



Darwin Initiative, Darwin Plus and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund Covid-19 Rapid Response Round - Final Report

Due within two months of the end date of the Rapid Response Round project

(maximum 6 pages)

Project reference	CV19RR06
If linked with an ongoing project, please include that project reference here (e.g. IWT001)	IWT056
Project title	Responding to COVID-19 impacts on wildlife trafficking in Uganda/DRC
Country/ies	Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo
Lead organisation	Environmental Investigation Agency UK
Partner institution(s)	Natural Resource Conservation Network (Uganda), Conserv Congo (DRC)
Start/end date of project	01/01/2021 to 31/03/2021
Which fund was this project relevant to?	Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund
Grant value (£)	£59,217
Project Leader name	Julian Newman
Report author(s) and date	Chris Hamley (with input from Joan Namuddu -NRCN and Adams Cassinga – Conserv Congo), 31/05/2021

1. Project Summary

Uganda is a major regional transit hub for the trafficking of illicit wildlife products such as pangolin skins and scales, elephant and hippo ivory, live chimpanzees, and leopard, giraffe and okapi skins. This is driving severe population declines in some of the last strongholds of Central/East Africa's wildlife. Much of these illicit wildlife products are sourced from adjacent Central African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2020, information from EIA's civil-society partners – Natural Resource Conservation Network (NRCN) and Conserv Congo highlighted the escalating impact of COVID-19 on wildlife.

With the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, Uganda's ten national parks experienced a rapidly escalating poaching crisis. As international tourist numbers diminished due to global transportation restrictions, Uganda's national parks became more vulnerable to poaching. Wildlife traffickers operating between eastern DRC and Uganda also capitalised on a reduction in law enforcement effort to smuggle illicit wildlife products through Uganda undetected.

Reduced tourist revenue for the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has undermined resourcing for ranger patrols. The reduced tourist presence in protected areas eliminated the poaching deterrent affect associated with safaris and dramatically reduced ecotourism employment opportunities. A doubling in wildlife poaching associated with communities that previously benefited from ecotourism was recorded. By June 2020, UWA had recorded 367 poaching cases compared to 163 cases in 2019. This was compounded with a growing backlog of court cases in Kampala resulting from a temporary closure of the special wildlife court that reopened in July

2020. Furthermore, restrictions on travel led to increases in transport costs affecting intelligence gathering activities.

Both Uganda and DRC have experienced outbreaks of diseases originating in wildlife including Ebola and Marburg. Human exposure to animals in the DRC/Uganda illegal wildlife supply chain is a major risk factor in the zoonotic disease emergence.

2. Project Achievements

Cross-border partnerships

To facilitate the building of working relationships between NRCN and Conserv Congo, Adams Cassinga (Conserv Congo Executive Director) travelled to Kampala, Uganda in February 2021. During his 5-day visit to Kampala, Adams participated in several meetings with NRCN's leadership team. As a result of these, both organisations agreed a Memorandum of Understanding through which to coordinate on cross-border wildlife criminal justice activities. These included investigations into wildlife trafficking networks operating between DRC and Uganda, intelligence sharing, sharing of information on prosecution outcomes, training, sharing of lessons learned and fundraising. Following the establishment of the MoU, the two organisations launched joint investigations into wildlife trafficking networks operating between DRC and Uganda.

The cooperation between NRCN and Conserv Congo is filling a much-needed gap in strategic wildlife law enforcement targeting trafficking networks operating out of Uganda and sourcing illicit wildlife products from habitats in DRC. In April we produced a podcast that is available on the EIA website (<https://eia-international.org/news/eia-podcast-how-to-tackle-the-corruption-driving-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-in-africa/>). The goal of this podcast was to communicate EIA's work with the two partner organisations and the challenges associated with combating wildlife trafficking in Uganda and DRC.

Investigations into wildlife trafficking groups

NRCN and Conserv Congo implemented investigations targeting wildlife traffickers operating within Uganda and DRC, and those operating between the two countries. Working in partnership with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and Uganda Police Force (UPF), NRCN conducted 32 law enforcement operations across the Northern, Central, Western and Eastern regions of Uganda. The NRCN investigations team visited 13 investigation sectors, which included urban centres such as Kasese, Gulu, Hoima, Packwach, Mbale, Mbarara and Mpondwe. These led to the arrest of 46 individuals (43 males, 3 females) for the trafficking of buffalo products (6 arrests), antelope products (22 arrests), hippo ivory (1 arrest), crocodile skins (1 arrest), live pangolins (2 arrests), pangolin scales (10 arrests), and elephant ivory (4 arrests). NRCN and Conserv Congo completed one operation to arrest a group of cross-border ivory traffickers, which resulted in 2 arrests and 120kgs of ivory seized. All seized products have been transferred into the custody of UWA. Two additional cross-border investigations were launched, and as of 31/05/21 these are ongoing.

Working in partnership with the DRC Ministry of Environment, the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature – ICCN) and the ICCN's CorPPn (a special wildlife crime unit), Conserv Congo conducted investigations in Kinshasa and the eastern provinces of Ituri and North Kivu. In eastern DRC, Conserv Congo's investigations team visited a total of 10 urban centres, including Goma, Rutshuru, Butembo, Beni and Ariwara. Given major law enforcement capacity, corruption and security challenges in DRC these investigations primarily focused on intelligence gathering and identification of leads. Information was gathered on 13 persons of interest (11 males, 2 females) involved in the trafficking of pangolin scales, elephant ivory, great apes and grey parrots. Conserv Congo worked with authorities to seize a total of 11kg of pangolin scales, 11 leopard skins, 1 okapi skin, 5 bonobo skulls, 23 bonobo hands, 4 crocodile skins, 2 lion skins and 2kg of elephant meat. All seized

products have been transferred into the custody of ICCN. One adult male chimpanzee, that had been illegally kept in captivity for 13 years, was identified in the hands of traffickers. Conserv Congo collaborated with the DRC police and ICCN as well as Bonobo Aid and Lwiro Primate Sanctuary to confiscate and rescue this animal.

Intelligence analysis and dissemination

To process and analyse intelligence collected by NRCN and Conserv Congo on wildlife trafficking, an EIA Intelligence Officer held regular debriefing meetings with each organisation's investigations/database staff. The partners also shared intelligence reports with EIA. Based on remote undercover engagements with key individuals involved in transnational wildlife trafficking, EIA investigators also generated information on pangolin scale and elephant ivory trafficking from DRC to countries such as Cameroon and Nigeria. Open-source research based on social media accounts and telephone numbers was also conducted. A total of 24 EIA intelligence reports were generated covering topics such as sourcing areas, trafficking routes, consolidation hubs, government and private sector corruption, armed group involvement, transportation methods, illicit products, prices and persons of interest. Based on this information, a 31-page intelligence assessment has been produced (confidential version), this provides a comprehensive analysis of wildlife trafficking methods of operation, key persons of interest and recommendations for future investigations. Eight key persons of interest have been identified for future investigations. Key findings that all require further verification and corroboration include:

- ICCN employees and national army (FARDC) soldiers were documented to be involved in wildlife poaching and trafficking.
- Key wildlife trafficking hubs in DRC identified included Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kisangani, Mbandaka, Zongo, Isiro, Beni, Goma and Bunia.
- Pangolin scales consolidated in Mbandaka are smuggled from there to Kinshasa, Kisangani, Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic; from Kisangani, pangolin scales are smuggled to Kinshasa, Goma and Uganda.
- Traffickers use of a wide range of methods to transport illicit wildlife products, including motorcycles, bicycles, canoes, whaling boats, planes, trucks, buses, cars, and helicopters.
- High degree of involvement of foreign nationals, including Senegalese, Malians, Ugandans, Cameroonians, 'Sudanese', and Nigerians, as well as 'Asian people' involved in the extractives sector.

The intelligence assessment has been shared with NRCN and Conserv Congo for future investigations planning, and one red-flag intelligence summary has been prepared. This red-flag document will be shared with the United for Wildlife transport/finance taskforces.

Wildlife trafficking prosecutions

NRCN has a team of prosecutors who are responsible for both prosecuting wildlife trafficking cases in Uganda's court system and monitoring government prosecutions. NRCN coordinate on prosecutions with the Uganda Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP). To clear the court case back-log and facilitate due process and effective implementation of prosecutions for wildlife trafficking, NRCN have supported the ODPP with transporting suspects and witnesses and visiting courts to check case progress. This activity has taken place in Kampala, but also other areas of Uganda including Mbarara, Gulu, Arua, and Kasese. Many traffickers arrested during the COVID lockdown period (March to July 2020) were released on bail, so NRCN worked to ensure these cases were heard in court. Several courts in Kampala designated specific weekdays for handling wildlife cases to help clear the court case back-log. As a result of NRCN prosecutions work, there were a total of 20 convictions and cautions, 19 of these resulted in custodial sentences and a fine. Custodial sentences ranged from 6 months to 2 years, and fines ranged. The two individuals arrested as a result of the joint investigations with Conserv Congo are currently remanded in custody (as of 31/05/21) and court hearings are taking place.

Conserv Congo also monitored government wildlife trafficking prosecutions, and through this project have worked to strengthen their relationships with DRC's Ministry of Justice. On 12 March 2021, Conserv Congo organised a workshop that brought together court officials, police, customs, civil society, and Interpol to discuss how to work in closer coordination to combat wildlife trafficking in DRC. This meeting in addition to bi-lateral engagements with the Ministry of Justice has sought to build more institutional buy-in from DRC's criminal justice sector for action on wildlife trafficking.

With funding from IFAW and technical support from EIA, Conserv Congo has monitored the ICCN arrest and prosecution of major wildlife trafficker named Salomon Mpay in Kinshasa (more information: <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/05/tale-of-two-traffickers-is-a-rare-spell-of-congolese-conservation-convictions/>). This individual was involved in the export of considerable volumes of pangolin scales and elephant ivory in addition to many other kinds of illicit wildlife product. He was given a two-year custodial sentence by the Gombe Magistrates Court in Kinshasa. This case outcome is a significant achievement in a country with major governance challenges and limited examples of successful prosecutions for high-level wildlife traffickers.

Research on zoonotic disease risks

To assess the zoonotic disease risks associated with wildlife trade in Uganda and DRC, EIA recruited an expert wildlife epidemiologist named Dr DeeAnn Reeder based at the University of Bucknell in the USA. For the research, Dr Reeder used a range of information sources, including published and grey literature, wildlife seizure data, EIA intelligence, and key informant questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed by government and civil-society stakeholders in both Uganda and DRC using ArcGIS Survey123. The assessment filled information gaps on species most heavily traded, summary of zoonotic disease spillover events, role of hunting, transportation and consumption of wildlife in spillovers, role of international trafficking/trade, and policy/research recommendations. Some of the key findings include:

- Spillover is most likely to occur when humans are in direct contact with live animals. This occurs when trade along the supply chain is in live animals or in the earliest stages of the bushmeat supply chain - when hunting, handling, and butchering exposes the hunter (or the food preparer, often women) to bites, scratches, blood, urine, faeces, and fleas/ticks that might be disease vectors.
- Live-animal markets that typify much of Asian trade and which are breeding grounds for spillover and pathogen mutation are not typical in Uganda or DRC, but the risk remains.
- Efforts to track wildlife morbidity and mortality events is underutilised and underfunded, such efforts have significant capacity for predicting human outbreaks.
- At the consumer end of illicit wildlife trade chains, pangolins are often weak and infected by pathogens, meaning that the live pangolin trade is very high risk for zoonotic disease spillover.
- For animals that are traded live and that are present in the international market (e.g. pangolins, primates and rodents) pathogens for which they are reservoir hosts may travel with them or they may pick-up additional pathogens to which they are susceptible along the way - in either case the risk to humans is significant.
- The depletion of wildlife and movement of wildlife and wildlife products from the rural to urban landscapes and beyond will, without a doubt, lead to new disease emergences of pandemic potential and will rob future generations of Ugandans and Congolese of their natural resources.
- In Uganda and DRC, few policies currently exist that adequately connect the wildlife trade with disease surveillance and zoonotic spillover mitigation.
- A "One Health" umbrella approach is required to facilitate integration of existing policies and to create new ones to mitigate spillover risks at the human/wildlife and human/wildlife/livestock interfaces.

EIA plans to work with NRCN and Conserv Congo to condense the findings of the zoonotic disease assessment into a briefing document to be shared with relevant government and civil-society stakeholders in Uganda and DRC. Dr DeeAnn Reeder and EIA have tentative plans to publish the research work in a peer-reviewed journal article. Under IWT056, a wildlife crime consultant was recruited in January 2021 to complete a series of assessments on pangolin/wildlife trafficking in Uganda, including the impact of COVID-19. Due to delays in *Covid-19 Rapid Response Round Final Report Template 2021*

obtaining research approval for this work from UWA, the delivery deadline for these assessments has been extended to August 2021 and the outputs will be reported under IWT056.

3. Lessons learnt

The central lesson learned from this project is that civil-society organisations operating in countries of concern for wildlife trafficking are central to ensuring government accountability on wildlife crime. Despite COVID-19 travel restrictions and formidable governance and other challenges, particularly in DRC, both NRCN and Conserv Congo have proactively implemented efforts to bring wildlife traffickers to justice. Through the implementation of IWT056, DRC was identified as a major illicit wildlife product source country and closer collaboration between Uganda and DRC wildlife anti-trafficking actors is essential. The new collaboration between NRCN and Conserv Congo that has been achieved through this project will function as a basis from which future project activities targeting cross-border trafficking can be implemented. Furthermore, Conserv Congo's in-person engagements with NRCN have served to transfer lessons learned and approaches to DRC. For instance, following Adams Cassinga's trip to Kampala he identified a strong need to deepen engagement with the DRC's Ministry of Justice to build institutional buy-in for action by the prosecution service on wildlife crime. As part of this, Conserv Congo plans to advocate for the establishment of special wildlife courts in DRC, following the model exemplified by NRCN's engagement with the ODPP.

In both Uganda and DRC, challenges around chain of custody of seized wildlife products remains a challenge. In particular, the preservation of bushmeat as evidence to be presented in court. Resourcing and systems for the rescue, rehabilitation and release of live pangolins and other seized live wild animals in both countries is a priority need.

While remote/online communication has served to ensure project implementation it has not replicated the benefits of physical meetings and in-person communication. Internet connections between Uganda and DRC, and the UK are sometimes poor, and this was particularly the case for Uganda during the national election period (that ran into January 2021). Prior to this project, between 2019 and 2020, EIA travelled to Uganda to conduct M&E and other activities under project IWT056, this enabled existing relationships with our partner organisation to be leveraged for the implementation of this project. Engagement with Conserv Congo has only been through remote means, which has worked well but an in-person meeting planned for later in 2021 is necessary to further build our working relationship. A lack of in-country visits to Uganda and DRC in 2021 has also prevented in-person engagement with government and NGO stakeholders by EIA, and limited our ability to coordinate with other actors.

4. Other comments and feedback

During the reporting period, with funding from a US State Department INL, EIA recruited a consultant to conduct a social safeguards review of our wildlife investigations, intelligence and criminal justice capacity building work. As a result of this we have developed a social safeguards implementation plan which includes actions to further ensure our work does not lead to human rights abuses or ethical breaches. No social safeguard issues have arisen through the implementation of this project.