

NRDC AND THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN WILDLIFE



Global biodiversity is essential to all life on earth.

The diversity of plant and animal species across our global commons is deeply connected to the health and sustainability of communities and wildlife around the world. Maintaining a broad variety of wildlife provides enormous ecological, cultural, economic, and aesthetic value and ensures that future generations can benefit from a rich natural heritage.

But international wildlife trade is putting biodiversity—and some of our most treasured species—at serious risk.

The global trade in plants and animals and their parts—fueled by increasing demand from Asia’s growing middle class, its mounting popularity as a financing tool for criminal syndicates, and inadequate policy frameworks—is now the leading threat to biodiversity after habitat loss.

A spike in demand for ivory and rhino horn has driven up poaching rates, putting African forest elephants at risk of extinction within a decade and rhinos in even greater jeopardy. Meanwhile, ongoing international trade in furs, claws, and trophies could be the death knell for polar bears, accelerating an anticipated two-thirds decline in their population due to habitat loss from climate change. And giraffe populations have declined more than 40 percent in the past 30 years due to habitat loss, trophy hunting, and a growing international trade in giraffe-bone carvings.

As demand for these and other wildlife products has surged, poachers have developed sophisticated means for killing and smuggling animals, and terrorist groups and drug cartels are entering the fray. But we can reverse these dangerous trends by putting new and innovative strategies to work in strengthening wildlife trade policies in key countries and internationally.

A healthy future for wildlife

NRDC envisions a future where robust populations of polar bears, elephants, rhinos, giraffes, and other imperiled species thrive in the wild. To achieve this, we are working to stop the exploitation of these species by ensuring that commercial and policy decisions on international wildlife trade are based on sound data and analysis.

Working in key international policy and market contexts, including the United States, China, and Europe, we promote the development, adoption, and enhancement of legal and regulatory frameworks to manage or shut down international and domestic wildlife markets. We create and advance analytic models that inform law, policy, and intervention strategies to prevent market errors and curb exploitation. And we engage with a wide range of decision-makers, influencers, and stakeholders—including governments, NGOs, corporations, and consumers—to achieve systemic changes in wildlife management.

NRDC's unique value

NRDC is one of the only organizations with the international and domestic reach and expertise to tackle the issue of wildlife trade on three key fronts: policy, demand reduction, and legislative/judicial capacity-building. With decades of experience in international and domestic wildlife policy and advocacy, we have the ability to identify the key “pressure points” where change is most likely to occur, as well as the tools—from litigation to market campaigns—necessary to deliver that change. And with offices in the United States and China—both major markets and political influencers on world wildlife policy—we have longstanding relationships with decision-makers and stakeholders where it counts.

Recent milestones

Helped persuade China, the largest ivory consumer in the world, to close its domestic ivory market by providing technical advice on the implementation and enforcement of such a ban.

Helped secure a near-total ban on the commercial ivory trade in the United States by providing critical market analysis, passing legislation in the country's top three ivory markets (California, New York, and Hawaii), and mobilizing public pressure on decision-makers, among other tactics.

Defended California's ivory ban against a legal challenge from a wealthy ivory collector—a landmark case that will help decide the fate of any similar lawsuits brought in other states.

Helped ban the international commercial trade in pangolins, the most-trafficked mammal on the planet, under a key global wildlife treaty.

Helped put in place reporting mechanisms to enhance cooperation between the United States, Mexico, and China on curbing the trafficking of totoaba, an endangered fish used in traditional Asian medicines.

Successfully incorporated three amendments into the first-ever revisions to China's Wildlife Protection Law, which will better protect species imperiled by the country's wildlife trade.

Designed and co-organized a first-of-its-kind forum that brought together government officials, diplomats, corporations, financial and research institutions, and NGOs to discuss improving cooperation between China and African countries on wildlife conservation and trade issues.

What's next

Moving forward, we will continue to seek new ways to engage on wildlife trade issues by leveraging our expertise and skills to limit the exploitation of individual species and endangered wildlife more broadly. Currently, we are exploring opportunities to help replicate strong policy frameworks in new contexts internationally, establish a definition and standard for sustainable use, and implement strategies that reduce demand by transforming consumer behavior.

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