often don't consider the illegal trade of European songbirds a priority. This is because they are neither endangered nor charismatic - or emotionally 'relatable'. Statistics determine perceptions.

In the field, activists must regularly construct urgency to trigger responses to the bird crimes they witness. Reports of illegal bird trapping with lime sticks seldomly lead to police action; but reports of illegal bird shooting usually trigger intervention by law enforcement. Framings determine responses.




## Conveying an environmental disaster: illegal logging in the EU

**Open your internet browser and search for 'illegal logging' + 'European Union'.  
Select the News tab.  
Check your first ten results.**

**How many of them feature the following elements:**

- **Images – clear-cut mountains or piles of logs?**
- **Figures – '3 hectares of forest disappear each hour', '20 million cubic meters of timber are stolen every year'?**
- **Words – 'crime', 'mafia' in combination with 'out of control', 'disaster', 'running out of time' ?**

Environmental disasters are often reported in a spectacular manner. The use of highly emotive images combined with decontextualized figures are effective tools to create the powerful trope of illegal logging. The sense of urgency is amplified by references to organised criminal activities and extreme violence. News stories go viral on social media making the phenomenon self-evident to larger audiences. They foster social movements and pressure policymakers into acting swiftly by enforcing strict protection regimes, blanket bans and criminalisation of forest wrongdoers. But they also obscure practices associated with local livelihoods, the diversity of forestry approaches, a nuanced understanding of the drivers of demand, while being ignorant to issues of social and environmental injustice.

 @George\_lorda

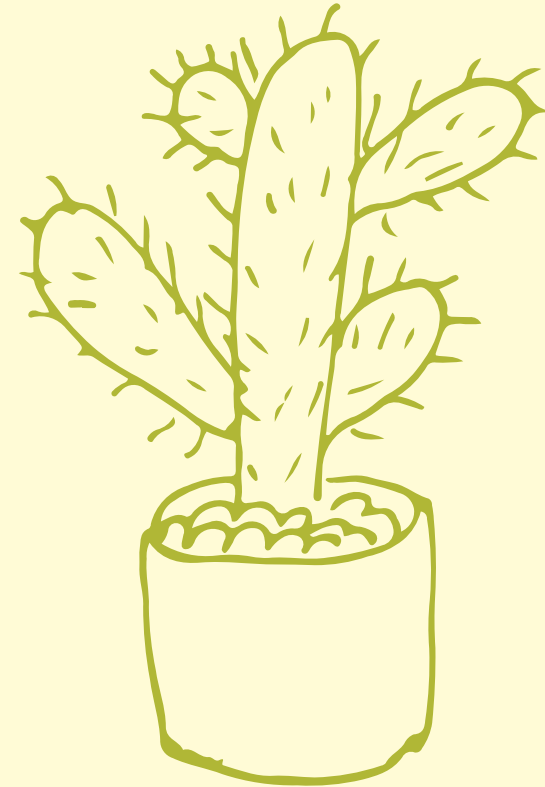
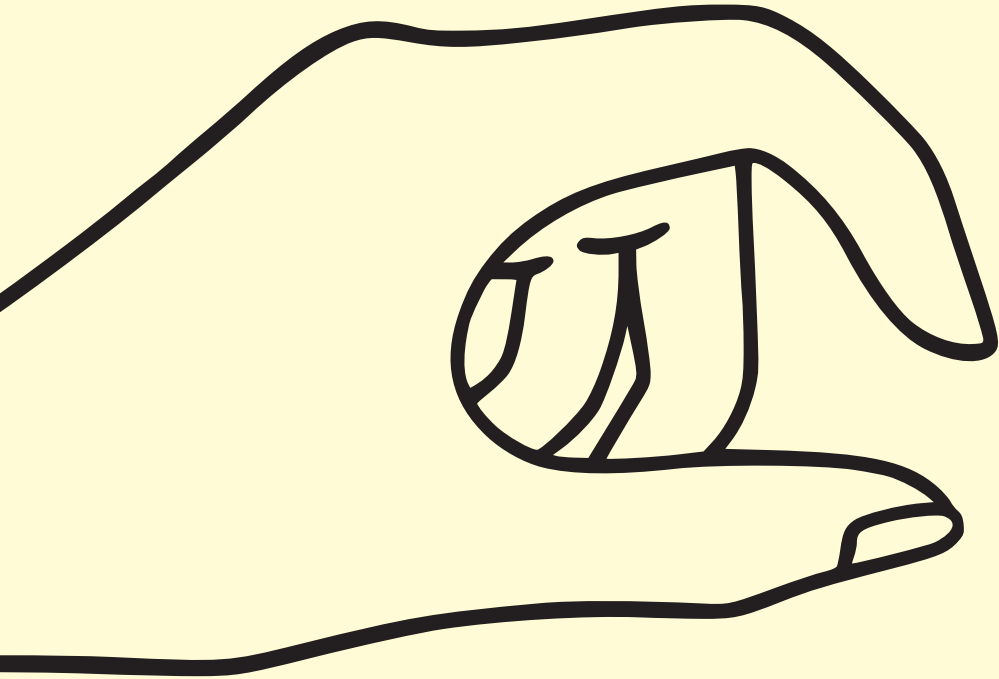
# Animal remains



**Demand for illegal wildlife products in the Global North ranges from cub petting in the Netflix documentary *Tiger King* to the appearance of exotic animals confiscated at international borders.**

The Leeds Discovery Centre storeroom contains items confiscated by UK border agents: Nile River crocodile handbags and taxidermy mounts, sea turtle carapaces, a mounted black palm cockatoo seized from infamous macaw parrot smuggler Henry Sissen. This storeroom of illegal animal products illustrates how desire and demand from collectors in the Global North sustains the illegal wildlife trade.

## Who steals a cactus?



### **The desire to collect is a powerful, even compulsive force.**

Where some have a passion for stamps or coins, others desire plants, especially the rare and unique. In their pursuit, collectors will go to great lengths, including beyond the law, to obtain them. But unlike stamps, a cactus is a living thing, it exists in the world. When the desire to possess leads to extracting plants from the wild, species trajectories may be altered, their ability to flourish at evolutionary timescales compromised. Illegal wildlife trade is more than a matter of money, supply, and demand—it also reverberates with matters of desire.



# Caviar: Black, gold, and grey



## **Black**

Demand for illegal 'wild' caviar drives a criminal black market in the EU. Buy the glistening black eggs in takeaway boxes, 1000 euros a kilo. But is it what you think it is? Some producers blackwash the eggs, so maybe you have been sold a lie and actually bought farmed caviar.

## **Gold**

When you buy caviar you are paying for a perception of luxury. Caviar is compared to diamonds, gold, and pearls. But historically caviar was a bar snack and pig feed. Caviar hasn't changed, so why have our perceptions?

## **Grey**

Wild caviar is illegal. Farmed caviar is legal. When one trade is legal but the other is criminalised, regulatory grey areas exist. Grey actors exploit these grey areas for grey business. The result? The intertwining of legal and illegal markets in the caviar grey market.

# Wildlife consumers



## **Why does wildlife consumption polarise opinion?**

We need a nuanced understanding of the motivations and values that drive wildlife consumption. Wildlife consumption has complex historical, social and cultural roots. Whilst it can be conspicuous consumption by elites, it is also an important part of poorer people's livelihoods. It can confer individual status through competition, but it is also used for medicinal purposes, and can help strengthen social ties and networks. Thus in order to be effective, demand reduction campaigns need to acknowledge and address the complex and conflicting values that drive wildlife consumption.

Seeing illegal wildlife trade as  
a serious crime and security  
threat is changing conservation.

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