



By Bruce Rich

Web Governance: Don't Be Evil

Many of the challenges facing conservation efforts in the developing world can be summarized as problems of governance. These start with the weakness of institutions, laws, and enforcement. They include the continuing annihilation of endangered plant and animal species. There is the related problem of political will to counter predatory economic and political pressures to destroy or convert natural habitats. Pervasive corruption and the growth of illegal international trade in banned substances and products are the most visible corollaries of these problems.

Some have viewed the internet as part of the solution in fighting poor governance through greater transparency and mobilizing grassroots campaigns for good causes. In reality, it is just as much part of the problem, enabling and turbocharging international mafias, facilitating the growing trade in endangered species, and opening new opportunities for corruption.

At the most recent meeting of the parties to the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species held in Bangkok, Thailand, the threat to the world's wildlife of failed global governance appeared more urgent than ever before. Addressing the representatives of 178 nations, United Nations Environment Program head Achim Steiner warned that global commerce now includes "a billion-dollar trade in wildlife species that is analo-

gous to that of the trade in drugs and arms . . . driven by a conglomerate of crime syndicates across borders."

From 2002 to 2011 a hecatomb of the African elephant has occurred, with organized gangs of poachers and militias in concord with Asian criminal consortia slaughtering 60 percent of the elephant population. Steiner cited the example of Cameroon, where in a few weeks in early 2012 as many as 450 elephants were killed "in exchange for money, weapons, and ammunition to support conflicts in the region."

According to the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the internet has already become the dominant factor in the illegal global trade in protected species. At the CITES meeting the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency accused Google of fueling the demand for illegal ivory through thousands of ads directed to consumers in Asia. On Google Japan alone, the EIA found over 10,000 separate ads selling ivory, in spite of Google's claims it doesn't allow the promotion of products from threatened species. At the same time, Interpol released a study (Project Web, funded by the IFAW) examining e-trade in illegal ivory in 10 countries in the European Union. Interpol found that just in a two week period 660 ads on 61 separate internet auction sites for 4,500 kilograms of ivory for sale for 1.45 million euros.

The burgeoning illegal wildlife trade is threatening not just elephants, but great apes, rhinos, exotic birds, tigers, other great cats, and polar bears. No species is too obscure, too rare, or too remote in an electronically connected world to be a new profit center as it is driven to extinction.

Take Kaiser's spotted newt, a colorful salamander found in only four streams in the Zagros mountains of southeastern Iran. Coveted by collectors who are willing to pay as much as \$350 for a specimen, *Neurergus kaiseri* is the first species to have been driven to

virtual extinction by the web. E-commerce on a dozen websites in the early 2000s drove its estimated population in the wild down by 80 percent.

Wildlife protection groups like IFAW have negotiated with individual e-commerce portals such as Ebay and Alibaba to convince them to ban sales of ivory on their sites. Interpol has identified national and international regulation of internet trade as a pressing priority if the traffic in endangered wildlife and wildlife products is to be effectively combated.

The failure of governance lies equally on the demand side in many richer developed and newly industrializing countries as well as in poor nations. Interpol has found large gaps in EU national wildlife trade legislation concerning the internet, with no obligation for sellers of endangered species products to prove that their products conform to national and international legislation, nor to inform prospective buyers of legal requirements. Nor is there an effort to regulate websites offering ille-

gal wildlife products. More revealingly, a number of EU countries rejected Interpol's invitation to participate in Project Web, claiming either that they lacked institu-

tional capacity or that internet wildlife crime was not a priority. These excuses of course are reflections of at best lack of political will if not bad faith.

One of the smaller nations in the EU, the Czech Republic, has passed legislation to fill gaps in internet regulation of endangered species products. The new law includes requirements for e-permits to be issued by Czech wildlife management authorities to guarantee that products sold on the internet comply with existing national and international laws on protection of endangered species.

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On the internet, there is a roaring trade in endangered species, on well-known web sites