



# Knowledge Brief

## Wildlife Trafficking in Central Africa



### Regional Overview

The report on “Wildlife Trafficking in Central Africa” commissioned by UNODC as part of the GEF-funded Congo Basin IP, within UNEP’s Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative, provides a detailed analysis of illegal wildlife trade in the Congo Basin. It covers six countries in Central Africa: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

The objectives of the research study were to identify the drivers, dynamics, trends and impacts of the illegal trade, and to identify the transnational organized crime networks (TOCs) involved.

The methodology is based on various sources: published/unpublished reports, CITES databases, EIA, TRAFFIC, IUCN, interviews with experts, etc.

The study identified TOC networks operating trafficking operations for each of the four wildlife commodities of interest: elephant ivory, pangolin scales, live great apes and African grey parrots. There was considerable overlap between networks trafficking ivory and pangolin scales, as well as between those dealing in great apes and African grey parrots. The report highlighted that the primary buyers and destinations of ivory and pangolin scales had shifted from China to Vietnam, with Vietnam in turn smuggling large quantities to China. Another finding was that while great apes and African grey parrots have destination markets dispersed across multiple regions, these markets are concentrated mainly in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. In addition, live exotic animal networks rely heavily on social media to establish personal relations between suppliers and demand-side traders, facilitating both marketing and communications. The findings indicate that these TOC networks extensively exploit corruption and falsification of documents, particularly when it comes to CITES permits.

### Transnational Organized Crime Networks

- TOC networks have been identified for the four main target species: elephant ivory, pangolin scales, live great apes and African grey parrots.
- There is a strong overlap between ivory and pangolin traffickers, and those involved in great apes and parrots.
- Buyers and routes of ivory and pangolin scales have shifted from China to Vietnam, now a hub for China.
- Great apes and parrots are destined for a wider variety of markets: the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia.
- Social media plays a key role in the marketing of live animals.
- These networks make extensive use of corruption and falsification of documents, particularly CITES permits.







## Elephants

The report found that poaching, trafficking, prices and demand for ivory have dropped in recent years, but still pose a threat to elephant populations. According to the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) Nigeria recorded the largest magnitude of confiscated ivory, followed in order by Gabon, DRC, Congo, Cameroon, CAR and Equatorial Guinea. While Nigeria, Uganda, Burundi and Angola are important transit countries for the export of Congo Basin ivory, Southeast Asia is known as the main destination. The study identified West Africans connected to Vietnamese TOC networks as the primary perpetrators of the trafficking. While TOC networks operate in all four of the sub-Saharan African regions, they have moved from eastern African ports to western African ports for exports. The study demonstrated that members of the TOC networks are highly mobile and adaptive, and shift operations quickly in response to law enforcement pressure.

- Although poaching has been declining since 2014, ivory seizures increased in 2022.
- TRIDOM (Cameroon, Congo, Gabon) is a major area of origin for ivory.
- Recent major seizures:
  - 2019: 9.12 tons seized in Vietnam (source: Republic of Congo)
  - 2022: 1.5 tons seized in Lubumbashi, DRC
  - 2023: 7 tons in Haiphong, port of Vietnam

## Pangolin scales

The Central Africa wildlife trafficking report revealed that the region serves as the world's largest source of pangolin scales, with poaching and trafficking rates showing steady growth from about 2014 to 2020. Following that period, a decrease in both seizures and price was observed. This decline may be attributed to law enforcement disruptions of TOC networks, potentially keeping exports in check. Among the observed countries, Cameroon and DRC have the most active pangolin scale trafficking networks. Intercontinental trafficking of pangolin scales is typically organized by experienced networks, often shipping scales alongside ivory, using the same TOC networks, transport methods and routes.

- Central Africa is the world's largest source.
- Intercontinental trafficking of scales is organized by experienced networks.
- Large seizures (often mixed with ivory) peaked in 2019 (up to 12 tons).
- Decrease in seizures and prices since 2020.





## Great Apes

The report highlighted that capture and exports of live great apes infants have increased in recent years for use as pets and commercial zoo exploitation, based on available data.<sup>1</sup> Prices at the lower levels of the supply chain in Africa have remained stable, but have increased two- to five-fold over the last five years at the export and importer selling level, suggesting rising demand in destination countries. Great apes are usually transported by air with CITES permits for other species. The main destination countries are in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia.

The study found that animal dealers are based mainly in the DRC, but also in Nigeria and Cameroon, and that they smuggle great apes mainly by air to dealers they know in Libya or in the Middle East across to Southeast Asia. The main collecting areas are often national parks (e.g. the Odzala-Kokoua and Nouabale-Ndoki parks in Congo).

- Increased demand for great ape infants, including gorillas.
- Misuse of CITES permits or direct smuggling.
- Great apes are often captured in national parks (Odzala-Kokoua, Nouabalé-Ndoki).



## African Grey Parrots

The report has highlighted that DRC has the largest source and most active trafficking of African grey parrots (AGPs). Illegal exports mainly transit through Nigeria. Since AGPs were listed on CITES Appendix I in 2017, illegal exports have increased every year. CITES Trade Database records suggest that South Africa laundered significant numbers of Congo Basin AGPs before 2017, but no longer does. AGPs are usually transported by air with CITES permits for other species, which demonstrate the misuse of such permits. As with great apes, prices for AGPs in source countries have been stable, but have risen in destination countries. It was noted that many of the same animal dealers that export great apes also export AGPs. West Africans, especially Guineans, may be involved both with great apes and AGPs.

- Since their listing in Appendix I of CITES (2017), illegal trade in African Grey Parrots has increased sharply.
- Origin of the trafficked AGPs: North and West DRC, Southern Cameroon, Northern Congo, Monte Alén Park (Equatorial Guinea).
- Illegal exports of AGPs mainly transit through Nigeria.



<sup>1</sup> Increased reports of great ape trade likely indicate increased poaching, but could also be linked to strengthened law enforcement resulting in more frequent reports.

## Transport, concealment and corruption

The report has demonstrated that ivory and pangolin scales are often concealed in maritime shipping containers or airfreight containers among legitimate cargo such as wood and peanuts. In contrast, great apes and African grey parrots are primarily transported through direct smuggling or with falsified CITES permits. The networks span enormous areas and operate across multiple African regions. Reaching this degree of organization would be impossible without corruption, which is highly present at all of the different trafficking stages: from collection, to transport and customs control. Corruption is widespread across multiple agencies with police, customs, wildlife authorities, air and seaport transport agents, and judiciary officials facilitating trafficking in exchange for bribes.

- Ivory and pangolins: concealed in shipping containers or airfreight containers with legitimate cargo such as wood and peanuts.
- Great apes and parrots: direct smuggling or falsified CITES permits.
- Corruption is omnipresent at all stages of trafficking: collection, transport, customs.

In conclusion, the wildlife trafficking networks operating in Central Africa demonstrate sophisticated transnational organized crime operations that have adapted to changing market dynamics and enforcement pressures. The study reveals a complex ecosystem of trafficking where networks show significant overlap between commodities—particularly between ivory and pangolin scale traffickers, and between those dealing in great apes and African grey parrots. While recent law enforcement disruptions may have contributed to declining seizures and prices for some commodities like pangolin scales, the adaptability of these networks is evident in their shifting export routes from eastern to western African ports, their extensive use of social media for live animal trafficking, and their systematic exploitation of corruption across all levels of government and regulatory agencies. The networks' ability to rapidly adjust operations in response to enforcement pressure, combined with rising demand in destination markets across the Middle East and Asia, suggests that combating wildlife trafficking will require sustained, coordinated international efforts that address both supply chains and the endemic corruption that facilitates these criminal enterprises.

## About the Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative

The Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative is working with governments and partners to preserve the Congo Basin rainforest and peatlands through transformational landscape approaches created together with local communities, forest-dependent people, and the private sector, ensuring meaningful benefits for all involved.

The UNEP-led multi-partner and multi-country Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative includes the GEF-funded Congo Forest Integrated Programme and the IKI-Funded Congo Basin Peatlands Project.

The GEF-funded Congo Forest Integrated Programme, being delivered under the UNEP-led multi-country and multi-partner Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative, comprises two flagship initiatives, including the GEF-7 Congo Basin Impact Programme (2021-2026), and the GEF-8 Congo Critical Forest Biome Integrated Programme (2025-2032).

The main aim of these two GEF-funded programmes is to catalyse transformational change in the conservation and sustainable management of critical forests in transboundary and national landscapes of the Congo Basin.

Email: [unep-ecosystems-congoforests@un.org](mailto:unep-ecosystems-congoforests@un.org)

[WWW.CONGOLANDSCAPES.ORG](http://WWW.CONGOLANDSCAPES.ORG)

