WILDLIFE CRIME AND SECURITY

Tara Keir

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THE SUN SHONE BRIGHT ON NOVEMBER 5, 2016 as a group of marchers gathered at the base of the Lincoln Memorial. I shielded my eyes, scanning the cluster of colorful posters raised high against an impossibly blue sky. It was the perfect winter day to host the Global March for Elephants and Rhinos in Washington, DC. As the group set off down Henry Beacon Drive, my gaze met a homemade poster peppered with images of intricately carved ivory trinkets. Beside it, the words "ivory funds terrorism"—an oversimplified, but not entirely inaccurate statement. In the moments that followed as the crowd turned along Constitution Avenue, a woman took the megaphone, echoing this statement for all to hear. Over the course of the march, variations of the claim continued to permeate and eventually evolved into "if you buy ivory you *are* a terrorist," which is a deeply oversimplified, assumptive, and inaccurate statement, likely said with motives to guilt individuals out of consumption detrimental to wildlife. While the link between ivory and terrorism is derived from evidence, my stomach sank at the exaggeration and lack of nuance and understanding reflected by equating buyers of ivory to terrorists. With this sensationalized and misrepresented claim still ringing in my ears, I began to wonder deeply about this larger narrative—one presenting wildlife crime as a security risk—and its overall impact on conservation. What message has the general public been left with if volunteer protestors are leading their causes with chants like this one? How much of this narrative is rooted in data? And ultimately, what is its impact on the rangers protecting targeted wildlife?

Wildlife crime, when ranked among other criminal activity such as arms, drugs, and human trafficking has had a tendency to be overlooked. In 2010, investigative reporter and former head of National Geographic's Special Investigations Unit, Bryan Christy, wrote in a *National Geographic* expose that "for too long in too many countries (including the U.S.), placing the word 'wildlife' in front of the word 'crime' had diminished its seriousness."[1] This observation from over a decade ago carries the weight of a lengthy struggle conservationists have faced as species are endlessly in demand and commodified, both legally and illegally. How do we ensure that wildlife laws are taken seriously? At the time Christy wrote these words, wildlife crime did not have an identity that publicly and widely recognized its ties to other transnational organized crime, let alone terrorism. While claims had been presented as early as 2008 during the House Natural Resources Committee hearing called "Poaching American Security," at the time the narrative had not yet reached the general public's broad understanding.[2] However, just a few years later, momentum shifted.

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In a world and nation still feeling the long-standing impacts of 9/11, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly referred to wildlife trafficking as a critical national security issue in 2012, imploring that the "illegal wildlife trade must be addressed at every level of the international community."[3] In that same year, John Kerry was appointed chairman of a newly created U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, which held a hearing on "Ivory and Insecurity: The Global Implications of Poaching in Africa."[4] In his opening remarks, Kerry stated that "more insecurity, more violence, and ultimately the degradation of stability of whole regions" would occur if poaching and wildlife trafficking were left to continue unabated.[5] Between 2010 and 2012 we saw 100,000 elephants killed for their ivory, leading to a convergence of issues—outstanding emphasis on security in a post-9/11 world, the killing of elephants occurring on a massive scale, and the drive of politicians with an interest in protecting impacted wildlife.[6]

Strengthened by this convergence, wildlife crime began to garner attention beyond the conservation world, as a variety of NGOs echoed Clinton's words in statements emphasizing the link between wildlife crime and security. Since then, a variety of US actions and programs emerged to protect key species and crack down on wildlife crime, including President Obama's Executive Order "Combating Wildlife Trafficking," responsible for establishing a cabinet-level task force addressing wildlife crime; President Trump's Executive Order, "Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking,"; and Congress's bipartisan passage of the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act signed into law in 2016, of which the intended focus was tackling transnational wildlife crime.[7] The overwhelming sentiment collectively became that wildlife crime was no longer a conservation or animal welfare issue alone, but rather one of both national and global security.[8]

At the time of the March for Elephants and Rhinos, I had become acquainted with the notion that wildlife crime and security, especially in the context of global terrorist threats, were intertwined. The first story on the matter to really spark my attention was the 2015 *National Geographic* article, "How Killing Elephants Finances Terror in Africa," in which Bryan Christy follows the trail of false ivory tusks installed with GPS trackers. Working with a Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) defector, Christy's investigations discovered that multiple terrorist groups—both Joseph Kony's LRA and the Janjaweed—trade ivory tusks with the Sudanese military for salt, sugar, and—most notably—arms. That investigation was a follow-up to a previous *National Geographic* cover story, "Blood Ivory," in which Christy's investigations of the illegal ivory trade identified China as the world's driver of the trade, exposed religion as a driver of demand for ivory, and identified corruption and organized crime as part of its criminal elements. According to Christy, it was this story that prompted the Tracking Ivory project since his "Blood Ivory" investigation left unanswered questions regarding explanations for violence reported out of central Africa by those involved in elephant poaching.

After that 2012 investigation, additional claims emerged from other organizations that ivory was a major source of funding for various terrorist groups and rebel militias. In 2014, a prominent conservation NGO, Conservation International, issued a statement that funds from wildlife poaching were directly linked to funding terrorism, citing the Janjaweed, LRA, and Al-Shabaab among those rebel organizations and terrorist networks. In that same statement, Conservation International delved further into the importance of these claims in their "direct connection" campaign, stressing that activities from these groups funded by poaching profits lead to competition over scarce resources.[9] Further examples include the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) report "criminal nature"which made the claim that the illegal trade in wildlife provides funds for rebel groups, militias, and terrorist groups, stating "the illicit ivory and horn markets are fed by some of the world's most vicious and heavily armed militant groups"–and a C4ADS report commissioned by Born Free

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USA claiming that the ivory trade has funded conflicts across Africa, specifically stating "The LRA, Khartoum's proxy militias, Al-Shabaab, and others are all under severe economic strain, and ivory has become an easily accessible and valuable component of their funding portfolios."[10] All of these examples demonstrate how links to terrorist groups and rebel militias have been emphasized when presenting illegal wildlife trade as a security risk, and how it has become a means to generate what Rosaleen Duffy, Professor of International Politics at the University of Sheffield, calls "threat finance."[11]

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The exaggeration of security risks linked to wildlife crime is based on limited evidence—links between rebel militias, terrorist groups, and the illegal ivory trade—which represents only a small segment of all wildlife crime occurring around the globe. According to Vanda Felbab-Brown, Director of the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors, "The intersection of militancy with wildlife trafficking is only a sliver of the global wildlife trade. To the extent that it exists at all, the participation of militant groups in poaching is only a fraction of the illegal trade that goes on."[12] Despite this small representation, as claims surfaced linking elephant poaching to militant groups, conservation NGOs alongside politicians leaned into a more general connection between wildlife crime and security threats, not just elephant poaching. Choosing to perpetuate this exaggerated narrative across all wildlife crime overlooks two critical factors: first, that wildlife crime and poaching is a challenge for which we significantly lack global data, and second, that the individuals who are impacted most severely by the changing identity between wildlife crime and security are the rangers holding down the frontlines of both security in this context and conservation.

When speaking with Jonathan Kolby, National Geographic Explorer and former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officer, he says that in his time with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) he did not personally encounter much illegal activity supporting this nexus between wildlife crime and national security within U.S. borders. For him, wildlife crime is primarily a conservation issue, which we have linked to national security risks for awareness and funding purposes. "Do we always need to revert to these other human crimes?" Kolby asks, while stressing that it is important to know how we measure these things on a larger scale, before applying the blanket statement of wildlife crime as a security risk across all trafficked species.

However, measuring impact is difficult when the data is lacking. Over the decade since wildlife crime's identity became entwined with security, it has become clear that this overarching statement is not so easy to explain across the broad "wildlife crime" generalization, particularly when drilling into the numbers. This is largely because the numbers simply do not exist at the scale and detail required. Two major challenges in assessing the factual linkage between wildlife crime and security lies in a lack of well-defined parameters for what constitutes poaching or wildlife trafficking, and a lack of hard data to quantify poaching and wildlife trafficking occurrences.

Furthermore, while reporting and claims exist to provide some public-facing evidence for the connection between wildlife crime (specifically the ivory trade, as cited prior, as well as fisheries and timber) and global security, much of the evidence for this narrative is inaccessible—held by organizations such as the CIA and INTERPOL—where intel is classified, confidential, and unavailable to the public.[13] This leaves it impossible to evaluate the credibility of such claims; however, Duffy's research confirms that "when working with evidence within the public domain [relating to wildlife crime], that evidence base is very narrow."[14] For example, the UNODC's World Wildlife Crime Report from 2016 abstains from specifying any figure, describing it as "nearly impossible to give an accurate and consistent estimate

of the criminal revenues generated by wildlife trafficking."[15] Relatively few countries collect data relating to wildlife trafficking, according to John Seller, an independent anti-smuggling consultant with 14 years experience with CITES. He further elaborates that while some countries have "some relevant data, for instance, in their central Customs seizure records, they may not seek to treat or analyze it as a distinct crime-type."[16] Therefore, the supply of such data to relevant IGOs tends to be incomplete and unpredictable. Sellar further concluded in 2017 that "it seems reasonable to state that there is, at present, no meaningful or accurate overview of wildlife trafficking whatsoever."[17]

When broken down by species, there are a few charismatic megafauna that have more data-like rhinoceros and elephant poaching; however, fewer data exists for lesser-known species such as pangolins. This encompassing term of "wildlife crime" or "illegal wildlife trade" also does not specify the inclusion of the illicit timber trade, as well as fisheries. According to Christy, "the suggestion that [illegal wildlife trade] is a national security issue in ways most people think of either of those terms is largely unsupported: pets, skins, and body parts are too small a part of most economies to affect security." However, he explains that when we recognize the word "wildlife" encompasses timber (including charcoal) and fisheries, we begin to see more truth in that suggestion.[18]

In 2022 it was reported by Vanda Felbab-Brown for the Brookings Institution that Mexican drug cartels are expanding their reach into wildlife crime via fisheries. According to this report, the "takeover began with criminal groups targeting fishers poaching protected species, such as totoaba."[19] After that, they began extorting fishers of low-value seafood species by obligating them to sell exclusively to cartels, and then moved on to targeting the larger companies harvesting high-value species.[20] As with the case in Mexico between cartels and fisheries, and cases across Africa linking the ivory trade and rebel groups, Christy's point rings clear that "countries' economies and institutions can be impacted by illegal wildlife trade in a potentially destabilizing way, especially when we add in the street taxing of these trades by militant groups." In addition to analyzing the definition of "wildlife," Christy further argues that "if we expand "security" to include notions of human health, for example, we quickly see that trade in wildlife and the diseases it carries trigger pandemics, and are a security issue."[21]

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It is important to analyze why the issue of wildlife crime as a security risk has been leaned into so heavily, even when the hard data to support the extent of such claims across all wildlife crime doesn't necessarily exist. In her book *Security and Conservation,* Duffy argues that there are three main ways in which the illegal wildlife trade is articulated as a global security threat. First is the notion that poaching and trafficking undermine the rule of law, which therefore encourages corruption and contributes to instability in governance. Second is the argument that armed groups use illegal wildlife trafficking as a means of funding and growing their operations. And third, that wildlife crime is combined with other illicit trades as a source of funding for activities that threaten security, since criminal networks often tap into various illegal trades and activities to opportunistically source power and funding.

In the context of the United States, the existence of these threats may lead to conflict, instability, as well as failed states which could affect trading opportunities, illegal migrations, and other direct links to U.S. national interests. According to Duffy, there are two key reasons this narrative is broadly emphasized, even across all wildlife crime and poaching activity. First, it taps into a "pre-existing and deep-seated

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fear about the expansion of terrorism networks post 9/11." And second, that by arguing conservation can contribute to security, this offers a new avenue to draw funding streams.[22]

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the societal and political mentality shifted to one focused on addressing crime more aggressively across the globe, which also led to increased militarization. In the years since wildlife crime's identity shifted to one based in security, we have started to look critically at how emphasizing this link has influenced the conservation landscape, especially in the context of militarization. When speaking with Christy about this mentality shift, he reasoned that, with militarization, there emerged new concepts of conservation. People were able to contribute money to physical weapons where donations felt tied to something tangible. People could see where their money was going, and feel as though they had a direct impact. He laid the common scenario out for me: "send in money, buy this thing [a helicopter, weapons, night vision goggles etc.] and forget about it. It is cheaper and easier than building a conservation program." Furthermore, funds from conservation financing were not enough to help fight transnational crime, and the emphasis of wildlife crime as a security issue helped tap into agencies with expertise to deal with these sorts of issues.[23]

This backs up concerns raised by Duffy and other individuals in the national security space that "misdiagnoses of the threat [to security] can skew [conservation] responses in a way that not only fails to address the problem, but can also divert attention and funding from where they are most urgently needed."[24] The argument here is that conservation has been turned into a security problem, which in turn prompts a security-focused response rather than a focus on community-based solutions targeting the root of the wildlife crime problem. Within this shift lies the fear that the underlying drivers of poaching and trafficking that impact communities are overlooked, instead emphasizing a security-focused–and thus militarized–response.

However, the reality is far more complicated. John E. Scanlon AO, Former Secretary-General of CITES and current Chair of the Global Initiative to End Wildlife Crime, is quick to remind me that local communities can thrive and prosper, but they need to have conditions where they can do so. When security is impacted in a region where targeted wildlife exists by rebel militias or terrorist groups, these local communities get severely impacted from the violence.

With experience across many different African Parks, Scanlon acknowledges that in some places, the militarized shift in efforts to tackle security may have scaled up the responses of rangers in a way that was disproportionate; however, visible security within the region remained important. It gave the impression that these areas are protected and can no longer be exploited by rebel groups in any way they choose. Scanlon suggests that within this debate over militarization and conservation, "let's have a more nuanced response that you need a full range of options." There are locations where

wildlife and transnational organized criminal networks, rebel militias, or terrorist groups overlap where the reality requires armed response, while other locations experience less risk and require a more scaled-back approach. However, this militarization significantly impacts park rangers, and begs the question of why security responses often landed on the shoulders of wildlife protectors, and not sourced elsewhere.

Due to the link between security threats and wildlife crime, the role of park ranger has evolved far beyond that of wildlife protector. The core identity of a ranger has changed. Uniforms became clad in camouflage patterns, and hands that once gripped tools for routine repairs now grip the cold steel of a rifle. According to Scanlon, this militarization of conservation and park management didn't ripple across every continent, but rather "in certain places suffering particular threats, [where] rangers have had to change to protect themselves, the wildlife inside the park, and the people living outside it."[25]

However, arming the "good guys" [rangers] has its consequences. In response to this shift, the "bad guys" [terror and rebel groups] now target them because they are armed. Park rangers are on the ground around the world to protect wild spaces and the animals in them. In 2022 it was reported by The Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) that the continent had experienced its worst year on record regarding ranger deaths, with 100 deaths across the continent since June 2021, 95 of which occurred in the line of duty. The report goes on to clarify that "at least 565 African rangers have been killed in action since 2011" and that "295 of these rangers have been murdered by militia groups, terrorists and bandits in co-ordinated attacks or by poachers whilst protecting our wildlife and wild places."[26] In 2016 National Geographic reported that in Virunga National Park located in DRC, "150 rangers have been killed there during the past decade" in attacks by rebel militias, a number that has since grown.[27] Christy states that "rangers are forced to confront rebel and violent groups who may have little interest in poaching wildlife but seek refuge in parks or to exploit nearby villagers for food, money, medicine, human trafficking, and more. These groups destabilize states like DRC, CAR, Sudan, and Nigeria. In this way, those who protect wildlife and wild places help maintain local and national stability and by extension, international security."[28] And this added role of security comes at a price.

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It has also been argued that turning wildlife crime into a security problem has supported the idea that "since poachers pose a clear and present threat to global stability, forceful action against them is justifiable."[29] This easily becomes a dangerous and detrimental path to tread. The "war against poaching" narrative that dominates sensationalized news headlines can quickly devolve to a war against poachers themselves. In this justification for forceful action, the smallest actors within a much larger criminal network become targeted for removal–even by death–as an end-all solution to eliminating wildlife crime. This militarized approach has blossomed partly as a response to the connection between wildlife crime and security.

As a result, the amplified messaging that wildlife trafficking and security risks are linked can have far-reaching implications for conservation efforts, local communities, and rangers themselves. A shift towards militarization and security-focused initiatives amongst conservation approaches across locations experiencing wildlife crime has contributed to potentially dangerous assumptions that vilify local individuals. In extreme cases, the biggest critique lies in the fact that rangers have been left to fight a security war. As Christy points out, "there has been no parallel effort to put military in these places," so rangers are left performing double duty.[30]

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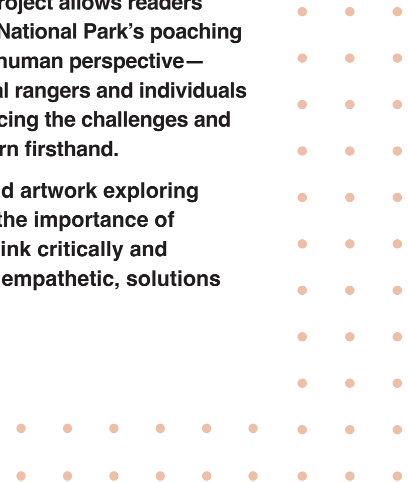
Ultimately, we have seen select evidence that trade in specific species, such as elephants, sourced from specific parks have funded terrorist groups or rebel militias. We also know that large scale timber poaching across multiple countries poses a threat to security, as does extortion of fisheries. However, it is imperative to understand that these examples amount to a fraction of all wildlife crime. As Scanlon points out, this threat to security exists on a spectrum rather than a blanket connection across all wildlife trade.[31] So, while we can understand that a link between wildlife crime and security exists, we must also dissect each scenario for the incredible nuance that exists within this link. Perhaps we can most accurately make the statement that "policing the illegal wildlife trade supports international security, the illegal wildlife trade itself is not typically a threat to international security."[32] Of greatest interest to my work, defining the identity of wildlife crime as wholly entwined with both national and global security has arguably had the most significant impact on wildlife protectors. Most notably, their identities are now rooted in not just wildlife protection, but in waging wars against security threats to protect local communities along with wildlife. Rangers in impacted landscapes are expected to shoulder the entire weight of responsibility to protect the global heritage of species. And especially within the parks where terrorist groups and rebel militias provide increased security risks both nationally and internationally, that responsibility now includes the role of enforcing security and enduring the immense risk it places on their lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Keir is a DC-based artist, conservationist, and creative storyteller with a dedicated passion for inspiring a thoughtful and in-depth approach to understanding and communicating the human side of wildlife crises around the globe. She is known for combining her unique watercolor and ink artwork with more traditional storytelling mediums to share conservation stories that resonate and challenge individuals to experience these stories through local perspectives. By stripping away projected morals and assumptions, she hopes to inspire a turning of the lens onto ourselves to understand the role we all play in the conservation issues at our doorstep, and also worlds away.

She became a National Geographic Explorer in 2019 when she was awarded with a NGS Storytelling Grant to investigate the rhino poaching crisis in South Africa. By combining storytelling, investigative journalism, artwork, and mapping, her final NGS grant project allows readers worlds away to understand Kruger National Park's poaching crisis from a unique and important human perspective—through the amplified voices of local rangers and individuals living alongside rhino and experiencing the challenges and effects of the illicit trade in rhino horn firsthand.

Tara continues to create stories and artwork exploring our human connection to wildlife, the importance of coexistence, and inspiring us to think critically and creatively in conservation from an empathetic, solutions and impact-oriented human lens.



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