

Online Safety Bill: Proposal to Add Wildlife Trafficking Offenses to Schedule 7

This briefing was prepared by the World Parrot Trust and the Alliance to Counter Crime Online (ACCO), and presents the case for adding illegal wildlife trade to the scope of the Online Safety Bill.

Online Wildlife Trade Exacerbates Extinction Crisis

Amid a global extinction crisis that the British government has pledged to help reverse,¹ vast markets for endangered wildlife products and exotic pets are today found on the world's largest social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and WeChat.

Similar conditions to those fuelling the rise in online illicit drug sales, child pornography and terrorist content have driven **explosive growth in online wildlife trafficking**. Algorithmic recommendation tools provide wildlife traffickers a cost-free mechanism for marketing to customers around the planet, in an environment that affords illegal actors a great deal of anonymity and even payment systems.²

With the British parliament poised to adopt one of the world's most forward-leaning laws governing cyberspace, **the UK has the opportunity take the lead in protecting endangered wildlife globally** by adding wildlife trafficking to the list of priority offenses identified under Schedule 7 of the Bill.

A Global Crisis Impacting Britain

The online wildlife trade is global, but directly impacts Britain. The UK's National Wildlife Crime Units say cyber-enabled wildlife crime has become their **priority focus**, since virtually every wildlife case they now investigate has a cyber component to it, usually involving social media or eCommerce platforms, or messaging apps.³

Research conducted by the World Parrot Trust and ACCO has revealed the vast exotic pet trade that takes place online in a dizzying range of threatened species, from African Grey parrots, chimpanzees, and cheetahs to thousands of lesser-known species of reptiles, fish, and invertebrates.^{4,5}

A 2022 BBC Click investigation took viewers inside the world where wildlife traffickers weaponized social media to promote and facilitate the illegal trade in endangered parrots.⁶



2022 Screenshot from Facebook.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/london-conference-on-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-2018/about>

² <https://www.counteringcrime.org/wildlife-fact-sheet>

³ www.nwcu.police.uk/how-do-we-prioritise/priorities/cyber-enabled-wildlife-crime;

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2287884X2030042X>

⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989418301768>

⁵ <https://www.counteringcrime.org/wildlife-sales-on-facebook>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60247540>

Traffickers in endangered animal parts, including elephant ivory, tiger skins, rhino horn and pangolin scale have also weaponized social media platforms to grow their markets, thus accelerating extinction risks for key species. This vast, unregulated trade in live animals and their parts is not only illegal, it exacerbates risk of another animal-human spillover event, such as the ones that caused Ebola, HIV and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

The Time for Self-Regulation is Over

Founded in 2018, the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online now groups 47 leading tech platforms, including Facebook, WeChat, Snapchat and TikTok. These companies may have pledged to dramatically reduce the illegal wildlife trade on their platforms,⁸ however, there is little evidence, even in the Coalition's own reporting, that tech companies have been effectively implementing their own community standards⁹. For example, ACCO published a 2020 report demonstrating that 57% of pages and groups selling wildlife had the terms 'for sale', 'sell', or 'buy' in their title, and many groups and pages had existed for years with tens of thousands of members, without being removed⁵.

"Tech platforms have shown us over and over that they are unwilling to regulate themselves," says Gretchen Peters, Executive Director and a co-founder of ACCO. "The time for self-policing must come to an end if the world is to save thousands of species from population collapse."

Algorithms and User Agency

Most concerningly, algorithms designed to direct individuals towards "related pages" and groups directly amplify trade activity by connecting wildlife traffickers to potential buyers around the world. This feature, which critics have said can serve as an "echo chamber" for hate speech and terror content, has the similar effect of amplifying illegal wildlife traffic. In their 2020 report, ACCO reported that 29% of the pages their researchers found were recommended through the 'Related Pages' feature⁵.

Animal offences and the Bill

Over recent months, the Government has added a considerable number of content areas to the Bill, from content associated with the proceeds of crime, to content that assists illegal immigration. It is difficult to argue that offences relating to wildlife trafficking, considered a serious organised crime, should not receive similar prioritisation to sales of drugs, firearms and people. Indeed, the UK has the opportunity to again demonstrate strong leadership on this globally important issue.

As the Online Safety Bill enters Committee Stage in the House of Lords an opportunity exists to include Wildlife Trafficking alongside other priority illegal content in Schedule 7 of the Bill. Inclusion under Schedule 7 will ensure that online platforms will be required to treat wildlife trafficking offences with the same seriousness as sales of drugs and firearms. This would help limit the role of social media and other online platforms in enabling wildlife trafficking.

Specifically, we propose the inclusion of offences (e) and (h) under Schedule 1 Paragraph 1(2) of the Control of Trade in Endangered Species Regulations 2018 (COTES), namely the display for commercial

⁷ <https://www.counteringcrime.org/online-crimes/online-wildlife-markets-are-wiping-out-animals>

⁸ <https://www.endwildlifetraffickingonline.org/>

⁹ <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/03/coalition-against-online-wildlife-trafficking-shares-little-evidence-of-success-analysis/>



alliance to counter crime online

purposes and offering for sale of species listed on the CITES Appendices without proof of origin or a valid certificate.

There is current momentum behind the inclusion of animal abuse offences under the Bill. An amendment has been tabled by Lord Stevenson of Balmacara that would bring animal cruelty offences under Schedule 7, specifically the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (unnecessary suffering) and offences under section 1 of the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996.

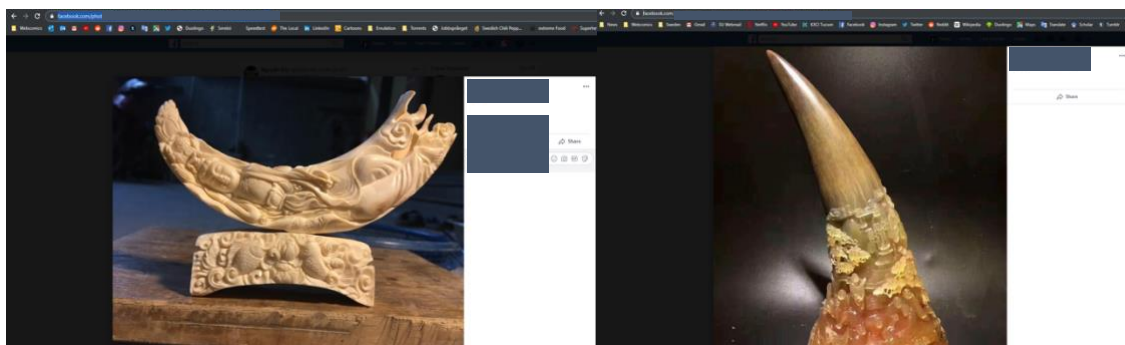
At previous stages of the Bill, Ministers provided assurances that they would closely consider the case for bringing animal cruelty content into scope. In response to a series of animal welfare amendments at Commons committee stage from Shadow Minister for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Alex Davies-Jones MP, then Bill Minister Chris Philp MP said:

“The shadow Minister raises important issues to do with animal cruelty. The whole House and our constituents feel extremely strongly about this issue, as we know...It is an area that I am sure is of concern to Members across the House, and now that the shadow Minister has raised the question, we will certainly give further thought to it.”¹⁰

Similar assurances were given at Commons committee stage, when then Bill Minister Damien Collins MP acknowledged that the inclusion of animal cruelty content in the Bill “deserves further consideration as the Bill progresses through its parliamentary stages”.¹¹

Conclusion

Britain is a country of animal-lovers that has long been a global leader in conservation. There’s an opportunity now for the UK to take the lead in protecting animals in a place where wildlife trafficking and animal abuse has become widespread: the Internet. As the world emerges from a multi-year pandemic that has claimed more than 6 million lives globally, leading British conservationists warn that the illegal online trade in wildlife also presents a grave risk to public health and safety. “The growth in online sales and the social media algorithms that promote the cute or bizarre have accelerated the risks,” said Ian Redmond, OBE, Chairman of the Ape Alliance. “Britain has the chance to lead the way in fixing this problem as part of global efforts to halt biodiversity loss and prevent the next pandemic.”



¹⁰ https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0004/PBC004_OnlineSafety_1st17th_Compilation_29_06_2022.pdf

¹¹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-07-12/debates/942C54C4-D672-492E-BAD9-195E3BB63724/OnlineSafetyBill>