

[News story: Michael Gove: Countdown to the London Illegal Wildlife Trade conference](#)

How many people would buy an ivory trinket if they were forced first to witness the massacre of elephants by poachers? You might well wonder. I often do.

Because humans' greed for ivory is driving a devastating decline in elephant numbers – 20,000 are killed every year – and despite public disgust there is no let-up in the slaughter.

Last month it was reported that in one of the most sickening attacks yet mounted in Africa, more than 50 magnificent elephants were killed near a sanctuary in Botswana – a terrible blow for a country with a long and successful conservation programme.

The tusks had been hacked off and spirited away, to be sold on for vast sums by unscrupulous criminals exploiting the international market for ivory.

We must act or face the real possibility that future generations will know elephants only from books, photos or films – an unthinkable prospect.

Tackling rapidly increasing wildlife crime is a government priority. Our ban on the sale of ivory will be among the strictest in the world.

But this latest attack is a grim reminder of the urgent need for further action on a global scale.

And in a month's time, the UK will be pressing for concerted international efforts when it hosts national leaders, NGOs and conservationists at the [fourth Illegal Wildlife Trade \(IWT\) Conference in London](#).

Saving the African elephant will be high on the conference agenda. Our new Ivory Alliance 2024, which I will chair, aims to cut the numbers killed for their ivory by at least a third by 2020, and to halve this rate again by 2024.

But we will also focus on the plight of many thousands of other protected and endangered species. No fewer than 1003 species of animals and plants are so threatened with extinction that the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international agreement between governments does not allow commercial trade in these species except in exceptional circumstances. CITES, to which the UK is a party, protects around 5,600 species of animals and 30,000 species of plants.

In recent years, rare rhino, pangolins, sturgeons – even rosewood – have suffered grievously. I'm glad to say the government already funds a number of protection projects around the world, often aimed at lesser-known species.

These include the critically-endangered hawksbill turtle, found in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the helmeted hornbill – targeted by poachers in the Malay Peninsula and Borneo for its ‘helmet’, a solid block of ivory-like substance – and the pileated gibbon, which is hunted in its native Asian rainforest for the food and pet trade.

We know that in South East Asia alone, up to 1.3 million birds are taken from the wild every year. And if that sounds a long way from the UK, illegal trafficking brings the plight of rare or tropical species very close to home.

[Chester Zoo](#) received some new residents – 100 exotic birds from 14 different species which were seized by customs officials in Europe.

It is likely that the birds would have been sold illegally as pets, assuming they survived transportation in often squalid conditions. Instead, they will now form a crucial part of international breeding programmes aimed at boosting numbers.

I am delighted, too, that the [British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#), which includes Chester, has led the way on this issue with a [pact calling for an end to IWT and condemning all those involved](#).

It’s important to realise that wildlife criminals don’t only destroy iconic species. They’re involved in serious, organised racketeering. Overall, environmental crime, which includes IWT, is the fifth most lucrative serious organised crime, worth up to £17bn a year according to estimates.

In this shadowy, underground world, criminals conspire with corrupt officials and agencies to undermine sustainable development and the rule of law. Their profits are ploughed into more illegal schemes, heaping fresh misery on local communities.

So this year’s London conference aims to identify new and effective ways to frustrate their activities. There will be three major topics of discussion – the need to tackle IWT as serious organised crime; building coalitions across continents to crack down on it and finding ways to close down or otherwise frustrate markets for ivory and other illegal wildlife products.

The stakes are high and time is not on our side.

Wildlife crime drives species to the very edge of existence.

It harms local communities and brings violence to people’s lives.

For these reasons, the London Conference can’t come soon enough. I look forward to working with our conference partners to secure the firm support of the public, businesses, NGOs and other governments worldwide.

And show that the international community is committed to fighting for the future of our most precious and endangered wildlife.