

TECHNICAL BRIEFING

How the UK Can Lead the G7 in Addressing the Global Wildlife Trade Online and Offline



In Indonesia, smuggled Eclectus parrots await rescue from pipes. © BKSDA Ternate

SUMMARY

The global trade in wildlife causes multiple harms to animals, people and biodiversity, pushing many species to the brink of extinction, causing untold suffering and creating ideal conditions for the emergence and spread of infectious zoonotic diseases.

Online platforms play a major role in facilitating and amplifying wildlife trade. Algorithms, platform features and products actively spread harmful activity rather than limit it. The UK government has a unique opportunity to lead efforts towards harmonizing global laws governing illicit activity in cyberspace in order to best respond to the rising tide of illicit activity on surface, deep and dark web platforms.



WORLD PARROT TRUST



alliance to counter crime online

INTRODUCTION

The World Parrot Trust (WPT) is a wildlife conservation NGO based in Cornwall, UK. WPT was established in 1989 with the mission of helping parrots survive in the wild and thrive in our homes and has grown rapidly to become a globally influential conservation and welfare organisation.

Capture and trade to supply the global pet trade is a major threat to many parrot species and has been a major focus of the WPT's work over the last 30+ years. Nearly 1 in 3 parrot species are threatened with extinction, more than any other comparable group of birds.

WPT has been at the forefront of ongoing efforts, leading advocacy for the 2006 ban on the importation of Wild birds into the EU, securing important protections for the most threatened species at CITES and engaging with corporations including airlines and tech platforms to put in place measures to end trafficking.

Although countries and regions such as the US and EU have taken actions to end domestic legal markets in wild parrots and other birds, the development of online platforms, increased transport connectivity and emerging middle-classes in much of the world present new challenges.

THE WILDLIFE TRADE HARMS ANIMALS, PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Poorly regulated wildlife trade can lead to the overexploitation of wild populations, significantly contributing to the biodiversity crisis. The wildlife trade also contributes to the spread of infectious diseases as recognised in the G7 communiqué on the *Climate and Environment*. Zoonotic pathogens such as Ebola virus, monkeypox virus and SARS have been linked to the wildlife tradeⁱ.

Poor welfare conditions during capture and transport lead to high rates of mortality, with up to 90% of trapped parrots dying prior to export in some instances.

Associated high levels of stress create the perfect "petri-dishes" for the emergence and rapid spread of infectious diseases and new variants. Recent research by the World Parrot Trust has revealed enormous numbers of wild birds being exported around the world from countries such as Senegal, currently battling outbreaks of high-pathogenicity H5N1 Avian Influenza in wild bird populationsⁱⁱ.



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ONLINE PLATFORMS FACILITATE AND AMPLIFY WILDLIFE TRADE

Online platforms have provided new and unparalleled opportunities for traders of parrots and other threatened wildlife to connect and promote sales. Websites such as Facebook and Instagram offer a mix of public and private means of communication, giving traders huge reach while providing means to arrange sales out of view. Experts working with the Alliance to Counter Crime Online, of which WPT is a member, have revealed the vast trade that takes place online in a dizzying range of threatened species, from African Grey parrots, Chimpanzees and Cheetahs to 1000s of lesser-known species of reptiles, fish and invertebrates^{iiiiv}.

Platforms provide a number of features which allow traders to “hide” in plain sight. Sellers can set up fake accounts and direct enquires to private messaging apps. Group admins of Private Facebook Groups instruct members on how to word adverts to avoid detection while providing focal points for illicit buy and sell activity. Most concerning, algorithms designed to direct individuals towards “Related pages” and groups that may be of interest, directly amplify trade activity through connecting wildlife traffickers around the world^{iv}. This feature, which critics have said can serve as an “echo chamber” for hate speech, has the similar effect of amplifying illicit wildlife traffic.

Although Facebook and other platforms have taken steps to address harmful content, updating community standards and increasing moderation, efforts currently still fall far short of the actions necessary. In 2018 Facebook committed to reducing wildlife trade and ending wildlife trafficking, however more than two years later it takes only a few minutes to find wildlife offered for sale. A recent investigation found that only 31% of pages where wildlife was offered for sale were removed after being reported and what was left accounted for 90% of total page likes. The moderation efforts there were heavily focused on English language pages. Alarming only 2% of 93 pages in Arabic were removed. Facebook currently employs approximately one moderator for every 190,000 users – the equivalent of 2.5 people policing the whole of Cornwall.





Photo courtesy Natural Resources Conservation (BKSDA)

MAKING THE INTERNET A SAFE PLACE FOR PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE

The power of online platforms as a force for both good and to do harm is well established. The recent UK white paper on online harms outlined an ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online and for the UK to set the global standard for a regulatory framework for an online environment. The Draft *Online Safety Bill* takes important steps to regulate tech companies requiring companies to have a duty of care towards their users and to prevent the proliferation of content and activity that is illegal and harmful to adults online.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS HARMFUL WILDLIFE TRADE

The UK government has been a leader in addressing illegal wildlife trade, coordinating initiatives such as the 2018 London Declaration in Illegal Wildlife Trade and funding vital work through DEFRA's IWT challenge Fund (which includes important work to protect wild populations of African Grey parrots). There is a unique opportunity now for the UK to take action, with global attention on the risks posed by pandemics and with UK independence from the EU.

- As hosts of the G7 summit, the UK can take a lead in encouraging the G7 and other invited nations to work towards harmonizing laws governing illicit activity in cyberspace in order to best respond to the rising tide of illicit activity on surface, deep and dark web platforms. **The links and synergies between these G7 policy tracks for *Climate and Environment* and *Digital and Technology* should be emphasised to G7 leaders.** The G7 communiqué on *Climate and Environment* recognises the need for “strengthening legislation, international cooperation, capacity building, criminal justice responses, and law enforcement efforts to strengthen our response” to combat wildlife trafficking. Strengthening regulation of the online environment that hosts and amplifies wildlife trafficking is critical to this process.

Coordinated action to improve online safety and for companies to take responsibility for illegal and harmful content is outlined in the *Ministerial declaration of G7 Digital and Technology ministers*. Such synergies are currently recognised in the G7 communiqué on Climate and Environment, which welcomes discussions by Finance ministers to coordinate action to tackle illicit financial flows from IWT and other illegal threats to nature. **Adopting similar language in communiqués arising from the G7 summit would help emphasise the importance of these actions.**

- The Draft *Online Safety Bill* must be inclusive in scope to ensure specific passages related to illicit and harmful wildlife trade are effectively included within this legislation. Through this Bill the UK aspires to lead where others will follow. **It is vital that harms to animals, people and the environment are considered within the final drafting of this Bill** and we further encourage the creation of statutory codes of practice around illicit and harmful wildlife trade.
- The Policy Paper “Action Plan for Animal Welfare” makes clear that the UK government's work on animal welfare extends beyond national borders and emphasises the Conservative Party's manifesto commitment that in all trade negotiations the UK's high environmental protection and animal welfare standards will not be compromised. **These should also extend to protections against harmful wildlife trade in the online environment.** As recognised in the Action Plan, having retaken an independent seat at the WTO, the UK has an opportunity to use trade policy to further its animal welfare agenda through influencing international partners. We encourage the UK government to extend these efforts to address the impact of the exotic pet trade on all wildlife, both online and elsewhere.
- Looking towards CBD COP15, an ambitious and effective post 2020 global biodiversity framework has never been more important. **Initiatives to address harmful wildlife trade in both online and offline spaces should be integral to this framework.**
- Finally, DEFRA's IWT Challenge Fund has supported critically important work to address illegal wildlife trade and is recognised as an exemplary and highly impactful initiative by colleagues around the world. **It is important that the UK commits to maintaining the IWT Challenge Fund** into the future and that this funding stream is not affected by changes to the UK overseas aid budget.

REFERENCES

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