Welfare issues associated with the illegal wildlife trade

Background

The illegal wildlife trade is a multi-billion dollar industry estimated to involve billions of individual animals (Rosen and Smith 2010). It has been compared to other more notorious illegal trades such as drugs, arms and human trafficking and has been associated with funding organised crime and terrorism (Wyler and Sheikh 2013). Wild animals are traded alive, to be kept as pets or for display, or killed and sold as whole animals or body parts for consumption, traditional medicines, ornaments and jewellery.

In Australia, many native animals, particularly birds and reptiles, are targets of the illegal wildlife trade, due to a high international demand for these species as pets. Exotic animals are also illegally smuggled into Australia to be kept by collectors.

The 'laundering' of wildlife, where illegally sourced animals as are sold as legal and/or captive bred is a serious problem. The use of falsified or dishonestly obtained documents, often when animals are passing through 'in transit' countries, makes it difficult to distinguish between legal and illegal trading. The internet and social media are also increasingly being utilised to facilitate illegal trade transactions (Hansen et al. 2012).

Multi-agency state and federal enforcement operations have detected large-scale illegal wildlife trade operations in Australia. Organised criminal networks have been found to be dealing in commercial shipments of live animals and eggs (Alacs and Georges 2008). Several high profile cases were reported in 2016-17. For example, a disgraced former sportsman faced multiple charges relating to his involvement in an organised crime syndicate illegally importing and exporting hundreds of reptiles and other animals interstate and overseas. Furthermore, a Northern Territory man was found with 13,000 animal parts in what was described as the 'biggest protected wildlife seizure' in Australia.

Animal welfare risks

At every stage of the wildlife trade, animals are exposed to serious risks to their health and welfare (Baker et al. 2013). Although, it is difficult to gather empirical data on the direct impact on individual animals, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the trade poses a multitude of risks to animal welfare including:

- **Capture and restraint** – methods used to capture wild animals such as snares and traps are likely to cause fear, distress, pain and injury. Captured animals may suffer injuries and exposure to environmental extremes, as well as harassment by people or other animals. Restraining wild animals causes stress as they are unaccustomed to being approached and handled by people. Birds and some species in the kangaroo family in particular may die suddenly as a result of the stress of capture and restraint. Removing a wild animal from their home territory and social group also causes fear and stress and in severe cases can lead to death.

- **Transport** – transportation exposes animals to many adverse conditions. Smugglers go to great lengths to conceal animals from enforcement authorities, routinely confining them in very small cages, containers or parcels. In addition to animals suffering fear and distress, extreme confinement may result in suffocation. Smuggled animals typically endure prolonged journeys over long distances. In transit, they may suffer from dehydration and starvation resulting in very high mortality rates (Liddick 2011).

- **Killing** – many animals in the illegal wildlife trade are killed using inhumane methods. In general, those involved in the trade lack the compassion, skills or equipment to ensure animals are killed quickly and without pain.

- **Captivity** – many animals traded illegally are forced to endure long-term captivity under inhumane conditions. Captivity can expose wild animals to a multitude of unusual stressors including forced closeness with people, unfamiliar smells, sounds and light patterns, improper diet and malnutrition, temperature shock, restricted movement, lack of opportunity to express normal behaviours, abnormal social groupings and inappropriate housing (Morgan and Tromborg 2007). Wild animals kept in captivity by traffickers and amateur keepers are unlikely to have their specific husbandry needs met.

- **Injury, pain and disease** - animals may suffer painful, debilitating and in some cases fatal injuries during capture, restraint, transport and captivity. Some species destined for the illegal pet trade are subjected to painful procedures, such as teeth clipping, to make them more suitable for captivity. Animals traded illegally are also at risk of suffering disease. In fact, wildlife trade has been known to cause disease outbreaks (Karesh et al. 2005). This is associated with the movement and mixing of animals resulting in greater disease spread as well as stress and reduced immunity thereby increasing an animal's vulnerability to infection. Investigations of major distribution facilities in the USA and Europe have uncovered extremely poor conditions under which thousands of animals have been retained resulting in significant injury and illness as well as mass euthanasia.

- **Lack of veterinary care** – animals who become sick or injured due to being trafficked, do not receive proper veterinary care resulting in prolonged pain and suffering. Optimum care of wildlife is often denied due to the lack of specialist veterinarians being available at their final destination or to avoid detection by wildlife authorities.

- **Lack of legal protection** – many smuggled animals are destined for countries that have inadequate or no animal welfare legislation or standards of care; even where these laws exist, animals held illegally will not be known to authorities.

Unfortunately, authorities who seize and confiscate illegally traded animals may not provide appropriate care of wildlife themselves. Incidents have been reported of inhumane killing by authorities, improper care by designated rescue groups and animals being returned to the trade due to corruption. Mechanisms to better monitor and manage the welfare of confiscated animals are being evaluated by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) authorities, but it will be some time before any recommended changes take effect.

Threat to wild animal populations

The illegal wildlife trade has been identified as a major cause of biodiversity loss (Daszak et al. 2000). Wildlife trade experts recognise that the majority of animals traded internationally are captured from the wild, placing populations at risk. Species that have been pushed to the brink of extinction by the pet trade include a number of reptiles and birds (Bittel 2016). In addition, many species involved in the illegal wildllfe trade lack regulatory protection. For example, CITES and the European Wildlife Trade Regulations (EWTR) regulate less than 8% of the 10,272 currently recognised reptile species (Auliya 2016). Collectors are known to target 355 of the 1390 world's threatened reptile species (Auliya 2016). Collectors also pose a serious threat to new discoveries as they are keen to obtain the latest rare species. Some scientific journals do not disclose the location of new species to help prevent poaching.

Laws in Australia relating to wildlife trade

Trade in endangered wildlife is governed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna regulations incorporated into the Australian *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act).* In addition to the relevant state animal cruelty legislation, respective state conservation laws also relate to wildlife trade activities.

State	Act
ACT	*Nature Conservation Act 2014*
NSW	*National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*
NT	*Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 2014*
QLD	*Nature Conservation (Wildlife Management) Regulation 2006*
SA	*National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*
TAS	*Wildlife Regulations 1999*
VIC	*Wildlife Act 1975*
WA	*Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*

Ending the illegal wildlife trade in Australia

Finding a solution to end the illegal wildlife trade is difficult due to the many complex factors involved. However, there are five broad areas where action should be focused in order to achieve change:

1. **Policy – develop effective frameworks to guide government responses to illegal wildlife trade.** Government agencies should acknowledge illegal wildlife trading as a serious crime and develop clear policy frameworks to guide their response in stopping the trade. Policy instruments which may be used include those relating to animal welfare, customs, trade, biodiversity conservation, biosecurity and the criminal code. For example, the US Congress and the EU have produced comprehensive policy frameworks on illegal wildlife trade. An effective first step would be for Australia to collaborate with key trading partners to forge multilateral agreements aimed at combatting the trade.

2. **Legislation – introduce stronger laws and harsher penalties to deter illegal wildlife trade activities.** At present in Australia, very few illegal wildlife trade seizures result in prosecution, with the usual penalty only being a small fine (Alacs and Georges 2008). The trade will remain appealing if potential profits are high and penalties light. Tightening legislation and increasing penalties should help deter people from becoming involved in the illegal wildlife trade. State legislation should be harmonised and loopholes closed.

3. **Enforcement – implement effective enforcement to detect and prosecute illegal wildlife trade cases.** Enforcement agencies should be provided with sufficient funding, resources and training to conduct surveillance, detect breaches and prepare robust cases for prosecution. State and national authorities should continue to collaborate on parallel or convergent wildlife crimes.

4. **Data analysis – maintain a centralised system to record and analyse relevant information**. Government and enforcement agencies should maintain, contribute to and share data on illegal wildlife trade. Data collection systems should be centralised to strengthen overall capacity to monitor and intervene. Australia should continue to regularly submit data to CITES as part of international efforts to monitor illegal wildlife trade.

5. **Behavioural and cultural change – engage the community to actively stop the trade**. Long-term behavioural and cultural changes are needed to reduce demand for wildlife as pets and for products such as traditional medicines. The public can help drive these changes by openly discussing the illegal wildlife trade and challenging long-held practices that may endanger animals. Refraining from buying wild animals as pets and associated products will reduce demand. Contacting the relevant authorities to report suspicious wildlife activities, such as people capturing or transporting wild animals or advertisements for prohibited wildlife for sale, will help reduce the trade. The scientific community can assist by developing ethical alternatives to traditional medicines. Social media users, journalists, advertisers and e-commerce businesses can help by refusing to share materials promoting wildlife products or wildlife as pets, and by providing information to raise awareness about the associated animal welfare and conservation concerns.

Conclusion

The illegal wildlife trade poses a significant threat with many animals experiencing fear, discomfort, injury, pain, disease, neglect and stress. Thousands of animals have died and will continue to die as a result of this trade. This serious and escalating issue, which has significant implications for biodiversity as well as animal welfare, requires urgent action.

Substantial progress can be made through relevant government agencies, the judiciary and the community working together to increase detection, reporting, investigation, prosecution and penalties of illegal wildlife traffickers as well as reducing the demand for wild animals and products through facilitating behavioural and cultural change.

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