



Illegal Trade in Wildlife (IWT)

Fact Sheet

Background

Transnational criminal groups are exploiting the interconnected air transport system to trade wildlife illegally. Although national enforcement authorities have the duty to apprehend and prosecute these offenders, airlines and their staff can be an important source of intelligence and contribute to halting this illegal trade.

The international illegal wildlife trade (excluding timber and fisheries) is estimated to be worth up to \$20 billion per year¹, making it the fourth largest illegal global trade (after drugs, counterfeiting and human trafficking) and covers a broad range of endangered species.

This trade poses a significant threat for many endangered animals, with the latest data from conservation organizations revealing the critical status of many iconic species. Tigers, elephants, rhinoceros, some of the other big cats and pangolins are of particular concern. This illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products not only threatens the survival of many endangered species but also strengthens criminal networks, poses risks to global health, and threatens nature-based tourism and the communities which depend on it.

The trafficking of wildlife bypasses health checks at borders and presents a threat of disease transmission to both animals and humans. The nature and scale of wild caught animal product (bushmeat) smuggling by passengers is not well known. However, surveys at four airports in Europe and seizures in the US indicate that hundreds of tonnes are illegally imported in baggage each year. Although not all concealed bushmeat is sourced from protected species, it is often poorly preserved and avoids sanitary checks.

Wildlife trafficking is dependent on an interconnected logistics and transport network, involving air, land and seaports, passenger and cargo airlines, shipping companies, express couriers, postal companies, and freight forwarders. Its high value has a potential corrupting influence on officials and aviation employees and hence may represent a secondary threat to aviation security.

There is increasing pressure for businesses to assess and mitigate their impact on biodiversity, driven by the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and emerging disclosure frameworks². Airlines have been proactive in this area, having committed to supporting the fight against wildlife crime for over 10 years.

IATA Activities

- IATA's focus has been on raising awareness of this issue with airlines and other aviation stakeholders and encouraging partnerships with enforcement authorities. To this effect, IATA is supporting airlines with [awareness raising, training, e-modules, and videos](#).
- The aim of IATA's involvement is to support enforcement authorities in the identification and reporting of suspicious passenger behavior and unusual shipments.
- During 2022 and 2023, IATA also worked on a pilot project with conservation partners and an enforcement authority in Southern Africa on the automated detection of illegal wildlife concealed in baggage using a machine-learning algorithm as well as raising awareness with enforcement authorities of advances in aviation digitization and automation that could provide additional sources of digital intelligence.

¹ [United for Wildlife](#).

² Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) (<https://tnfd.global/>)
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- IATA has co-hosted with the United for Wildlife Transport Task Force and United Nations Offices for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) seven meetings of the Autodetection Working Group (AWG). The AWG comprises representatives from enforcement, conservation, technology providers and the air transport sector and focuses on coordinating autodetection R&D and the sharing lessons learned.
- IATA has developed a wildlife certification module integrated into the [IEnvA Program and a total of 11 airlines have been independently assessed to have met the requirements](#).
- IATA participates in the United for Wildlife (UfW) Transport Taskforce, which brings together global transport and freight industry experts including airports, shipping companies, and airlines with law enforcement and other agencies to identify and facilitate action led by the private sector.
- More than 70 IATA members have signed the [Buckingham Palace Declaration on the Transportation of Illegal Wildlife Products](#). Signatories from the aviation community also include Airports Council International (ACI), African Airlines Association (AFRAA), Association of South Pacific Airlines (ASPA), Airlines for Europe (A4E), Airlines Association of Southern Africa (AASA) and an increasing number of airports.
- IATA strengthened its cooperation with the Secretariat of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\)](#) and signed a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\)](#) at the 71st IATA AGM in 2015 to work closely with the organization to reduce illegally traded wildlife and ensure safe and secure transport of legally traded wildlife.
- The 72nd IATA AGM in Dublin in 2016 unanimously endorsed a [Resolution](#) denouncing the illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products and pledging to partner with government authorities and conservation organizations in the fight against traffickers of endangered species.
- IATA and ACI signed an annex to an existing MoU at the 73rd IATA AGM in 2017 to include the development and promotion of measures to assist in combatting the trade.
- IATA joined a consortium of international conservation organizations as a Core Member of the [US Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#) Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership. This was a five-year partnership to support the transport sector with information on high-risk species, routes and concealment methods, awareness raising activities with staff, passengers and cargo customers and the facilitation of the reporting of suspected traffickers and suspicious cargo. IATA's involvement in the ROUTES Partnership included the development of an independent standalone wildlife certification and airline staff reporting tool.
- A number of other IATA governing bodies have adopted appropriate policies such as:
 - The adoption by the Joint Passenger Services Conference (JPSC) of a Recommended Practice (RP) on raising passenger awareness of the illegal wildlife trade and an additional RP on the carriage of prohibited wildlife in baggage.
 - An addition to the Live Animals Regulations (LAR) which came into effect on 6 July 2017.
 - Guidance on the safe handling of escaped animals in the cabin included in the next reissue of the Cabin Safety Best Practice Guide.
 - Information text added to the IATA Ground Operations Manual.

More info: www.iata.org/wildlife