NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS AND WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING: A FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL ACTION

A White Paper

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International Council of Museums
Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History
(ICOM NATHIST) Wildlife Trafficking Working Group

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Preamble

Natural history museums have been built the world over. Their concerns are the mission of the International Council of Museums Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History (ICOM NATHIST). We document changes in biodiversity through the study of the more than 60 billion objects we hold. Through our 20 million exhibitions and websites, we share knowledge with one billion visitors annually, with a further 2 billion visits to websites. This white paper is our effort to contribute to worldwide efforts to combat the global crisis of wildlife trafficking. It is also an invitation to join us in this effort.

Executive Summary

Illicit trafficking of wildlife is arguably one of the most serious ethical and logistical problems currently facing natural history museums. The black market, worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually, is turning more regularly to museum collections. Collecting institutions have a powerful voice in this issue which they are not currently using. This white paper outlines a framework for coordinated action we urge should be taken:

- **Communication** within the Museum sector to increase collaborations.
- **Building and strengthening partnerships** to grapple with the scale of the problem.
- **Improving documentation**, for instance identifying objects at risk, improving record keeping of museum collections of interest, especially of the most vulnerable components, to make trade in stolen material more difficult and smuggled items easier to track.
- **Training and educating professionals**, including museum professionals, law enforcement officers, judges, customs and border control officials and heritage and legal market professionals. Topics would include proper protocols to ensure that Museum exhibitions contain materials and specimens that are legally and ethically obtained.
- **Raising public awareness** through museum-based initiatives such as exhibitions, workshops, forums, online, smart phone app and education programs, to reduce demand and work toward reaching universal condemnation of illicit trafficking.
- **Developing methods for improved identification** of biological material to enhance best practice standards. Museums have expertise in providing taxonomic advice.
- **Improving security** internal and external to museums to reduce the risk of theft of collection objects and aid recovery
- **Lobbying for improvements to legislation** within and across national borders, e.g., harmonizing CITES & World Heritage conventions to link them better on this issue.
Introduction

This white paper is the product of the ICOM NATHIST Wildlife Trafficking Working Group ("WTWG"). The original members met at a workshop held at Zagreb Zoo on the 8th and 9th of October, 2014. The group’s formation and work were subsequently ratified by the ICOM NATHIST Board on October 11, 2014. WTWG includes some of the world’s best thinkers on illicit wildlife trafficking from a variety of perspectives, including wildlife genetics, international security, ecology, museology and public engagement. The WTWG finalized a Workshop Report outlining the discussions held in Zagreb which serves as the basis for this white paper.\(^1\). The specific recommendations herein address illegal wildlife trafficking and the leadership role natural history museums can and should take in resolving the risks presented by trafficking.

Illicit trafficking of wildlife is one of the top international illegal trade practices, behind only narcotics, counterfeiting, and human trafficking.\(^ii\) It is estimated to be worth at least US $19 billion per year.\(^iii\) Many international groups and some national governments have recognized illegal wildlife trafficking as a growing source of funding for terrorist groups. Increased demand for certain wildlife items in the United States, China, and other countries continues to fuel unprecedented depletion of resources. Lives have been lost, and livelihoods destroyed, by the increasing aggressiveness of poaching activities. The impact on targeted wildlife has been catastrophic.

This activity has accelerated to encompass thefts of specimens and materials from natural history museums. Incidents such as the €500,000 theft of rhinoceros horn from the National Museum Archive at Balheary Road in Swords County Dublin in April 2013 \(^iv\), and the theft of seventeen rare monkeys from the Beauval Zoo in France in May, 2015 \(^v\), exemplify the urgent need for proactive involvement.

This state of affairs has galvanized the international community to action through international treaties amongst affected countries, as well as collaborative measures between conservation groups, non-governmental organizations, and the like. Natural history museums have unique expertise, insights and institutional risks that mandate our participation in this ongoing and crucial international dialog, anticipating a unique and valuable contribution.

Natural history museums can and should refine practices to protect existing collections – especially collections that are now becoming more attractive to wildlife traffickers. This includes developing standards for identifying and documenting high risk collections, as well as addressing best practices for museum security and personnel training.

Natural history museums can also lend their support to outreach and science programs that educate their public. The illegal wildlife trade is not just destroying elephants and rhinoceros, but also big cats, great apes, parrots, tropical fish and thousands of lesser-known species such as pangolins, slow lorises and bird-wing butterflies. Museums can do much to educate constituents regarding the breadth of illegal wildlife trafficking and its trans-national character. Considerable efforts could be planned to increase the credibility and good-will that natural history museums enjoy as both public and scientific institutions. The time for action is now.
This white paper outlines a framework of activities to combat illicit wildlife trafficking, educate the public, and protect collections. It is followed by a discussion regarding proposed implementation of these activities, and areas of recommended further study.

**A Framework for Natural History Museums**

**Formal and Informal Partnerships**

Building and strengthening partnerships is essential because of the scale of trafficking and the frightening pace of wildlife decimation. The WTWG will reach out to organizations that are committed to eliminating wildlife trafficking, passionate about educating their public regarding the dangers of trafficking, and supportive of the role natural history museums play in education, collections management, and scientific expertise. Several museums, organizations and public administrations are already working for the development of museum inventories and the dissemination of adapted tools. One of the purposes of the WTWG should be supporting these initiatives. Such partners may include relevant ICOM partners, museums and professional associations, United Nations organizations, international committees overseeing relevant international conventions, conservation organizations, NGOs, universities, customs and law enforcement and national governmental bodies.

**Improved documentation**

Identifying objects at risk through improved record keeping, documentation and imaging of museum collections is a key focus of this initiative. Improved documentation would make trade in stolen material more difficult and smuggled or stolen items easier to track.

**Training and educating museum professionals and contractors**

Training and educating professionals in the museum field on best practices and ethical responsibilities would minimize the risk of “inside” jobs where collections are inadvertently lost, sold or destroyed due to institutional corruption or coercion. Equally, building new collections whether for exhibition or research, require serious ethical consideration. Training and educating professionals outside the museum community, such as law enforcement officers, judges, customs and border control officials, as well as exhibition developers and suppliers, would assist in enforcement at key points along the supply chain, as well as prosecution of culprits. Training of awareness raising of legal market professionals and would be integral to our efforts.

**Raising public awareness**

Raising public awareness through exhibitions, workshops, forums, online, smart phone app and education programs are important contributions of the museum sector and would help to reduce the demand and work toward reaching universal condemnation of illicit trafficking. Through this initiative, we will encourage the global natural history museum community to engage their visitors on these issues. World Wildlife Day, International Museums Day and other pre-existing celebrations could also be good vehicles for raising awareness.
Improved Methodologies

Museums’ expertise in taxonomy is of tangible benefit to combatting wildlife trafficking. In addition, developing methods for improved identification of biological material (e.g. through DNA techniques) enhance best practice standards and facilitate due diligence. We will encourage the global museum community to use these activities to underpin policy decisions regarding threatened species.

Security

Improving museum security reduces the risk of theft and aids recovery of objects that are stolen. Through industry communication, we will promulgate best practice in evaluating and managing security risks to natural history collections. We will also assess and disseminate the most recent and effective policies and practices regarding museum and collections security.

Lobbying

We will lobby for improvements to international or national legislation, better regulations, and increased funding for local implementation and enforcement, giving special attention to assisting institutions in source countries. For example, the CITES & World Heritage conventions are key legal treaties in the international conservation community. While they are broadly similar in their objectives, operationally there is more that could be done to link them. CITES focuses on protection of fauna and flora, specifically with respect to international trade\textsuperscript{vii}, while the World Heritage convention\textsuperscript{vii} focuses more broadly on the protection of both natural and cultural sites.

A single information resource

As many sources of information exist without a cohesive synthesis, gathering information into a single resource easily updated at need would benefit workers in the field globally.\textsuperscript{viii} This effort is critical in identifying and monitoring threatened populations and species.

Implementation

Communication

ICOM NATHIST will continue to host and grow the website of WTWG\textsuperscript{ix}, refreshing it with new content and including important information in the periodic ICOM NATHIST e-Newsletter disseminated free to interested parties.

Structure and Partnerships

We acknowledge that the scale of global wildlife trafficking is so vast that no one sector can have an impact in isolation. An important priority is for the WTWG to form collaborative partnerships. This white paper serves as a blueprint for action and provides a tangible framework for the formation of relationships. This white paper also demonstrates the capacity of natural history museums to combat this global crisis. Once partners are engaged we will work together to form a high level plan of action.
Financial contributions

No financial contributions are anticipated from partners in the first instance. Instead, support will take the form of in-kind contributions to the actual work being undertaken, and support for representatives to attend the annual meeting (see below). This will be reviewed periodically, as circumstances change.

Annual Meeting

The ICOM NATHIST Wildlife Trafficking Working Group will meet annually in association with the annual meeting of ICOM NATHIST, or at other times as arranged. There, we will agree on a program of works to be ratified by the Board of ICOM NATHIST and partnering organizations.

Conclusion

This white paper urges coordinated participation by natural history museums and other related organizations in addressing the far-reaching and catastrophic risks presented by wildlife trafficking. Natural history museums’ collections and taxonomic expertise make them ideally placed to take a leadership role on this issue. In identifying risks, formulating policies and best practices, natural history museums have an opportunity to address illegal wildlife trafficking while protecting their existing collections and preserving the planet’s natural heritage for generations to come.

For more information, contact

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1. [https://icomnathisttraffic.wordpress.com/about/](https://icomnathisttraffic.wordpress.com/about/)
“CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.”
https://www.cites.org/eng/disc/what.php

Each State Party to the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property commits to “ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of [its] cultural and natural heritage.”
Natural heritage is defined as natural features, formations and sites, but excludes wildlife. See:

https://icomnathisttraffic.wordpress.com/