

COMMITTING THE CRIME

The ways in which wildlife-related crimes are carried out tell us much about those behind them and what is needed to combat them.

THE STRUCTURE OF POACHING

It may be useful to examine first what is meant by poaching, especially as there are countries - and Britain is one of them - where the term 'poacher' can conjure up the image of a likeable rogue sallying forth into the countryside to bag a pheasant or salmon from the estate of some absentee landlord in what might be viewed as a blow for the working classes. Such a jolly jape, set in the picturesque landscape of a Constable or Landseer painting, is in total contrast to the violent and bloody illegal harvesting occurring in Africa or Asia and may be one reason why poaching may not immediately be thought of as serious crime.

Poaching is generally regarded as the taking of animals without the legal right to do so. The manner of the taking varies considerably. Its simplest form, perhaps, is the setting of a wire snare on the path regularly used by the target species. The snare is designed to encircle either the animal's leg or neck and strangle it or hold it in place until the hunter comes along to kill it with a firearm, club or knife.

Snares are used throughout the world and have been for centuries. In some countries, such as Britain, their use is legal under certain conditions and to take specific species.

There are a range of other forms of trap into which animals and birds are lured by food, using either live or dead bait. Our image from the movies might be of a large pit, sometimes with spikes placed at the bottom, covered with vegetation through which the passing animal will fall. I cannot think of any instance of such a trap being used in recent years: they involve too much work and the end can be accomplished by much easier means.

Nets strung in appropriate places can be effective but require time to erect, can be hard to conceal and also need to be checked frequently, which can be present problems for poachers.

If the hunters want the animal's body parts for anything other than human consumption, then poison is a very effective killing method. Meat, or occasionally vegetable matter, laced with an appropriate toxin, is placed either on a path used by the target animal or in the area where it will feed or graze. Poisoning becomes especially effective when the target is a species which is used to having humans contribute to their diet. In some of the private reserves, game ranches and safari parks in Africa, the management (either regularly or at certain times of year) will distribute fodder or other dietary supplements for their animals. This practice has been exploited by poachers, with several incidents in South Africa in recent years in

which rhinoceroses have been killed by poisoned cabbages or pumpkins, placed where they were used to finding food supplements.

An added bonus in using poison, from the poacher's perspective, is that it is noiseless. A firearm brings the considerable risk of shots being heard by anti-poaching patrols or by local residents who may contact the authorities, and for this reason the use of tranquilizer darts has made an appearance in southern and eastern Africa in recent years. But the darts, the rifles that fire them and the tranquilizing chemicals themselves are not easy to acquire. The fact that some people have done so demonstrates the increased organization and sophistication that has entered into these criminal activities.

One horrendous side-effect of the employment of tranquilizers in rhino poaching is that, once unconscious, the creatures have their horns literally hacked out of their heads by the poachers and wake to face a slow death by bleeding.

Poison is also in widespread use in what are sometimes described as revenge attacks on animals. Such incidents - not, strictly speaking, poaching, but worth mentioning here - occur when villagers are motivated to rid themselves of species that may be preying upon them, their livestock or their crops. As might be imagined, they are commonly carried out on big cats and will be deployed to target, for instance, tigers in India, leopards in Nepal or jaguars in Brazil. Poison is also laid in parts of Africa and Asia in response to crop-raiding elephants.

It is usually easy for local authorities to distinguish revenge or deterrent cases from true poaching incidents, as the animal carcass will be found intact. That is not to say, though, that there are not also occasions where a villager, having been moved to kill a 'pest' animal, will subsequently strip the carcass of, say, its skin or tusks. After all, if you are living in poverty it may be silly to look a gift horse (or tiger or elephant) in the mouth, so to speak.

Poaching can also involve some rather bizarre methods. There have been many cases in India in which hunters, but also villagers in revenge incidents, have either re-routed overhead live electricity cables or run wires from them, so that they stretch across paths followed by elephants. In the late 1990s, in northern Cambodia, I was told of poachers who had set mines on jungle trails used by tigers. This was favoured in some areas because of the high number of munitions left over from the days of the Khmer Rouge. This method was apparently also used occasionally in Vietnam, again because of easy access to military weaponry. I have not, however, heard of mines being used in recent years.

Munitions are certainly not quiet and seemed only to have been used in the most remote areas. They also risk causing very considerable damage to the target animal, since they detonate when the animal's paw or pad presses down upon them. In the late 1990s, when it was the bones of a tiger that poachers sought, the damage caused to its head and skin when the mine exploded did not matter too much. However, as the skin trade became increasingly valuable and important, this method was just far too destructive.

I have been told that mines have also been used against elephants but, as with tigers, they can prove devastating and almost inevitably damage, if not destroy, the tusks.

Marine species are illegally harvested using several of the methods described above, especially - and not surprisingly - netting. They too, though, can be poached using poison and explosives, although nets are normally needed to sweep up the resulting dead or stunned fish.

The biggest disadvantage of all these tactics - because few poachers will care that they often cause very considerable suffering to the animal - is that (with a few exceptions and only with very careful placement) they are indiscriminate. If poachers set a snare for a tiger or rhinoceros, that is what they want to catch. If they have had to sneak, perhaps over a long distance, into a well-patrolled national park, probably in the dark, at risk of animal attack or other natural hazard, and have then to repeat the journey the next night to inspect the snare, the last thing they want is to discover that it is holding onto a worthless wild pig or deer.

Consequently, the killing approach favoured by most poachers is the same as that used by legal hunters: the firearm. Although one will occasionally encounter poachers using a bow and arrow or a crossbow, it is rare. Handguns are rarely used for poaching. Revolvers or semi-automatics, despite what you see in Westerns or cops-and-robbers films, are very inaccurate except at close range. Consequently, poachers will opt for long-barrelled weapons.

These can be either shotguns or, more popularly, rifles. A shotgun is more effective in the hands of the less-skilled shooter because its pellets spread out and so are more likely to hit the intended target. They have a lower physical impact, though, which also reduces with distance, so a shotgun is good for bringing down a bird in flight but will certainly not stop a rhino or tiger unless the shooter is very close - the last thing he wants to be if the animal can quickly close the gap and gore or claw him to death.

A rifle, by contrast, expels a bullet that can travel very considerable distances and which will punch into even the thickest-skinned creatures. Its force is such that the shock of the impact alone can knock it over and rip apart or fatally injure its brain, heart, lungs or other major organs, so that death quickly follows. In the right hands, a rifle can be extremely accurate.

Rifles vary. In single-shot rifles, a fresh bullet has to be loaded into the breech after the trigger has been pulled, while rifles fitted with a magazine hold several bullets. In semi-automatic rifles, a bullet is loaded into the breech after each pull of the trigger, while in fully automatic weapons, bullets continue to be fired as long as the trigger is pulled back and until the magazine is empty.

The majority of poachers use semi-automatic or fully automatic weapons. In some of these, the semi-automatic feature can be converted to fully automatic at the simple flick of a switch. The majority of such rifles were originally designed for military purposes. In most areas of the world where poaching is rife, these weapons are left over from armed conflicts, either within that nation or in neighbouring countries. In many of these places, weapons are widespread, commonly kept in homes, and can be acquired very cheaply. A survey in 2012 estimated that 650 million weapons were in the hands of civilians around the world, while military, police and other government officials had 225 million.

The type of weapon favoured by poachers is sometimes referred to as an assault rifle, the type of gun which have been used in several of the multiple death and injury shootings that have occurred, for example, at schools in America in recent decades. These incidents have illustrated just how quickly, and morbidly efficiently, one person can bring another's life to an end or change it forever.

Perhaps the world's best known assault rifle is the Kalashnikov AK-47, named after its Russian inventor. As the model number suggests, it was developed in 1947 and became the

standard weapon of the Soviet army. As the influence of the USSR spread around the world, so too did its armaments and AK-47s can now be found across the globe and particularly in the developing world. They are somewhat clumsy and not especially sophisticated but they are reliable, easily repaired and cheap to buy, while the ammunition for them is also widely available and inexpensive. The standard AK-47 magazine holds 30 bullets (rounds). When fully automatic mode is selected, the Kalashnikov can in theory fire 600 rounds per minute. If that were not firepower enough, the AK-47 can also be quickly adapted to fire grenades, which is not something that anti-poaching personnel like to come up against. Many have, though, particularly those in the Kenya Wildlife Service, who regularly encounter very heavily-armed poachers entering from neighbouring Somalia where all sorts of weapons may be readily obtained.

The AK-47 has been copied and is now manufactured in many countries other than Russia, which has made the weapon cheaper. The most modern model, the one favoured by Osama bin Laden and which he was pictured holding in videos, can sell on the black market for the equivalent of 2,000 US dollars. In the Niger Delta, an older model AK-47 might cost as little as 75 dollars.

Less common, but seen more frequently in recent years, are the latest model high-powered military-style weapon or the high-quality hunting rifles that are designed specifically for big game hunting. These are equally efficient, effective and deadly. The hunting rifle, though, will always be the more accurate, especially in the hands of a true marksman.

When these weapons are combined, they become particularly lethal to man and beast. Some poaching gangs making intrusions into South Africa's national parks in search of rhinos, for example, have been seen to be armed with a mixture of guns. The most accomplished marksman in the group carried a hunting rifle and it was his job to kill the animal. His companions, maybe three, four or five in number, had automatic assault rifles. Although they could assist the marksmen in killing rhinos, they were primarily there to protect him and their job was to kill any rangers or other law enforcement officers that might intercept the gang.

This brings me to the first of the organized crime indicators and the structured nature of endangered species poaching.

Even if its cost is as low as 75 dollars, an AK-47 will remain beyond the pocket of most rural residents of Africa or Asia. When one then considers that a big game hunting rifle, capable of firing a .375 Holland and Holland or .416 Rigby bullet, the calibres favoured by those who want guaranteed 'stopping power', will cost anywhere between 1,500 and 20,000 dollars, then that's a whole new ball game.

And that is just for the gun. It is of no use without bullets. AK-47 ammunition can be bought cheaply, several bullets for the equivalent of a dollar. However, rounds for a hunting rifle are a different matter, especially as there is not such a ready black market for those calibres. Good-quality big game ammo can cost 90 dollars for 20, but even if all the poacher needs is AK-47 bullets, he is going to need many of them and this, again, involves money he probably does not have.

This is where organized crime comes in. Someone further up the criminal chain seeks out an individual who lives where the target species can be found. Ideally, it will be someone

who already has experience in illegal hunting, probably of a subsistence nature, poaching to put food on the table. Throughout the world there are families, and sometimes whole tribes, with a centuries-long tradition of hunting. The skills have been passed down from father to son (it is usually the men who hunt) and involve not just killing or capturing the animals but tracking, skinning or dissecting them, and being able to move quickly and quietly around the land – an area they know like the back of their hand - avoiding detection by the authorities.

Hunting skills can also be found in the developed world. There is an often-told story in Scotland of a German field sportsman visiting Moray who had been guided, over several hours, by an estate stalker to within shooting distance of a red deer stag with an impressive set of antlers. This was a true trophy animal. The German sighted along his rifle and pulled the trigger. The bullet landed but not cleanly on target. The deer began to limp away. Grabbing his client's weapon, the stalker reloaded, aimed and fired. The stag dropped stone dead. The client gushed compliments on the guide's marksmanship and asked how he had ever achieved such expertise.

'It's simple,' the local man replied. 'My grandfather was head stalker on this estate, my father was head stalker and now I'm head stalker. I've been doing this, except for a break of five years, for over thirty years.' 'What did you do during those five years?' enquired the visitor. 'I killed your ancestors!' came the reply.

Hunting, legal or not, can also be a cultural and macho practice. A survey conducted in Africa many years ago found that males in a tribe loved nothing better than to head out into the bush for several days at a time to escape from their womenfolk. It provided an opportunity for them to gossip, drink home-brewed liquor, swap stories and tell dirty jokes that they wouldn't get away with at home, just as English men head for soccer games on a Saturday afternoon or American men are drawn to bars 'where everybody knows your name'.

Recruiting a lone individual for poaching will usually not be enough. For one thing, the finest tracker may not be able to hit the proverbial barn door if you give him a gun. It is not just about skills, though. Someone who can hunt down an elephant, and then efficiently aim at it and shoot it, is faced with the plain physical problem of extracting the tusks, which will mean bringing an axe with them, and somehow carrying two large tusks, the axe and the rifle back out of the park, perhaps over many miles. It simply is not practical for one person.

I have already described how some rhino poaching gangs operate in South Africa and one can see that there is a significant financial input required to equip them. Perhaps the finest example of this particular indicator can be found thousands of miles to the north and east in an environment that, in many respects, could not be more different from the savannahs where the elephant and rhino roam.

The Tibetan Plateau in western China borders Bhutan, India, Myanmar and Nepal. It is home to one of the world's most remarkable creatures, the Tibetan antelope. This antelope roams across a harsh and forbidding wilderness at heights of between 3,250 and 5,500 metres. To protect it from this tough environment, nature has endowed the antelope with a coat of hair that is regarded as the finest in the world. Not only is its habitat sparsely populated by other animals, it is also sparsely populated by humans.

The small numbers of people who do live full-time on the plateau tend to occupy settlements below the 4,000 metre level and are relatively nomadic, moving about to find

grazing for their yak herds. A few other humans enter the region temporarily from time to time for specific purposes - to engage in illegal mining, for example - as the area is rich in a range of mineral deposits, including gold.

The locals are poor, simple people. They live hand to mouth, governed by the weather and the seasons. There is no money for luxuries on the plateau. It is these inhabitants who are sought out, recruited and equipped by organized crime groups.

There is probably no illegal animal harvesting anywhere in the world, apart from trawling for marine species, which calls for as great a degree of organisation as the poaching of Tibetan antelope. Gangs of men - up to twenty at a time - are required to kill the antelopes. Each will bring a particular skill, as a driver, a cook, a tracker, marksman or skinner. Each gang will have between four and seven 4x4 vehicles, carry hundreds, if not several thousand, rounds of ammunition and will usually use Chinese-manufactured AK-47s. Most gangs will have at least one AK-47 weapon per vehicle, but will often carry more, often single shot rifles. The weapon of choice will depend upon the marksmanship of gang members. AK-47s are *de rigueur*, however, because they are the best response if anti-poaching patrols appear.

The bands spend a month or more on the plateau and need appropriate quantities of fuel and food rations. Interestingly, although it would presumably offer a source of protein, the meat from poached antelopes seems hardly ever to be consumed. Some gangs will be equipped with GPS devices and, very occasionally, satellite phones, and will need appropriate clothing to cope with the temperatures on this, the world's most elevated and extensive highland area, ringed by the world's highest mountain ranges. Winter temperatures can drop to -40 C, but the wind chill factor will take temperatures considerably lower.

The people who live in this realm cannot afford, even if grouping together, to equip themselves to engage in this level of sophisticated poaching expedition. It is organized crime networks who recruit, pay, equip and direct them. And it is those same groups who subsequently take possession of the Tibetan antelope skins and arrange for them to be smuggled out of China to neighbouring countries where they will be processed into shawls that can each attract prices of up to 35,000 US dollars once they are moved to consumer nations.

The Tibetan Plateau was certainly the harshest environment I visited in my 14 years of international wildlife law enforcement, and the poaching there was more extensively organized than any I encountered elsewhere. That said, the use of light aircraft and helicopters during recent rhino poaching incidents in southern and eastern Africa has probably displaced the Tibetan antelope as the most complicated illegal target. It is a sad reflection of the seriousness of wildlife crime that we can now start to draw up this kind of poaching league table.

SOPHISTICATION OF SMUGGLING TECHNIQUES AND ROUTES

The customs officer in America who was checking parcel goods in a terminal several years ago must have wondered about the strange things people want to collect when he opened a package from southeast Asia and found many large, dead, beetle-like creatures. Not being an expert on species identification, he may have acknowledged that their colourful carapaces,

horns and multiple spindly legs made for unusual and exotic specimens. Knowing that CITES regulated trade in endangered species, he sought the assistance of a wildlife inspector.

The inspector was able to tell that these creatures were not CITES-listed but picked one out of the package to examine it more closely. It was then that he and the customs official discovered that the hard shell of each beetle had been packed with amphetamines.

A few years before that incident, an officer in Miami noticed snakes arriving from South America had had cocaine wrapped in condoms forced up their rectal passages. Since not many border control officials relish a close physical inspection of venomous reptiles, it was an effective smuggling method.

It is not common to find wildlife and narcotics being smuggled together, but wildlife smuggling techniques are as colourful as the human imagination itself. Elephant ivory is stained to give it the appearance of wood or may be baked inside an outer covering of clay, to mask its true nature. Tusks are stuffed into containers full of smoked or dried fish, in the hope of masking its odour from the sniffer dogs increasingly often used at major ports. Primates are wrapped in adhesive tape and then drugged, so that they will lie motionless inside passenger hand baggage during long-haul flights. Rare birds are painted or dyed to make them appear drab, to allow them to be passed off as a common or less-regulated species. Small reptiles are hidden inside men's briefs or women's bras as they are carried cross-border. Birds' eggs are transported in vests fitted with many pockets, which are worn next to the smuggler's skin. Not only do such vests conceal the eggs from the gaze of border control staff but their presence next to the smuggler's body provides sufficient warmth for them to continue to incubate en route.

In Kathmandu, I saw a vehicle that had been stopped by forest department officials as it made its way from India to a final destination in China. Its rear compartment had been reinforced to enable it to transport a large amount of valuable and rare timber. More impressively, a switch fitted on the dashboard, when activated, changed the front and rear number plates. The car's true Nepalese registration plate would rotate to display a plate purportedly allocated to that of a foreign embassy in Nepal. The officials had received specific intelligence about the smuggling attempt but admitted that, without it, they would not normally have stopped any vehicle displaying diplomatic CD plates. The smugglers presumably got this idea from the gadget-packed Aston Martin which featured in a James Bond film many years ago.

Rare, highly-prized poison arrow frogs have been smuggled from Amazonian regions to Europe inside plastic 35mm camera film cases. These beautiful, highly-coloured creatures get their name from the toxic mucus that covers their bodies. It protects them from predators and members of Amazonian tribes have traditionally rubbed their arrows on the frogs' bodies before setting out on hunting trips.

Air waybills and cargo manifests are forged to conceal the true origin of contraband. Sea-going shipments will transit through various ports before arriving at their final destination. In some cases, the cargo will be off-loaded and perhaps repacked before continuing on its way. This makes determining the true country of origin difficult and some shipments will go round and round for weeks and months at sea before finally reaching the true destination.



Top of page: A floating house in the Amazon region of Brazil, home to the type of individual whose poverty may be exploited by criminals seeking to acquire rare parrots, plants or reptiles.

Above: The daily commute facing rural residents in parts of Asia. This river crossing in Cambodia was one of several that the author had to cross in 2007 order to reach the border with Thailand, the scene of significant wildlife smuggling.

Right: Criminals use a huge variety of means to conceal the contraband they smuggle across borders. Here, the screen is displaying images of car wheels that are being X-rayed by Customs officers at the border between two Middle Eastern countries.

