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WILDLIFE CRIME IN CAMEROON AND THE PROTECTED AREA SYSTEM

A PRESENTATION BY
THE LAST GREAT APE ORGANIZATION, CAMEROON (LAGA)

Wildlife Crime and Protected Areas

In recent years ample information has been gathered on the nature of wildlife crime and wildlife trafficking both within Cameroon as well as within the sub region. Our understanding of the complex system leading to biodiversity loss in Protected Areas has been drastically improved. Protected species follow organized trade routs with different levels of criminality – a hand that is stretched into the PA to do the killing is just a part of a larger mechanism with brain and body way outside the PA, many times outside the country. In my opinion, this information is not yet sufficiently integrated into strategies of PA and the use of the narrow term “anti-poaching” to describe its enforcement efforts is a good manifestation of this.

The ways for adjusting strategies is out of the scope of this short presentation; all it aims is to give a glance at the nature of our problem – Wildlife Crime, beyond poaching.

Strategic Overview of Wildlife Crime in Cameroon and Operations’ Impact

Beyond the number of operations and their effectiveness there is an even more important factor in evaluating law enforcement work – the strategic value of the operations in reducing the level of illegal wildlife trade. In this regard diversified operations are chosen, which carry an added value to expose and map the different angles of wildlife crime in Cameroon. Consequently, these operations and their followed interrogations shed light on the nature of illegal wildlife trade in the sub-region. The strategic focus over this period was on great apes, ivory and lion parts, including special attention to international ivory trading routes. The following is a selection of some of the operations conducted between April05-March06 that can improve our understanding of wildlife crime in Cameroon.

Apes

June - an operation against a hotel manager holding two chimps, three monkeys, ivory and a lion skin, in collaboration with the three PASA ape sanctuaries in Cameroon. The hotel manager had been trading in primates as well as exhibiting them.

September- less than two weeks after the GRASP inter-governmental meeting - an operation against an ape dealer and operator of an amusement park. This person has had apes confiscated from him in the past in efforts from the shelters, apparently without deterrent.

October - The Taiping Four affair exposes a different angle in combating illegal trade in apes - the political fight against the international players of the trade. The Taiping Four are four gorillas that were smuggled from Cameroon to Nigeria to the Taiping Zoo in Malaysia, which paid over a million dollars in this illegal deal. Cameroon has been demanding the return of the gorillas in accordance with CITES guidelines. In October, following a series of inter-ministerial meetings and correspondence with the South African government the Cameroon government sent a negotiations mission to South Africa. The mission, sent by the Prime Minister’s office, included the sub-directors from MINFOF, MINEP, and Ministry of External relations, the High Commissioner of Cameroon in South Africa and the Director of LAGA. The Cameroon delegation took a strong stand in demanding the gorillas to be repatriated.

October- an operation against an ape dealer in the South of the country. The dealer was arrested after midnight as he was driving his motorcycle hiding the chimp in a sack, on his way for the sale.

January - an operation linking the trade in apes with the drugs trade in Bafia. Four large sacks of marijuana, weighing about 50Kg, were seized along with a young chimpanzee. Another kind of drug was also caught in possession of the dealer, which he admitted was cocaine. The drugs and wildlife dealer has been employing at least 4 poachers and has been trading other protected primates regularly.

March - a dealer specialized in trading in protected wildlife species has been arrested in Yaounde with a live chimpanzee. The dealer was observed regularly trading in protected wildlife species including apes between Belabo in the East Province to Yaounde in the Centre Province.

Ivory

The Chinese connection

By CITES CoP 13 and after operations uncovered a Chinese involvement in an organized illegal ivory trade. Two major ivory dealers were arrested in the Douala engaged in illegal ivory trade to Asia. One was arrested a second time after his jail term making a deal on the Chinese ship “Chi Feng Kou”. Most of the sales observed took place on foreign ships in the port of Douala where the ivory leaves to the international market – particularly to China. Chinese nationals were also observed purchasing articles such as chopsticks and Buddha statues inside major ivory workshops, one has been arrested. The workshops were busted seizing some 116.5 kg of ivory. All dealers arrested have served jail terms.

Military Ivory Trafficking from Gabon

September - the Minister of Forest and Wildlife personally supervised an operation intercepting a military vehicle commanded by a Captain transporting 93 elephant tusks as well as other protected species meat and parts. The contrabands were on their way from the south of the country to the centre, and are seem to be a part of a larger well organized military ivory trafficking activity from Gabon. Five civilians and two Military personnel were arrested the court case is ongoing.

The Nigerian link

November - A successful ivory operation took place in Bamenda, North West Cameroon targeting the Nigerian link, shedding light on a country with many links to wildlife crime in Africa – Nigeria.. We believe that much of the international illegal trade in Cameroon is connected to Nigeria, and there is still a significant amount of work to be done to have a lasting impact.

The Guinean link

February - two operations against Guinean ivory trade connections. The two were in Douala and were a follow up on foreigners involved in international ivory trade, connected to the prosecution of a big trader in Douala of Guinean nationality, the previous year. He used to buy tusks from all over the country and employ carvers manufacturing models for the Asian market. He served a jail term and later left Cameroon. Now these operations arrested three more Guineans operating in a similar way in two different places with 68 Kg of ivory.

The North of Cameroon as a regional trafficking junction

November - operation against a wildlife dealer, after he was found in illegal possession of two lion skins and four leopard skins. LAGA believes the dealer is a part of a larger organized illegal network involved with both national and cross border trade of endangered wildlife. The dealer was suspected of making another sale of four lion skins, destined for Nigeria, just two weeks before the operation. Interrogation sheds light on the north of Cameroon as an important junction of international wildlife trafficking routs from Cameroon, CAR, Congo, and Chad to Nigeria.

Overview of International Wildlife Traffic in Cameroon



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