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South Asia: Combating illegal wildlife trade



Climate change, glacier melting and earth warming have become common vocabulary in the public speech and political agenda, yet, there are other, equally important concerns with respect to our natural environment and survival of future generations. One of them is biodiversity, threatened by habitat loss for flora and fauna and by wildlife crime.

South Asian countries account for 15 per cent of world biodiversity. The iconic tiger and elephant, snow leopard and other big cats, one-horn rhino, pangolin, brown bear, deer, reptiles, seahorse, star tortoise, butterflies, peacocks, birds, red sander, orchids, shells, corals to name some of the species -partly endemic to South Asia - are seriously endangered or even on the brink of extinction, mainly because of rampant poaching and unscrupulous illegal trade of wildlife for the sale of hides, trophies, ornamental plants, music instruments and for traditional medicine, often in outside markets.

It is already 35 years ago, that in 1975, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) came into force with the purpose to protect endangered wildlife. Most South Asian countries have ratified the Convention. Nevertheless wildlife has decreased substantially over the years symbolized prominently by the drastic reduction of tigers in the wild, whose number went down in one century from 100,000 to approximately 3,200.

From 17 to 19 May 2010, South Asian countries met at the "First Meeting of the South Asia Experts Group on Illegal Wildlife Trade", in Kathmandu, Nepal to discuss, how they can work better together in wildlife law enforcement to effectively contain illegal wildlife trade, bring poachers and smugglers to justice and rescue animals when seized. The ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) supported by Freeland and TRAFFIC (the wildlife trade monitoring network of the World Wildlife Fund) provided valuable insight in its capacity-building, networking and communication work over the last six years, which resulted in major achievements with regard to the rescue of 28,000 animals and the first multiple years convictions for wildlife smugglers in several South East Asian countries. In the light of this experience, the Representatives of the respective Government agencies decided to form a similar network for South Asia, the South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network (SAWEN) and identified the immediate actions required to give shape to this network, including the establishment of a secretariat, the carrying out of joint operations, intelligence sharing and identification of markets for illegal wildlife products.



With this step done and in pursuance of the Jaipur Declaration of the South Asia Cooperative Environmental Programme (SACEP) in 2008, the meeting marked a renewed commitment by South Asian countries to protect our so valuable natural resources and wildlife in a region that hosts one fourth of the world population. And they can count with the support of TRAFFIC, the International Consortium on Combating

Wildlife Crime, -formed in 2009 by CITES, Interpol, the World Customs Organization and UNODC - as well as of other partners such as the World Bank and the US.

Read more about TRAFFIC:

TRAFFIC is the wildlife trade monitoring network of WWF and works to counter illegal trade and ensure sustainability of legal trade through methods ranging from undercover field investigations to providing high level policy engagement with governments.

Note: South Asia comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

This article is written by Cristina Albertin, UNODC Regional Representative for South Asia who participated in the 'Experts Group Meeting on Illegal Wildlife Trade' in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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