

Speech: Minister Mark Field's speech at Wilton Park conference on illegal wildlife trade

Introduction

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to see so many of you here, heralding such an international range of expertise and commitment.

Like me, I guess you welcome spending time amidst the glorious surroundings of Wilton Park, especially those of you who have travelled a long way.

This historic institution has been the scene of many important and ground-breaking conferences over the years that have led to significant shifts in global policy.

So this is the perfect place to be discussing how we can work together to stop the illegal trade in wildlife, which is detrimental to our planet and our societies in so many ways.

In October the UK is going to be hosting the fourth international conference on the subject. We have high ambitions for Conference, but we need your support, enthusiasm and guidance to realise them.

That is what yesterday and today have been all about.

Impact of IWT

As we all know, the illegal wildlife trade has been a blight for decades. I can remember hearing about the dangers of poaching to rhino and elephant populations when I was still a schoolboy.

What is less well known outside this room is the sheer scale of it, and the range of species affected: from eels to pangolins, corals to timber.

Since I became a Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office a year ago, I have been fortunate enough to travel widely in the Asia Pacific region.

On many of these visits I have discussed the illegal wildlife trade with my counterparts, and I have seen first-hand the efforts being made to tackle trafficking – from a bear rescue centre in Vietnam to Thai efforts to strengthen law enforcement, which led to the arrest of a trafficking king-pin earlier this year.

That arrest is an illustration of what we already knew: that the trade in illegal wildlife has become the work of global organised crime networks, and it is making them a fortune – as much as £17 billion a year by some estimates. This is not – as some mistakenly continue to believe – a victimless crime.

The vast size of some of the seizures also gives an indication of the scale of the networks involved.

Last year, the Hong Kong authorities picked up over 7 tonnes of elephant tusk, the world's largest ever single seizure of ivory. Tragically, that one haul alone equates to as many as 720 dead elephants.

As we all know, the criminal networks responsible for this needless slaughter not only endanger the survival of species and the biodiversity of the planet.

They also have a detrimental effect on wider society – not least because the illegal trade in wildlife is linked to large scale corruption.

This means that significant tax revenues are lost.

To give just one example, the Environmental Investigation Agency estimates that illegally harvested timber exports to China deprived Mozambique of an estimated US\$146 million in lost tax revenues between 2007 and 2013.

And last year a study by the NGO Africa Resources estimated that in just eight years from 2006 to 2014, eight southern African countries lost around US\$7 billion per year in illicit financial flows from the wildlife tourism sector.

The problem is growing. A 2016 report by Interpol and the UN Environment Programme suggested that environmental crime, which includes the illegal wildlife trade, was increasing at a rate of between 5 and 7% per year – nearly three times faster than global GDP.

And the detrimental effects are not simply financial. In some cases the corruption is linked to the political elite, which means that the illegal wildlife trade also undermines the rule of law and good governance as well as sustainable development.

That is why tackling it is such a priority for the Foreign Secretary, and for me.

History of the IWT Conference series

The UK government is playing a leading role on the issue, both at home and on the international stage.

Four years ago we hosted the first ever Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference, securing ambitious agreements from more than 40 governments to take urgent, coordinated action.

The resulting “London Declaration” recognised the illegal wildlife trade as a serious criminal activity, with widespread, pernicious effects. It remains our guiding framework today.

At subsequent conferences in Kasane and Hanoi we collectively progressed from high level commitments to implementation.

Yet despite this significant progress, the illegal wildlife trade is still at crisis point.

2018 London Conference

That is why we have set ambitious goals for the October London Conference.

We need to achieve a real step-change in collective action.

That means working to strengthen partnerships across borders and beyond governments.

We hope to achieve this by focussing on three main themes:

IWT as a serious organised crime

The first, and most pertinent to our conference today, is to deal with the illegal wildlife trade as a serious organised crime, smashing once and for all the narrative that IWT is some kind of Cinderella issue.

Global criminal networks are creative and agile, and the illegal wildlife trade is a truly global challenge.

We need strong networks working together across borders and across continents to counter it.

Seizures need to be followed by full investigations and successful prosecutions.

The London Conference is an opportunity for countries to enhance our coordination and cooperation, to make sure this happens.

The International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime has played a significant role in supporting joined-up, global law enforcement.

It has brought together Interpol, the UN Office for Drugs and Crime, CITES, World Customs Union and World Bank expertise and networks. The UK has committed £4 million to support ICCWC's strategic programme.

However there is much we still do not fully understand, including the links between the illegal wildlife trade and other forms of trafficking, and links to wider security challenges.

We must draw lessons from global efforts to combat other forms of illicit trade and activity, such as tackling illicit finance.

Illicit finance

Again, the UK is taking action on illicit finance.

This Government is committed to protecting the integrity of the UK's financial system by ensuring that it is hostile to illicit finance.

The introduction of last year's Criminal Finances Act enhanced the powers of law enforcement agencies to investigate and tackle financial crime.

Along with new money laundering regulations, the defences of our banks, lawyers, accountants and the rest of the regulated sector are now in line with the latest international standards set by the Financial Action Task Force.

I was particularly interested to engage in your discussions on "following the money" today and given the involvement of the Prime Minister's envoy, my colleague John Penrose, I trust that illicit finance will be a prominent theme at the London Conference.

Corruption

Corruption is another issue that will be high on the agenda, for the reasons I mentioned earlier. The illegal wildlife trade both fuels and is fuelled by corruption. It occurs at all stages and all levels of the illegal wildlife trade networks.

It is crucial that we continue to see wildlife crime in this light, and to discuss it at an international level, as we did in a side event at the UN Crime Commission just recently, and at the anti-corruption summit here in the UK two years ago.

Last year G20 Leaders agreed High Level Principles for tackling the corruption associated with wildlife trafficking. That work is now being taken forward through the G20's anti-corruption working group.

Corruption is a hard nut to crack, so I am hopeful that your discussions this week will identify tangible steps we can take forward together.

Building coalitions

The second focus at the London conference will be on "building coalitions" – something we can see in action here today.

That is because governments are only one of the actors needed to combat wildlife crime. To be successful, we also need to bring in financial institutions, academics, NGOs, journalists and businesses.

I am proud of the leading role UK NGOs and academics have been playing for many years in global efforts to stop wildlife trafficking.

Yet I believe getting the private sector more involved in the issue has been one of the most significant developments of the last four years.

I am delighted we have representatives here from the United for Wildlife Transport Taskforce.

They have already delivered tangible impact, contributing to seizures of illegal wildlife products estimated to be worth over half a million dollars.

I also think there is real scope for technology companies to lend their skills to the future fight. In that regard, the World Wildlife Fund Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online is a significant step forward.

Last week the Foreign Secretary and I hosted a round table discussion with leading technology companies and conservationists, to explore how technology can help solve some of the challenges.

I was extremely encouraged to see how keen the technology sector was to help. I am further encouraged by the fact that since the meeting, a number of other technology companies have been in touch to offer their support.

This isn't just about quick fixes – we need a long term strategy and outlook. I believe technology companies and the private sector more generally are well-placed to play a significant part. That is why business engagement will be an important element of the Conference.

One of my fears with these conferences is that everyone works so hard in the run-up that they collapse in a heap after. Follow-through is vital, and this is why I'm so enthused about the role technology can play in stamping out this crime long term.

Closing markets

Our third and final theme for the conference is about closing markets for illegally traded wildlife.

China's ban on the domestic ivory market is a game-changer. Enforcing the ban will be a challenge and we need to support countries to address the risk of the illicit market being displaced to neighbouring countries.

Closer to home, the UK's Ivory Bill – which we hope will be on the Statute Book by October – introduces some of the toughest legislation in the world.

We have very strong public backing for this – during the public consultation nearly 90% of responses supported a ban.

Of course, we also need to close illegal markets and reduce demand for the many other species affected by the illegal wildlife trade.

Conclusion

To conclude, the illegal wildlife trade is a criminal racket that is a catastrophe for biodiversity and seriously detrimental to economic development.

The UK Government is absolutely determined to press for concerted, sustainable, global action to combat it.

There is no time to lose, and we need your help to ensure that the London Conference is ambitious, specific and focussed enough to deliver for the long term.

I want world leaders to leave the Conference with renewed energy and political will to defeat the illegal wildlife trade.

High-level commitments are important; successful implementation is vital.

We have a tough fight on our hands. But I am convinced that by working together, we can and will win it.

Further information