United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Corruption

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The Context – Corruption enables violations of CITES and facilitates global wildlife crime

The world has been confronted by wildlife crime\(^1\) for decades, but in recent years there is evidence of increased involvement of organized crime groups, often conducting this highly lucrative illicit activity at industrial scale. Wildlife crime has serious economic, social and environmental impacts, decimating wildlife populations, destroying habitats, degrading ecosystems and increasing the risk of zoonotic diseases by evading the health inspections, sanitary and other controls usually associated with legal trade. Ultimately, wildlife crime hinders progress toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Transnational organized crime groups are targeting high value species with complete disregard for wildlife, people’s lives and their livelihoods. These criminals are corrupting officials, recruiting and arming poachers, creating insecurity and propelling local communities into a poverty spiral.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)\(^2\) is an international legally binding agreement adopted in 1973 that sets rules for international trade in wildlife. The Convention regulates commercial and non-commercial international trade in more than 36,000 species of animals and plants, including their parts and derivatives, to ensure that this trade is legal, sustainable and traceable. The 183 States that are Parties to the Convention are obliged to trade internationally in accordance with the Convention, take appropriate measures to enforce the Convention, and to prohibit trade in violation thereof, including measures to penalize such trade.

Effective application of CITES depends largely on control over the issuance, inspection and acceptance of CITES documentation, as well as detecting wildlife in illegal trade. Corruption manifests itself under CITES in many different forms – including through the offering, seeking and accepting of bribes, counterfeiting of permits and the direct involvement of officials in the theft of, and trade in, illegal wildlife specimens. Illegal trade in wildlife can also often be associated with a combination of other well-established crimes such as fraud, counterfeiting, use of dangerous weapons, assault, conspiracy, bribery, money-laundering, tax evasion and other forms of corruption.

The preamble to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) recognizes that corruption is particularly linked to organized crime and economic crime, both of which occur in the context of wildlife crime. Corruption often serves as an enabler of wildlife crime and has, in this context, become increasingly important to address. Accordingly, at its seventeenth meeting, the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP17, Johannesburg, 2016) adopted Resolution Conf. 17.6\(^3\) on Prohibiting, preventing, detecting and countering corruption, which facilitates activities conducted in violation of the Convention.

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) unanimously adopted the first ever dedicated Resolution on Tackling Illicit Trafficking in Wildlife. The adoption of this Resolution reflected the heightened level of political concern over the devastating impacts of poaching and trafficking in wildlife on both wildlife and people. Several similar Resolutions have since been adopted by the UNGA, including in 2017, and most recently in September 2019. These Resolutions reinforced the need to focus on key areas in the fight against wildlife crime, including addressing corruption.

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1. Wildlife’ refers to all fauna and flora, in whole or parts thereof, alive or dead. ‘Wildlife crime’ refers to acts involving wildlife specimens that violate national laws or regulations.
The UNGA Resolution[^4] highlights the central roles of CITES, the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNCTOC) and the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC) in tackling wildlife crime.

Under the auspices of ICCWC, the CITES Secretariat, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Bank and the World Customs Organization (WCO), have been working closely together to support Member States and to provide them with the tools, services, technical support and capacity building they need to establish long term sustainable capacity to respond to wildlife crime. Addressing corruption is an integral part of this work, as demonstrated by the development of a number of resources to support Parties, such as the guide on Scaling Back Corruption - A Guide on Addressing Corruption for Wildlife Management Authorities.[^6] Subsequently, at the eighteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP18, Geneva, 2019), Decision 18.77 was adopted, encouraging all CITES Parties to actively pursue and promote the use of the Guide to strengthen responses to, and overcome the risks and challenges posed by corruption associated with wildlife crime. Further, Decision 18.78 was adopted, requesting the CITES Secretariat, UNODC and other partner organizations of ICCWC to promote the use of the Guide and to support Parties, upon request, in implementing activities and measures to address the risks and challenges posed by corruption.

Several CITES-listed species are high-value items targeted by organized crime groups, and this makes the officers responsible for regulating trade in specimens of these species potentially vulnerable to corruption. To effectively address the high levels of wildlife crime currently being observed, Parties should, as part of their response, treat wildlife crime as a serious offence especially where transnational organized criminal groups are involved, and further scale up efforts to prohibit, prevent and counter all forms of corruption that it facilitates.

**Recommendations to the Special session of the General Assembly against corruption**

1. **Encourage Member States to fully mobilize the United Nations Convention against Corruption in support of efforts to address wildlife crime**

   In line with the UNGA Resolution[^7] and the CITES Resolution 17.6 on Prohibiting, preventing, detecting and countering corruption, which facilitates activities conducted in violation of the Convention, encourage States that have not yet done so, to fully ratify or accede the United Nations Convention against Corruption, and urge those Member States who have already ratified or acceded to UNCAC to effectively implement its provisions, also in the context of wildlife crime.

2. **Support the development and implementation of preventative anti-corruption strategies to address wildlife crime**

   Raise awareness of the scale and impacts of wildlife crime and encourage Member States to actively pursue strengthening measures to address corruption associated with wildlife crime, including by promoting the use of tools such as the Scaling Back Corruption - A Guide on Addressing Corruption for Wildlife Management Authorities developed by UNODC, and where needed, requesting support from ICCWC as anticipated by the provisions of CITES Decision 18.78.

3. **Encourage the engagement of anti-corruption bodies in work to deter wildlife crime**

   Draw attention to CITES Resolution 17.6 on Prohibiting, preventing, detecting and countering corruption, which facilitates activities conducted in violation of the Convention, and encourage increased interaction and collaboration between national anti-corruption commissions and similar bodies, and national agencies responsible for wildlife law enforcement, in support of the design and implementation of integrity policies, institutional risk management processes, investigations into corruption, and strict penalties where irregularities are detected.

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