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US-China Cooperation on Wildlife Smuggling: An Opportunity

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Earlier this spring, while a band of poachers carried out an audacious attack on a white rhinoceros in a French zoo, escaping with one of the animal's horns, European authorities broke up a criminal network attempting to smuggle an endangered eel species out of the EU. Despite international authorities publicly identifying China as a key destination for such goods, demand continues to ensure that eels, ivory, tiger bones and myriad other illicit wildlife products make their way to Chinese markets, perhaps the largest in the world. These accounts may leave many tempted to shake heads and wag fingers in China's direction, but the United States would do well to recognize anti-wildlife smuggling as an opportunity for mutual cooperation in an otherwise contentious bilateral relationship.

While relations between the United States and China have already experienced volatile highs and lows during the opening months of the Trump administration, the two nations have access to frameworks that could facilitate collaboration on wildlife issues. Both countries are already parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), and thus have international legal apparatuses at their disposal to break up transnational networks of wildlife smugglers. The United States and China are far and away the two largest markets of unlawful animal products and plants, so both have an outsized duty to take leadership roles and aggressively tackle the issue head-on. Because of their combined market share, any collective action successfully adopted and carried out would have noticeable effects on the international stage.

Thus far, the two nations have shown at least initial commitment to quashing illegal wildlife smuggling. The Chinese permanent representative to the United Nations decried such poaching and trade practices at a recent session of the General Assembly. While appealing to the broader global community to band together on the issue, he also stressed domestic Chinese initiatives to curtail ivory sales and disrupt market forces that incentivize the trade. In the United States, the Department of Justice, Department of State, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) all commit sizable resources to tracking the movement of illicit wildlife products, an industry that they value at roughly \$10 billion per year (It is currently unclear how the Trump administration's proposed budget will affect the agencies' abilities to carry out this mission).

Yet, much work remains to be done from both sides. The Chinese government recently passed domestic legislation that many critics argue actually gives more incentives to wildlife smugglers. With vague wording and exceptions for traditional medicine, wild animals can still be captured for commercial use or as public performance animals. The law should be revised so as to drastically limit the scope of legality for products used in Chinese medicine and "supplements," a noticeable expansion of what was acceptable under previous regulations. International agreements mean nothing if they can be bypassed through less stringent or even contradictory domestic policies.

Kathleen Devlin, graduate of the Yale Jackson Institute master's program in Global Affairs, explains that "The United States would do well to recognize anti-wildlife smuggling as an opportunity for mutual cooperation in an otherwise contentious bilateral relationship."

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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US involvement in curtailing the wildlife trade became an uphill battle with three words: “We’re getting out.” By choosing to abandon the Paris Climate Accord, President Trump single-handedly passed the buck on environmental issues from US leadership to whomever else will fill the void. The Paris agreement could have been a strong tool for restricting the trade of endangered flora and fauna throughout the world, especially through increased emphasis on protecting biodiversity. With the US withdrawal from the accord and proposed cuts to government agencies fighting global warming, there could be irreversible and long-lasting effects on the ecosystems that smugglers pillage for profit.

Many options exist if the leaders of China and the United States decide to prioritize this issue. First, wildlife trade could take a larger spotlight in bilateral interactions. In June 2015, high-ranking officials participated in talks “to end the ‘massacre’ of wildlife and reduce the flow of illegal wildlife trafficking.” Both US and Chinese representatives agreed that more effort was needed to orchestrate a coordinated front in a show of solidarity. Yet have we seen any actionable steps taken besides this initial agreement? A more convincing stance would be to highlight the issue as a main pillar at the next US-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue with actionable next-steps and metrics to chart progress. The United States could begin a program similar to the State Department’s annual tiered human trafficking assessments, highlighting countries successfully battling the practice while putting the worst offenders publicly on notice, or tie funds of the Millennium Challenge Corporation to compliance with anti-trafficking goals. Bringing more international attention to practices originating in or passing through their borders could sway public opinion in those countries or take away funding for US-funded development projects, thus putting more pressure on not just China but any country that finds itself under the microscope.

From a Chinese perspective, cracking down on illicit wildlife trade could actually bolster party credibility in less expected ways. The government would be well served to take responsibility for essentially subsidizing endangered wildlife trade in other countries, especially its neighbors. Areas like the Bokeo Province Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Laos (conveniently close to the border with China’s Yunnan province) has become a hotbed for illicit products, including bear bile, tiger bone wine, pangolin scales, and panther pelts. This trade ties the hands of local officials and has created sizable disruptions in the nearby communities that feel they are being exploited for Chinese gain. Also the site of numerous casinos, many Chinese officials visit the SEZ to gamble (illegal in mainland China) and purchase illicit products, which further feeds into the entrenched network of money laundering and organized international crime networks operating within the zone. The State Council banned the consumption of products made from endangered species like shark fin soup at official CCP meetings in 2012, a good first step against perceptions of widespread party corruption. President Xi could continue to stymie such practices to essentially bolster his corruption campaign while fulfilling international obligations to prevent wildlife consumption.

In the current political climate, long-standing disagreements over the South China Sea or trade imbalances will not easily find solutions. In comparison, the fight against illegal wildlife poaching, transporting, and trading is a low-risk endeavor that could result in positive gains for the US-China relationship. Working together on less politicized issues need not take away attention from the countries’ major quarrels. Through increased bilateral collaboration, China and the United States could build up some much needed trust while also displaying solidarity globally and tackling important issues that traditionally receive less attention. Yet, in order to fully reap these rewards, the United States must reassess its stance on global climate leadership, and China must get serious about domestic circumstances that incentivize wildlife markets.

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