Research Article

Experiences of the Hungarian customs authority in international illegal wildlife trafficking

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Received: 09/03/2021 Accepted: (online first): 08/06/2021

Competing interests: Author(s) stated no compete of interest.

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How to cite: Zsigmond, Cs., Kovács, D. Experiences of the Hungarian customs authority in international illegal wildlife trafficking. DRC Sustainable Future, 2021, 2(1): 54-60; DOI: 10.37281/DRCSF/2.1.6

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine how Hungarian customs officers perceive the role of Hungarian customs authority and its effectiveness in international illegal wildlife trafficking. We aim to identify the characteristics of international illegal wildlife trade, which also affects Hungary, and to evaluate the experience of customs officers. Most of these custom officers encounter such crimes of international nature. By assessing and publishing their experience one can take more effective action in the future. This approach allows to identify the methods of offense, the reasons of offense, and the difficulties faced by the custom authorities. To explore this, we conducted a questionnaire survey of 27 questions addressed to many members of the target group. The survey contained closed questions and, to a lesser extent, open-ended questions, allowing to learn both their objective experience and subjective opinions. Prior to the survey, we mapped out which units of the National Tax and Customs Administration would encounter most often international illegal wildlife trafficking, and then compiled the relevant issues that may allow effective action against this kind of incident. By devising the questionnaire, our aim was to assess how frequent illegal wildlife trafficking in Hungary is, what routes and hiding methods are typical, which species are affected, and what measures are needed to increase efficiency of combating trafficking. The questionnaire was completed by 202 experts. Results show that in course of their work most respondents (64%) have met International Wildlife Trafficking monthly. According to their experience, attempts are being made to smuggle various endangered animal and plant species into the country, mainly at the Liszt Ferenc International Airport in Budapest. According to respondents, in most cases, international networks may be behind the smuggling activity. Respondents believe that the effectiveness of combating wildlife trafficking can be improved by more frequent and thorough inspections, higher priority given to such cases, increased penalties, and special training of customs officers. Based on received answers, the paper highlights the phenomena and problems that generally occur globally in the inter-regional trade of illegal wildlife. These can be addressed by effective action of law enforcement officers and customs authorities. The fight against illegal trade in protected animal and plant species is considered high priority, as it causes loss of biodiversity and damage of the ecological balance, and it jeopardizes our sustainable future.

Keywords: Wildlife trafficking; illegal trafficking, nature crimes, sustainability; International Wildlife Trafficking
1. Introduction
Effective action against international illegal trade of endangered species is essential to preserve sustainable development (Nellemann et al., 2014), as this crime disturbs the delicate ecological balance by seriously endangering biodiversity. It can also pose a threat to human health, as some research publications suggest that the COVID-19 virus may be zoonotic, meaning that it may have spread from animal to human. Hence, illegal wildlife trade might have contributed significantly to its spread (Lam et al., 2020). In addition, it causes enormous damage to the world economy, being linked to severe organized crime (FTAF, 2020; Interpol, 2019a; Viollaz et al., 2018), and can even undermine the stability of some states (Wyatt, 2013). Effective action against international illegal wildlife trading can only be achieved through dedicated work and cooperation in different areas (Elliott, 2017). This is the task of legislative bodies, certain branches of law enforcement, law enforcement agencies (police, customs, nature conservation guards), competent ministries (Ministry of Environment, Game Management), and non-governmental organizations (Keohane & Victor, 2011). Each organization is an indispensable pillar of effective action, whenever one of the weaker organizations jeopardizes the effectiveness of the whole activity. This is also true for the Hungarian customs authorities, which does law enforcement. To increase the effectiveness of this organization in acting against illegal trafficking, strategic steps are needed. For this, one should gather the experience of customs authorities and to learn about difficulties that arise in practice. Assessing the phenomenon and acquiring experience on smuggling techniques in international illegal trade is a basic tool for efficient future actions (Kurland & Pires, 2017).

Smuggling is part of a long cross-border supply chain, ranging from poaching (van Uhm, 2016) to smugglers who are opportunistic members of an unorganized group. Some are working on a regular basis, for international criminal organizations (Wyatt et al., 2020). The main task of the Hungarian customs authority is to control the legal and illegal trade of endangered animal and plant species, as well as of products made from them. Control is performed upon both entering and leaving the country, and during so-called in-depth inspections. These customs controls are carried out in accordance with the EU Customs Code. Some previous research has examined the effectiveness of these controls. Hence, a survey conducted in year 2009 (Tilki & Dunavölgyi, 2009) used both a primary (file research) and a secondary research method (survey) and focused on the cases initiated by the customs authorities and explored the experience of customs officers. Authors’ work examined cases in 2006 and 2007, begun by customs officials because of violations of nature conservation or nature damage offenses. Main objectives of the research were: (i) to learn about the reasons for terminating the investigation, (ii) what the typical offending behaviors were, (iii) what species were smuggled, and (iv) what were the circumstances of the discovery.

According to the survey, almost all cases set up by customs authorities were closed. In some instances, on the grounds that perpetrators’ mistake caused the committed crime, i.e., the accused was unaware that plants or animals intended for import or export to the country were protected by law. Based on these cases, one can identify the lack of knowledge on species that are prohibited or authorized for import. The same is true for medicinal products, containing components from protected animal or plant species. Another problem was that the relevant nature conservation rules were changing, divergent, and difficult to review. Crimes (damage to nature) were typically committed through unauthorized import of protected animal or plant species, or products derived thereof. Distribution of offenses was the following: 18.4% animal skins or animal provisions, body parts (skull, tooth, or jaw), 14.5% stone coral, 21.7% medicinal products, 8.6% turtle species, 9.9% reptile products, 9.9% birds, and 17.1% other (e.g., caviar, snake carcass spirit, or dried seahorse). The research also found that customs authorities do not employ a customs official with expertise in nature conservation, although according to the questionnaire survey this would be necessary, as 1-2% of the cases pertain this type of offence (Tilki & Dunavölgyi, 2009).

Seizure statistics of Hungarian customs authorities and smuggling trends from 2015 to 2019 were examined in another study (Harnberger & Zsigmond, 2020). These statistics were used as a primary data source and expert interviews were conducted with customs officers experienced in such cases. Results reveal that smuggling of endangered species was mainly for medicinal (e.g., medicinal products from Indian thistle) or for decorative purposes (snowdrops), followed by birds (alive, destroyed during transport, or processed), and derivatives of mammals and then reptiles (animal skins and products thereof), and lastly, pieces of corals. According to these statistics, smuggling happened mainly by air. Goods smuggled on the plane arrive in Hungary mostly as postal parcels, and a smaller part was found in the passengers’ parcels. Illicit traffic by air is followed by illegal transport by road (bus, minibus, car) from Hungary’s southern and eastern neighbors (Serbia, Ukraine, and Romania).

Expert interviews indicated that animals are typically smuggled in passenger traffic, mainly tourists, who are unaware of the relevant nature conservation regulations, import corals from exotic countries, in smaller
quantities, and exotic reptile skins, as well as medicinal products containing endangered animal and plant parts. In the postal sector, products of animal origin are smuggled from African countries, while products of plant origin are smuggled from the Far East. In passenger traffic, camouflage and concealment methods are usually used, such as other illegal smugglers, hidden in clothing, wrapped in underwear in checked baggage, ivory jewelry hidden among other jewelry. According to this research, CITES-protected plants (snowdrops, domestically protected alpine fires, and Carpathian saffron) are mainly transported to Hungary or through Hungary by car, at border crossings, and presumably sold on the black market. Smugglers usually transport these birds (live, in cages, or processed, frozen) in a minibus or car, hidden (hidden under seats). A specific diversion method that a smuggler communicates to a custom officer is the customs clearance of goods in his possession: one or two cartons of cigarettes, hoping that this way he can circumvent further customs clearance. Nonetheless, custom officers conduct a routine investigation to uncover illegal goods. Recently (2015-2020), illegal wildlife trading from third countries to and from some EU countries has become widespread, i.e., the EU can be considered as a source, destination, and transit country (Zsigmond, 2020). Hungary is not an exception to this, as documented by this paper. Research to date has focused mainly on incidents, methods of perpetration, and seizure data. Less attention was paid to custom officers, who come across these types of fraud, how often they meet them, how informed they are about the phenomenon, what their personal experience is, whether they are aware of the relevant legislation, have they received sufficient information and special training on the procedures for dealing with these cases? To clarify the above issues, we conducted a questionnaire survey among the members of the Hungarian customs authorities, who most often encounter such crimes; they serve at Budapest International Airport, at road and border crossing points, and at depth control units.

2. Materials and Methods
Several previously studies have used questionnaire surveys to learn about the characteristics of illegal wildlife trafficking. One such study referred to the illegal trade in pangolin in African Gabon, which used questionnaire and database analysis simultaneously (Mambeya et al., 2018). This research, like ours, was aimed at learning from the experience gained by law enforcement officers. Database analysis was based on seizure data, while the questionnaires were completed by African pangolin hunters and law enforcement officers (police officers, customs officers), who are confronted with such cases. The aim of the authors was to examine how widespread the illegal pangolin trade starting from Gabon is, what illegal trade routes were developed, how and effectively law enforcement detects illegal shipments, and what conservation measures and policy decisions may be needed to address the problem. An online questionnaire survey was conducted in the U.K. to assess the effectiveness of restrictive, and austerity provisions were implemented to curb illegal ivory trade domestically (Harris et al., 2019). The survey encompassed legal traders. In terms of effectiveness, factors like knowledge of restrictive rules, applicability, and deterrence were examined. In Malaysia, local communities were surveyed on knowledge of conservation regulations, to protect Sunda pangolins from illegal trade (Ariffin & Nan, 2018). A survey conducted in Vietnam aimed to assess consumer habits and motivations (Davis et al., 2019). There is a high demand for medicinal products made from the bile of some endangered bear species in Vietnam and in the countries of South-East Asia. To restrict this, one should know consumers’ motivations and habits.

Aim and structure of the survey
Our goal was to uncover the subjective opinion of custom officers about illegal trafficking and to learn about their empirical experience on combating such detrimental undertakings. We compiled the questions and each question type accordingly. The questionnaire consisted of two parts and contained 27 questions. Out of these, 18 questions were of the closed type (including two scaling questions). These were multiple choice questions, where the respondent had to select the answer, he/she considered appropriate, while 9 questions were open-ended (essay-type questions), where they could share their own opinion and experience. In the first part, data management issues specific to the respondent were: age, length of service with the National Tax and Customs Board staff, hierarchical position, and location of service. The second part of questions focused on how often the respondent encountered international illegal trade in endangered wild species. What accomplices did the smuggler have, and what were the most typical traded animal or plant species. The last group of questions explored the opinion of people participating in the survey and their related experience. Do people know the law? Are they getting enough information about these actions? A total of 202 people completed the questionnaire. Among the participants in the research, the proportion of men was much greater: 179 men (88%) and 23 women (12%) completed the questionnaires. Age-wise most were 46-55 years old (75 people), 14 people belonged to the 18-25 age group, 47 people were 26-35 years old, and 64 people fell in the 36-45 age group, only 2 people were over 56 (Figures 1 and 2). According to the service location: 87 people were from the Deployment
Directorate, 76 from the Hungarian-Ukrainian border section, 16 from the Hungarian-Serbian border section, and 3 from the Hungarian-Romanian border. Also, 20 people from the Liszt Ferenc International Airport of Budapest answered our questions (Figure 3). The experience of the responders, based on their length of service was the following: 102 with over 20 years in the field, 52 with over 10 years of service, and 48 with 1-10 years of practice in the field.

In terms of position, 64 of the respondents were border customs officers, 53 people worked as patrols in the herd, and 14 were law enforcement officers. Additionally, we had 2 Customs Administrative Officers and 19 main customs administration administrators; 8 people served in expert positions and 22 were senior executives. Other 20 respondents could not be included in any of these classes, because their positions were not precisely indicated. Of those who served at the Airport Directorate, 3 worked at the Border Police Coordination Department. Also, our questionnaire was completed by 2 people from the Border Control Department.

In the Hungarian-Serbian border section at the Csongrád-Csanád County Tax and Customs Directorate, 7 persons served in Szeged, 4 persons at the border office in Tompa, 4 persons at the branch office in Röszke, and 1 person at the branch office in Hercegszántó. Among those serving on the Hungarian-Romanian border, 3 persons worked at Hajdú-Bihar County Tax and Customs Directorate in Ártánd.

3. Results and discussion

In the conducted survey, the following answers were received to the questions on illegal trade: (1) whether they encountered endangered wildlife species in the course of their work? - 129 people answered yes, 70 did not meet, and 3 were not sure (see Figure 4). Responders did not really encounter such events in their private lives, as 140 people answered no. Nevertheless, it has happened that they may have experienced this kind of thing during vacations.
Figure 4: Answers to the question: “Have you encountered endangered animal and plant species and the trade in products made from them in the course of your work?” (graph constructed by the authors).

Regarding the regularity of the plot, 80 of the respondents answered that they met their work in this type of plot years ago, 5 people answered that they meet these acts every month, 19 people every six months, 41 people per year, 9 people once every five years encounters this kind of action (see Figure 5). There were people, who have never encountered an event of this nature before (48 people). People who meet with the plot every month are in most of them and in the service of the airport. Every six months, or every year, those who serve at the state borders meet with the act.

47% of the interviewed customs officials declared that animal trade was slightly more common than plants trade, and 27% opiniated that illegal trade in both plants and animals was common.

Figure 5: Frequency of incidence (graph by the authors)

When asked on the kind of concealment used by the perpetrators, 91 of the respondents answered that they carry illegal products hidden in packages. Cases with products found hidden in vehicles were encountered by 59 people. Of the 20 personnel on duty at the airport, 16 of the 20 people who completed the questionnaire found that smuggling endangered wildlife by air was a consignment. Based on the experience of financiers (9 persons), animal remains recovered by CITES were found hidden in legal food. Thirteen of the respondents identified travelers, who did not use any means of concealment, as they were unaware that the product in their possession was derived from a protected animal or plant. When asked how many people are usually involved in the offense according to the respondents (147 experts) based on the cases uncovered, the perpetrators were presumably not working alone; usually more persons were involved, or possibly two offenders who played the roles of seller and buyer.

Next question was on the motivation of this crime; more than half of the respondents indicated financial benefits. When asked about the negative economic, social, and environmental impacts of international illegal wildlife trafficking, respondents largely answered that biodiversity would be significantly reduced and the more and more species will become extinct. A small percentage of respondents also believed that organized crime would also increase. Different species of wildlife are vulnerable, unique, and valuable, so they can be easily and quickly exploited in illegal money making.

We received several suggestions on how to curb these acts. There are basically three possible solutions. First, one should tighten sanctions applied on a large part of the stock. According to the stock, the buyer himself, not just the trader, should be held liable. According to respondents, the second most important measure in terms of austerity is to monitor compliance with the rules. Increased control should be implemented at the source, destination, or transit countries. Based on their opinion and experience, more transparent controls would make a good solution. Development of technical tools for control would be a major contribution to reduction of trafficking. Many respondents suggested that service dogs trained for this purpose could also be used during inspections.

Third, in most cases illegal transport of endangered species is carried out by ignorance and insufficient knowledge of the legislation.

A targeted question addressed the responders’ experience about online commerce, considered to most prevalent smuggling method, particularly for illegal animal or plant derivatives arriving in the country by air. Frequency of wild game trafficking reported here are consistent with a previous quantitative study based on a primary data source, which examined seizure data of the National Tax and Customs Office from 2014 to 2018 (Harnberger-Zsigmond 2020). There is a declining trend in illegal animal and plant smuggling by customs. It should be noted that a reduction in the number of effective detections and seizures does not necessarily mean a decrease of the number of cases committed, as pointed out in the above-mentioned paper. Reducing controls on airport customs packages may cause a longer
delay in identifying illegal cases. A basic criminological premise is that crimes that have become known to authorities can only be considered the “tip of the iceberg,” representing only a fraction of the committed crimes (Borbíró et al., 2016; Korinek, 2020). Within the illegal game trade, the latency can be up to ten times greater (Kőhalmi, 2003).

According to our findings, the crime most often occurs at the Liszt Ferenc International Airport, which is also supported by previous research (Harnberger & Zsigmond, 2020). Our disclosed proportion of illegally smuggled animals or plants differ from previous quantitative research results, as we focus on seized endangered animals or their derivatives, while previous research revealed a greater proportion of plants.

Smugglers have largely used concealment during illegal transportation, which is also in line with international trends (van Uh, 2016). One can state that these crimes are committed for financial gain. Among the proposed solutions identified in the questionnaire one should mention more frequent and more effective audits. In 2019, the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Administration participated in such international actions 16 times; one of them was the Thunderball action organized by Interpol (Interpol, 2019b). In the latter action outstanding results were achieved in the seizure of endangered animal and plant species. In general, there is a lack of controls on the part of the authorities, because of shortage of specialized equipment and a supervisory system that could provide appropriate compliance with the law (Kőhalmi, 2017).

We also received a clear answer on opportunities popping up in the online space, which help to commit a crime. Acting against online crime represents a great challenge for the authorities (Lavorgna, 2014).

4. Conclusions

Results of another research conducted by the Hungarian customs authorities also point to the same problems that several large-scale international studies have already disclosed on the global scale (UNODC, 2016, 2020): wildlife crime crosses borders and often continents; behind the act, the purpose of financial gain motivates mainly the inhabitants of poorer source countries, the law imposes a mild penalty, and customs officers generally lack the appropriate expertise. Therefore, special training would be needed. Our findings are that the management of the problem goes far beyond the possibilities of the Hungarian customs authorities, effective action can only be solved by a broad cooperation of state and social bodies, which can contribute to the protection of a sustainable environment and development in the future.

Supporting material


References


Interpol. (2019a). The world’s flora and fauna are at great risk from criminals. https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Environmental-crime/Wildlife-crime


