

Press release: Foreign Secretary pledges to do everything possible to protect wild animals

In the last five decades, the world has lost nearly 60 percent of its vertebrate animals. In case you believe that is just another statistic, think about what it means.

The magnificent wildlife that humanity has inherited – the animals that enliven our imaginations, enhance the beauty of the world and provide livelihoods for millions of people – are disappearing with terrifying speed. We have lost two thirds of Africa's elephants since the 1970s. We are down to the last 80,000 giraffes and the final 20,000 lions. The world's tiger population has dropped by 95 per cent in the last century.

If we go on like this, our grandchildren may only know of these animals from David Attenborough documentaries.

So today, I will open a conference in London attended by 80 countries on how to combat the illegal wildlife trade. The criminal gangs who smuggle horns and tusks pose one of the greatest threats to the survival of wildlife. They target some of the poorest countries in the world, spreading corruption and depriving governments of desperately needed revenues that could be used for schools and hospitals.

The World Bank estimates that governments lose as much as \$15 billion (£11 billion) every year because of illegal logging. And the same criminal networks that traffic the body parts of wild animals may also deal in guns and drugs and people.

This week, I have joined Penny Mordaunt, the International Development Secretary, to announce a new British initiative to target the traffickers by helping countries in Africa and Asia to launch investigations and seize assets. We are sending more British diplomats to Africa, including experts on combating the illegal wildlife trade.

Last year, our Parliament passed the Criminal Finances Act, strengthening the British Government's powers to combat money laundering and freeze unexplained wealth. Since then, we have placed another law before Parliament that would ban domestic ivory sales.

We will also contribute £250 million to the United Nations Global Environment Facility by 2022. As part of this, the Global Wildlife Programme has worked with Kenya on a new law imposing tougher punishments for wildlife crimes, including life imprisonment for anyone caught smuggling the body parts of an endangered species.

We are using our aid budget to help the UN Office of Drugs and Crime to

strengthen the ability of developing countries to enforce their laws against the wildlife trade and improve their investigative skills.

When laws are enforced and smugglers prosecuted, wildlife populations can and do recover. The number of wild tigers in Nepal, for example, has doubled in the last nine years.

The London conference will be the biggest international gathering of its kind ever held. My aim is for Britain to do everything possible to protect wild animals for the sake of our grandchildren. If we failed to act, quite simply we would never be forgiven.