



Illegal wildlife trade is the fourth largest criminal enterprise in the world — behind only drugs, human trafficking, and arms dealing — estimated at \$23 billion annually. It is driving many species toward extinction, destabilizing ecosystems, funding criminal organizations, and creating the exact conditions — stressed, crowded, multi-species contact — that generate pandemic-level zoonotic diseases.

■ **What Is Trafficked?**

The breadth of illegal wildlife trade is staggering — virtually any living organism or part thereof can appear on the black market:

Species/Group	Product Traded	Status/Notes
African/Asian Elephants	Ivory	~20,000–30,000 elephants killed/year at peak; ivory demand mainly Asia
Rhinoceros (all 5 species)	Horn (used in traditional medicine, status symbol)	~500–600 rhinos poached/year in South Africa alone
Tigers	Bones, skins, body parts for traditional medicine	Fewer than 4,500 wild tigers remain globally
Pangolins (8 species)	Scales, meat	Most trafficked mammal on Earth; over 1 million seized 2000–2019
Parrots and Songbirds	Live pets	Trap mortality 50–70% before sale; drives wild population declines
Sea Turtles (all 7 species)	Eggs, meat, shell (tortoiseshell jewelry)	All sea turtle species protected under CITES Appendix I
Sharks	Fins for shark fin soup; gill plates	>73 million sharks killed annually for fins; 70%+ of shark species in decline
Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles	Food, traditional medicine, pet trade	Southeast Asian turtles among most threatened vertebrates
Reptiles (general)	Live pet trade, leather	Millions traded annually; captive-bred distinction often fraudulent
Tropical Hardwoods (rosewood)	Furniture, instruments	Highest-value wildlife product globally; often overlooked

■ **CITES: The Global Legal Framework**

CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is the primary international treaty regulating wildlife trade. Adopted in 1973 and now ratified by 183 countries, CITES controls trade through a permit system organized by three appendices:



Appendix	Purpose	Trade Rules	Examples
Appendix I	Species threatened with extinction if trade continues	All commercial trade prohibited; permits only for exceptional non-commercial purposes	Tigers, all rhinos, orangutans, gorillas, all sea turtles, African elephant
Appendix II	Species not currently threatened but could become so without trade regulation	Commercial trade permitted with export permit from country of origin; sustainable harvest demonstrated	Most CITES-listed species; many reptiles, birds, orchids, cacti
Appendix III	Species protected in at least one country that has requested CITES cooperation	Trade permitted with documentation of legal harvest	Walrus (Canada), Seahorses (USA), specific country-level listings

■ Wildlife Trade and Disease

The connection between wildlife trade and pandemic risk is not theoretical — it is the subject of peer-reviewed scientific consensus. Live animal markets that mix multiple wild species under crowded, stressful conditions are ideal environments for interspecies viral transmission and mutation. SARS-CoV-1 originated in a Guangdong live market in 2002. The SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) origin is debated, but most scientists agree wildlife market exposure was a significant risk factor regardless of the ultimate source. Bushmeat hunting in Central Africa provided the initial human exposure to HIV-1. Ending unregulated wildlife trade is thus not only a conservation imperative but a global public health imperative.

■ **Report Wildlife Crime:** If you suspect someone is buying, selling, or importing illegally traded wildlife or wildlife products — including ivory, rhino horn, live exotic pets without documentation, or suspicious animal parts — contact the **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Law Enforcement: 1-844-FWS-TIPS (1-844-397-8477)**. You can also report online at: tips.fws.gov Internationally, reports can be made to TRAFFIC (traffic.org) or WWF's wildlife crime hotlines.



■ Final Summary

Illegal wildlife trade is not a distant problem. It affects ecosystems on every continent, it funds criminal networks, and it creates pandemic risk. Every consumer choice — not buying ivory, not purchasing wild-caught exotic pets, choosing certified sustainable products — removes demand from the supply chain that drives trafficking. Demand reduction saves species.

■ Related XVC Guides:

- [WLD_11: Responsible Exotic Ownership](#)
- [WLD_12: Invasive Species](#)
- [WLD_22: Global Conservation Organizations](#)



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