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Wildlife Conservation Society

The illegal wildlife trade is one of the biggest problems for wildlife worldwide today. It seems to be increasing in volume and it allows a whole mass of different things. You've got the bush meat trade, which is primarily a problem in Africa, a lot of it in Central Africa, but increasingly spreading out in East Africa as well. And then there's wildlife trade across Asia, which is feeding into markets primarily in East Asia and that covers everything. That covers meat for food and it also covers wildlife and medicines, for the traditional medicines. And it also covers pets and also birds going for the pet trade. And so it's an increasing problem. It's an increasingly globalized problem with staff bearing across international borders and that includes into places like the U.K. and the U.S.

It's an increasing problem here in some ways. Some of the bird trade coming into the U.S. is a big problem. Some of the bush meat trade coming from Africa is a problem. It's not a huge problem in terms of volume. It's potentially a problem in terms of bringing in disease into this country because with animals coming illegally smuggled into this country, they can be bringing in wildlife diseases. So for example, last year at Logan Airport in Boston they confiscated a shipment of 26 monkeys coming in, smoked monkeys coming in for bush meat trade. Well, that certainly is a disease problem. The scale of it is probably not big enough to be a major conservation problem but it does have other repercussions.

In terms of why we should care, wildlife trade worldwide is wiping out a lot of species that people in this country care about. So, in Africa for example, Great Apes are threatened by wildlife trade for their meat. Animals that are really special globally, such as chimpanzees and gorillas, are threatened by hunting and trade for their meat. This applies to a huge number of other species. In Asia the pet trade centers on orangutans and for a large number of birds that are very spectacular. A lot of the world's most wonderful wildlife is being threatened increasingly by hunting and trade for skins as well as for the meat for medicines, that sort of thing. So, it's a big problem from that point of view.

Another reason why we should be caring about the wiping out of wildlife, particularly from the world's tropical forests by hunting and trade, is because what we're essentially doing is creating what's known as the empty forest syndrome. And this means that we're getting forests, which look fantastic; they're full of wonderful trees but they're losing their wildlife from inside them because it's being hunted out. And that means that we're losing pollinators, dispersers, browsers and that's likely to have a domino effect within the forest and will cause other species to go to, including species which are very important for medicines, for timber. And so we'll get this knock-on effect. So, for example, in Gabon about 80% of plants in the forest are pollinated or dispersed in some way by animals. So if we lose those animals the wider repercussions for the whole ecosystem could be very significant indeed and we don't know the full ramifications of it.

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Wildlife faces massive problems worldwide. A lot of it clearly closely tied into local political and economic problems and development. So, for example, it boils down to two core things. One is loss of or disturbance to their habitat where they live. And the other is hunting and wildlife trade, and those are the two core things that are causing species to disappear. And both of those clearly are very strongly linked in to what's happening locally, politically on the ground. So areas of high human population density, for example, means that people need land and people need food, which means they chop down forests; they go into natural habitat areas and they often need to hunt wildlife. So, you've got that direct link.

Wildlife trade is closely linked particularly in Central Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa to poverty and what's going on politically. So for example, Zimbabwe in the '80s had some of the best wildlife management systems on the planet. They were fantastic. Now, with a lot of the breakdown of governance in rural areas in rural Zimbabwe is causing an increase in hunting and bush meat trade there. Conversely, across the border in Zambia, where you have traditionally less good wildlife management systems, now they're really kicking in and there's some excellent wildlife management projects going on in the Langua Valley area.

There's a drought (in the Langua Valley area) and there's a severe shortage of food. People are tending to need to eat wildlife for the food. So, one of the programs that the Wildlife Conservation Society is involved in there is working to set up farmer cooperatives to help people get food more securely – and be able to market it – while at the same time working with people to get them to help to protect wildlife within their own national parks. So you have these policy links in some areas where people, rural people, have very little choice and they need to eat and wildlife is there and it's edible.

But concurrently with that you also have increasing links where wildlife is being consumed as a luxury by people with increasing middle class wealth in some tropical countries. So for example in Central Africa, you have rural people who are forest based people, who need wildlife to eat as a source of food. And then running in parallel to that you have an increasingly wealthy middle class in urban areas who want to buy wildlife as a luxury. Bush meat is a luxury food within in the cities. So you've got these two things going on and wildlife management needs to take that into account. So you can't tell people who really depend on a resource who have nothing else to stop. What you need to do is to work with them to see what's sustainable, what's not sustainable, and if necessary, help to develop alternatives. But at the same time, address these luxury urban markets, which are a major drain on resources and they're bad for the wildlife population. And they're also bad for the rural people who still really depend on that resource.

There are some very interesting links between bush meat trade consumption, consumption of wildlife of food and consumption of fish for food. So for example, there's been an interesting study done recently off the coast of Ghana, which showed that when the marine fish catch is low then people started poaching more inside national parks. So, there's a need for this wild protein and there are very strong links between

consumption of fish and consumption of bush meat. And then in Central Africa, in the Congo, we have a project which shows very clearly that during the dry season when the river is low – this is fresh water fish in this case – when the river is low then fish are easy to catch and the price of fish in local markets goes up – or goes down. But at the same time that pulls the price of fish below the price of bush meat, so people eat more fish and less bush meat.

During the rainy season when it's more difficult to catch wild fish, then the price of fish goes up. It goes above the price of bush meat and so people eat more bush meat. So, the two things are very closely linked and what tends to happen --if you get development going into an area --is that the same pressures hit both the bush meat and the wild fish. For example, a logging road going into an area for the first time, people migrate in along the road. Logging company staff moves into an area so your local human population increases. Your access to outside marketing increases. Your general access to more modern technologies increase within the area, which means that people start hunting much more unsustainably because they're hunting to feed more people who have moved into the area. And also they start hunting to feed outside markets.

At the same time, people are starting to fish more unsustainably as well. They now have access to markets as well where particular species of fish will fetch a good price. And they also start to use other types of technology, such as bombing and poisoning, which traditionally would not have been used. So as you get development coming into an area for the first time, all these things hit both wildlife populations and also fish populations. And that means that your local people lose out all around.

The role of zoos, in general, is changing. Particularly good zoos in Europe and North America, their role has changed over the years from being collections of animals for people to see, as a sort of theme park, through to areas of scientific knowledge about conservation, about wildlife in general, so they can be centers of research about what individual species need, about species health issues, but also very much more increasingly centers of education for the public about conservation issues. And a lot of good zoos now increasingly also have linked conservation programs in the field. So either some of their monies go towards fundraising for field programs on the ground and also in terms of educating people about better conservation practices for wildlife. In addition, there's a captive breeding side of things, which is very important for some species. But the number of species that can be captively bred in zoos is going to be small, inevitably, compared with the number of species that are a threat worldwide from these pressures of habitat loss and hunting. So, the core role of zoos is, is rapidly evolving to become education centers, outreach centers and centers for links with field conservation programs across the world.

The state of the planet's wildlife, at the moment, is very alarming. It's on a cusp for a lot of species. Some species are going so fast and we either need to do something about it very quickly or we're going to start seeing some pretty massive extinctions of species that we really care about. Potentially unless we change the way we behave as a species, we're

going to start to see another major extinction crises for other species. Unless we start to realize that life really is a balance and that we have a responsibility to these other species, then we could start to see really massive waves of extinction within the next decade or so.

We should all be caring about this in some way or another because what happens to species across the world ultimately is going to affect all of us. Initially, this is a moral and an aesthetic reason, that we're one of perhaps a hundred million species on the planet but we're the first species ever to have the control of the fates of other species in our hands. So there's a whole ethical dimension about why we should care about all these other species.

There's also the fact that once we do start to get domino extinction effects we don't know what the full impact is going to be. And particularly within the world's forests and the world's seas, we don't know what that increasing extinction crisis is going to do in terms of the world's climate, in terms of the whole functioning of the ecosystem, so we don't know about that. But then there's the other factor, there's the aesthetic thing that the world will be a much poorer place if it has no elephants and no gorillas in it. And I certainly would be very sad to live in a world that has so few other spectacular animals in it. It's one of the things that gives absolute wealth and richness to life on this planet. And if we wipe it out then, and end up with basically small species that we can happily live such as small rodents, small deer, that sort of thing, and we lose our big carnivores and we lose our big primates, then the world would be a very much poorer place for everyone.