

[Home](#) | [India](#) | [Karnataka](#) | [Opinion](#) | [World](#) | [Business](#) | [S](#)[▶ News Shots](#) [▶ Explaners](#) [▶ Bengaluru](#) [▶ Science](#) [▶ Trending](#) [▶ Brandspot](#) [▶ Photos](#) [▶ Newsletters](#)[Home](#) > [Environment](#) > [Wildlife](#) >

In India, prized species have targets on their backs

If methods of investigating and tackling poaching syndicates do not keep pace and stay ahead of the game, India's megadiverse ecosystems will pay the price.

 **Pavan Kumar H**

Last Updated 13 January 2024, 20:02 IST



At the fringes of thick forests are vast sugarcane fields which are part of Murkawad village in the Haliyal forest division. A three-year-old leopard had laid claim to this land last year. In March, the spotted big cat became the target of a sharpshooter, who used a country-made gun to kill the animal. The sharpshooter is suspected to have been hired by disgruntled villagers.

The carcass of the animal was found dumped in a sugarcane field next to the Kali Tiger Reserve, devoid of its claws — a commodity highly prized in the illegal wildlife trade market. In the three months between December 2022 and March 2023, the Haliyal division reported the poaching of two leopards and a tiger.

The Indian leopard is a highly protected species under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, which means that they are protected from hunting unless they pose a threat to human life. However, leopards are among the most targeted creatures, hunted for their skins, bones, teeth and claws.

According to a 2020 study by TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring network, leopard poaching increased during the lockdown period.

By its very nature of being able to survive in forest edges, the leopard is in frequent conflict with humans. This conflict is a major driver of mortality and could be a factor contributing

[Home](#) | [India](#) | [Karnataka](#) | [Opinion](#) | [World](#) | [Business](#) | [☰](#)[▶ News Shots](#) [▶ Explainers](#) [▶ Bengaluru](#) [▶ Science](#) [▶ Trending](#) [▶ Brandspot](#) [▶ Photos](#) [▶ Newsletters](#)
clue about the whereabouts of the poachers or the articles.

Considered a megadiverse country, India accounts for 7 to 8% of the world's species. Today, experts fear that India is fast emerging as a major 'source, destination and transit hub' of wildlife trade in the world.

The emerging exotic pet industry in India has also resulted in the smuggling of orangutans, lemurs, gibbons, palm civets and various species of birds. A report by the Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) partnership claims that India is among the top 10 countries where air transport is used for wildlife trafficking.

A total of 18 airports reported the trade of 146 species between 2011 and 2020. Close to 70,000 animals, including their body parts and derivatives, were recovered in a decade, the report says.

"Wildlife trafficking is the fourth-largest form of transnational organised crime after smuggling of drugs, human trafficking, and counterfeiting," says Nirmal Kulkarni, senior consultant of the counter wildlife trafficking team at Wildlife Conservation Society of India.

Low prosecution rates

The burgeoning industry is bolstered by low conviction and prosecution rates of poachers. According to data available from India's Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) and attached police authorities, over 9,253 poachers were arrested between 2012 and 2018 in the country, but the rate of conviction was just 2%.

"It is hard to quantify the total natural wildlife resource loss, as in the majority of the cases, the crimes are not even reported," says Nithin Desai, the director of Central India Wildlife Protection Society of India.

In a 2023 report, researchers Ajay Kumar Rana and Nishant Kumar state that international wildlife trafficking networks mainly operate through long porous international borders or transit routes in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam. According to TRAFFIC, a majority of species endemic to India are traded off to China, Mexico, Indonesia, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, parts of the Caribbean Islands, and other countries in Southeast Asia and Europe.

These poaching syndicates have continued to function due to the lack of a concerted effort to prevent these crimes. "The global organised crimes syndicate is so strong and wide-reaching in the Western and Eastern Ghats, that tracing them becomes impossible. Unless

[Home](#) | [India](#) | [Karnataka](#) | [Opinion](#) | [World](#) | [Business](#) | [☰](#)[▶ News Shots](#) [▶ Explaners](#) [▶ Bengaluru](#) [▶ Science](#) [▶ Trending](#) [▶ Brandspot](#) [▶ Photos](#) [▶ Newsletters](#)

The consequences

The proliferation of red-eared sliders in India's water bodies provides a glimpse into the consequences of the illegal trade of exotic species. The species of turtle is among the world's most commonly traded turtles in the world and is considered highly invasive.

The species, traded as pets, breeds faster compared to local varieties and also outcompetes endemic species for food. The turtles, originating from the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, are mainly smuggled through Chennai and Trichy. Today, there is a massive presence in the water bodies of Chandigarh, temple ponds of Guwahati, lakes of Bengaluru, the water bodies of Mumbai and Delhi's Yamuna river.

"Invasive species (like the red-eared slider) take over these habitats by feeding on selective species of fish which native species also depend on. This will have a long-term impact on the local biodiversity," says Desai.

The over-hunting of certain species like the pangolin can also threaten the survival of forests in the long run. Pangolins are regarded as guardians of the forests for their ability to keep termite populations in check and prevent tree damage and forest fires. They also play an important role in aerating the soil.

Pangolins are the most trafficked mammals in the world. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, some Asian pangolin species have declined by more than 50% in recent years. "Over the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of poaching cases of pangolins in northeastern states and the Western Ghats," says Uttara Mendiratta, a wildlife trade expert.

The sighting of pangolins in these regions has come down drastically, she adds. "They are being poached for their meat and scales that are said to have medicinal qualities," Uttara says.

Several other animals with specific roles in the ecosystem are in danger today. "Body parts and derivatives are mostly traded in the international and domestic market for alternative medicines, meat, and other purposes. Animals such as owls, sand boas and others are traded in the domestic market for religious purposes," she says.

The illegal wildlife trade no doubt has an impact on the biodiversity of a region as the removal of select species can result in an imbalance in the food cycle. An often ignored consequence is the origin and spread of several zoonotic diseases

[Home](#) | [India](#) | [Karnataka](#) | [Opinion](#) | [World](#) | [Business](#) | [☰](#)[▶ News Shots](#) [▶ Explainers](#) [▶ Bengaluru](#) [▶ Science](#) [▶ Trending](#) [▶ Brandspot](#) [▶ Photos](#) [▶ Newsletters](#)

Advancement of technology

The advancement of technology has also resulted in growing fear among experts about the changing nature of wildlife crime. The existence of chat rooms for those looking to smuggle wildlife products on the dark web is an example of how technology can be harnessed by criminals, according to officials.

The online trading of wildlife poses a great challenge to forest departments across the country. A majority do not have the required infrastructure and expertise to even report such sales. "It is altogether a different ball game, where the agencies are lagging," says Kirupasankar M, regional deputy director of the WCCB.

The forest department is already falling short in the detection and prosecution of traditional forms of wildlife crimes. "We can deter wildlife crime only when the conviction and punishment rate increases," says Kirupasankar.

Poor conviction rates have resulted in the notion that illegal wildlife trade is a low-risk business with high returns. "Unfortunately, it is always the poor and the forest dwellers who get caught for hunting the animals and not the syndicate that creates the demand and supply chain," says Uttara.

Kirupasankar explains that a major deterrent to judicial proceedings is the lack of concrete evidence. "Courts follow certain procedures and seek proof of crime. Unlike other cases, providing eye-witnesses and substantive proof is impossible in wildlife crime," he says.

There is also a need to use more specialist techniques such as forensics to tackle poachers and bring down networks.

Kirupasankar says his department is attempting to bring all stakeholders including forest departments of various states on board to share information and intelligence, which is currently lacking, to prevent wildlife crime.

Improvements

Experts suggest that the forest department form special task forces that can take action on wildlife crimes and see cases to their logical end. For instance, Madhya Pradesh, which reports one of the highest numbers of tiger-poaching cases, has instituted the State Tiger Strike Force with dedicated staff and infrastructure to address wildlife crime.

Dhiraj Singh Chauhan, in charge of the strike force, says they have received a mandate from

species. The demand is growing and modes of smuggling are evolving in an increasingly globalised illegal wildlife trade market. If methods of investigating and tackling poaching syndicates do not keep pace and stay ahead of the game, India's megadiverse ecosystems will pay the price.

(Published 13 January 2024, 20:02 IST)

- India News
- Wildlife Conservation
- Environment News

Follow us on



Home



News Shots



Trending



Menu