



THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

A GROWING THREAT TO NATURAL RESOURCES,
PEACE, DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY

A UNEP-INTERPOL RAPID RESPONSE ASSESSMENT



Nellemann, C. (Editor in Chief); Henriksen, R., Kreilhuber, A., Stewart, D., Kotsovou, M., Raxter, P., Mrema, E., and Barrat, S. (Eds). 2016. *The Rise of Environmental Crime – A Growing Threat To Natural Resources Peace, Development And Security*. A UNEP-INTERPOL Rapid Response Assessment. United Nations Environment Programme and RHIPTO Rapid Response–Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, www.rhipto.org

ISBN 978-82-690434-0-2 (print)

ISBN 978-82-690434-1-9 (pdf)

Printed by UNEP

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Foreword

The world is being dredged of its natural resources, with much of what we rely on for our livelihoods at risk from a new threat: environmental crime.

The slaughter of elephants and rhinos has raised awareness of the illegal trade in wildlife. We are facing mass extinctions and countries are losing iconic wildlife species. However, the scope and spectrum of this illegal trade has widened. Criminals now include in their trafficking portfolios waste, chemicals, ozone depleting substances, illegally caught seafood, timber and other forest products, as well as conflict minerals, including gold and diamonds.

The growth rate of these crimes is astonishing. The report that follows reveals for the first time that this new area of criminality has diversified and skyrocketed to become the world's fourth largest crime sector in a few decades, growing at 2-3 times the pace of the global economy. INTERPOL and UNEP now estimate that natural resources worth as much as USD 91 billion to USD 258 billion annually are being stolen by criminals, depriving countries of future revenues and development opportunities.

Environmental crime has impacts beyond those posed by regular criminality. It increases the fragility of an already brittle planet. The resulting vast losses to our planet rob future

generations of wealth, health and wellbeing on an unprecedented scale. They also compromise our ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

An additional by-product of environmental crime is that it undermines peace. It is not surprising that the UN Security Council has recognized the serious threat to security posed by environmental crime, with UN reports pointing to armed groups and potentially even terrorists sustained through the spoils of this rising criminal industry.

However, an enhanced law enforcement response can help address this worrying trend. There are significant examples worldwide of cross-sectoral efforts working to crack down on environmental crime and successfully restore wildlife, forests and ecosystems. Such collaboration, sharing and joining of efforts within and across borders, whether formal or informal, is our strongest weapon in fighting environmental crime.

But to meet the scale of this threat, a broad-ranging, targeted effort must be put forward so that peace and sustainable development can prevail.

Mr. Achim Steiner

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Summary and recommendations

The environment provides the very foundation of sustainable development, our health, food security and our economies. Ecosystems provide clean water supply, clean air and secure food and ultimately both physical and mental wellbeing. Natural resources also provide livelihoods, jobs and revenues to governments that can be used for education, health care, development and sustainable business models. The role of the environment is recognized across the internationally agreed seventeen sustainable development goals adopted in 2015.

However, the environment as the very foundation of sustainable development, peace and security is now at risk. Environmental crime is vastly expanding and increasingly endangering not only wildlife populations but entire ecosystems, sustainable livelihoods and revenue streams to governments. By some estimates, possibly more than a quarter of the world's elephant population has been lost in a decade. However, environmental crimes are no longer restricted to iconic wildlife and rare wood species alone – they have become part and parcel of the larger global network of transnational organized environmental crimes. Environmental crime also include corporate crime in the forestry sector, illegal exploitation and sale of gold and minerals, illegal fisheries/fishing, trafficking in hazardous waste and chemicals and threat finance using wealth generated illegally from natural resources to support non-state armed groups and terrorism.

Although the definition of “environmental crime” is not universally agreed, it is often understood as a collective term to describe illegal activities harming the environment and aimed at benefiting individuals or groups or companies from the exploitation of, damage to, trade or theft of natural resources, including serious crimes and transnational organized crime.

Indeed, the value of the illegal wildlife trade is now dwarfed by the larger crimes against the environment.

- The illegal wildlife trade is by some estimated at 7–23 billion USD per year
- Environmental crime is now estimated to be ca. 91–258 billion USD (2016) annually, a 26% increase from previous estimate in 2014.
- Environmental crimes is rising by 5–7% annually – 2–3 times the rate of the global economy
- Losses of government revenues through lost tax income due to criminal exploitation account for at least 9–26 billion USD annually.
- Forestry crimes including corporate crimes and illegal logging account for an estimated 51–152 billion USD;
- Illegal fisheries an estimated 11–24 billion USD;
- Illegal mining estimated at 12–48 billion USD;
- Waste at 10–12 billion USD.



The wide uncertainty range reflects the lack of criminal statistics in this field, but is based on best sources and criminal intelligence from INTERPOL. The value makes environmental crimes the fourth largest crime in the world after drug trafficking (344 billion USD), counterfeit crimes (288 billion USD) and human trafficking (157 billion USD), by some estimates.

Unlike any other known crime, environmental crimes are aggravated through their additional cost and impact on the environment and cost to future generations. Deforestation, dumping of chemicals and illegal fisheries causes loss of ecosystem services such as clean air and clean water, extreme weather mitigation, food security and even health and wellbeing. They also deprive governments of much-needed revenues and undermine legal businesses.

The possible annual growth rate of environmental crimes is difficult to estimate. Based on some registered trade statistics, seizures and reported incidents including of iconic species and chemicals, the last decade has seen a rise in environmental crimes by an annual growth rate of possibly in the range of at



least 5–7%, with examples as high as 21–28%. This compares to a global GDP growth rate of ca. 2.4%. Hence, the growth rate in environmental crimes, including the illegal wildlife trade, may indeed be 2–3 times that of the global economy, but corresponds to or exceed the growth rate in Asian countries that serve as transit or recipient of many illegal products.

With the rising involvement of transnational organized crime, criminals coordinate, evade or even shift their focus from drugs, human trafficking, counterfeit products and arms

Moreover, enforcement efforts have revealed a great increase in the scale of organization of environmental crimes: Prosecuted and convicted individuals in recent years have been convicted for illegal logging and laundering of hundreds of millions of USD in individual cases, dwarfing the resources which are available for enforcement, investigation and prosecution. Individual carbon credit fraud cases have involved sums of transfers and profits also in the hundred million USD scale. A single individual vessel involved in illegally fishing Patagonian toothfish was estimated to have had

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