

# Conservation and crime convergence? Situating the 2018 London Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference

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## Abstract

The 2018 London Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Conference was the fourth and biggest meeting on IWT convened at the initiative of the UK Government. Using a collaborative event ethnography, we examine the Conference as a site where key actors defined the problem of IWT as one of serious crime that needs to be addressed as such. We ask (a) how was IWT framed as serious crime, (b) how was this framing mobilized to promote particular policy responses, and (c) how did the framing and suggested responses reflect the privileging of elite voices? Answering these questions demonstrates the expanding ways in which thinking related to crime and policing are an increasingly forceful dynamic shaping conservation-related policy at the global level. We argue that the conservation-crime convergence on display at the 2018 London IWT Conference is characteristic of a conservation policy landscape that increasingly promotes and privileges responses to IWT that are based on legal and judicial reform, criminal investigations, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement technologies. Marginalized are those voices that seek to address the underlying drivers of IWT by promoting solutions rooted in sustainable livelihoods in source countries and global demand reduction. We suggest that political ecology of conservation and environmental crime would benefit from greater engagement with critical criminology, a discipline that critically interrogates the uneven power dynamics that shape ideas of crime, criminality, how they are politicized, and how they frame policy decisions. This would add further conceptual rigor to political ecological work that deconstructs conservation and environmental crime.

**Keywords:** illegal wildlife trade, poaching, conservation, crime, event ethnography, criminology

## Abstract

La conférence de 2018 sur le commerce illégal d'espèces sauvages à Londres (IWT/CIES) était la quatrième et la plus grande réunion sur le sujet convoquée à l'initiative du gouvernement britannique. À l'aide d'une ethnographie événementielle collaborative, nous examinons la Conférence comme un site où les principaux acteurs ont défini le problème de la navigation intérieure comme l'un des crimes graves qui doit être abordé.

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Nous demandons (a) comment le IWT/CIES a-t-il été qualifié de crime grave? (b) comment ce cadre a-t-il été mobilisé pour promouvoir des réponses politiques particulières? Et (c) comment le cadrage et les réponses suggérées reflètent-ils le privilège des voix d'élite? La réponse à ces questions montre les manières croissantes dont la pensée liée à la criminalité et à la police peut être une dynamique de plus en plus puissante qui façonne la politique liée à la conservation au niveau mondial. Nous soutenons que la convergence conservation-criminalité exposée à la Conférence de Londres 2018 sur le IWT/CIES est caractéristique d'un paysage politique de conservation qui promeut et privilégie les réponses à le commerce illégal basées sur la réforme juridique et judiciaire, les enquêtes criminelles, la collecte de renseignements et les technologies d'application de la loi. Les voix qui cherchent à s'attaquer aux moteurs sous-jacents de le commerce illégal en promouvant des solutions ancrées dans les moyens de subsistance durables dans les pays d'origine et la réduction de la demande mondiale, sont marginalisées. Nous suggérons que l'écologie politique de la conservation et des crimes environnementaux bénéficierait d'un plus grand engagement avec la criminologie critique, une discipline qui interroge de manière critique les dynamiques de pouvoir inégales qui façonnent les idées du crime, de la criminalité, de la politisation et de la façon dont les décisions politiques sont formulées. Cela ajouterait une rigueur conceptuelle supplémentaire aux travaux écologiques politiques qui déconstruisent la conservation et les délits environnementaux.

**Mots-clés:** commerce illégal d'espèces sauvages, braconnage, conservation, criminalité, ethnographie événementielle, criminology

## Resumen

The 2018 London Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Conference was the fourth and biggest meeting on IWT convened at the initiative of the UK Government. Using a collaborative event ethnography, we examine the Conference as a site where key actors defined the problem of IWT as one of serious crime that needs to be addressed as such. We ask (a) how was IWT framed as serious crime, (b) how was this framing mobilized to promote particular policy responses, and (c) how did the framing and suggested responses reflect the privileging of elite voices? Answering these questions demonstrates the expanding ways in which thinking related to crime and policing are an increasingly forceful dynamic shaping conservation-related policy at the global level. We argue that the conservation-crime convergence on display at the 2018 London IWT Conference, is characteristic of a conservation policy landscape that increasingly promotes and privileges responses to IWT that are based on legal and judicial reform, criminal investigations, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement technologies. Marginalized are those voices that seek to address the underlying drivers of IWT by promoting solutions rooted in sustainable livelihoods in source countries and global demand reduction. We suggest that political ecology of conservation and environmental crime would benefit from greater engagement with critical criminology, a discipline that critically interrogates the uneven power dynamics that shape ideas of crime, criminality, how they are politicized, and how they frame policy decisions. This would add further conceptual rigor to political ecological work that deconstructs conservation and environmental crime.

**Keywords:** illegal wildlife trade, poaching, conservation, crime, event ethnography, criminology

## 1. Introduction

In October 2018, the UK government hosted the London Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Conference to bring together global leaders to "help eradicate illegal wildlife trade and better protect the world's most iconic species from the threat of extinction."<sup>2</sup> The 2018 London IWT Conference highlighted the expanding ways in which thinking, practices and networks related to crime and policing are an increasingly forceful dynamic shaping global conservation-related policy. As the fourth and biggest meeting on IWT convened at the UK Government's initiative, the 2018 London Conference was intended to cement the profile of the UK Government as a global leader in tackling the complex challenges of illegal wildlife trade. In the process, the Conference defined the issue of IWT as a serious crime that needs to be eradicated. The opening paragraph of the Declaration that emerged from the 2018 IWT Conference, and that was signed by over 60 countries, sets

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/london-conference-on-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-2018> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

out an agenda for addressing the illegal trade in wildlife as a serious organized crime, which produces a wide-ranging set of consequences:

We, the representatives of Governments, gathered in London on 11 and 12 October 2018, recognizing the significant detrimental economic, environmental, security and social impacts of the illegal trade in wildlife, make the following political commitment and call upon the international community to act together to support and build urgent collective action to tackle the illegal wildlife trade as a serious crime carried out by organized criminals, and to close markets for illegally traded wildlife. (Declaration: London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade 2018: 1)<sup>3</sup>

The UK Government encouraged those interested in the Conference to follow the hashtag [#EndWildlifeCrime](#) on social media for the latest news and information. "End Wildlife Crime" subsequently became the rallying cry that organizers and many participants used to frame the event and issue at hand.

In this article we draw on the framework of global political ecology as an approach to understand the ways in which discourses about the environment, and especially environmental crises, frame environmental problems, solutions, and mobilize policy and related action (Peet, Robbins and Watts 2010). More specifically, we build on political ecology that uses collaborative event ethnography to interrogate how these discursive processes manifest at global environmental meetings to shape conservation governance and policy. We apply this thinking by examining the 2018 London IWT Conference as a site where key actors defined the problem of IWT as one of serious crime that needs to be addressed as such. We ask: what are the emerging consequences of framing IWT as a serious crime? In pursuing this question, we examine

- a) the framing of IWT as serious crime
- b) how this framing was mobilized to promote policy responses inspired by policing, security and law enforcement sectors, and
- c) how both the framing and suggested responses reflect the privileging of elite voices.

In answering these questions, we argue the Conference marginalized voices that see solutions to IWT as being more closely related to addressing its underlying drivers and causes, namely sustainable livelihoods in source countries and global demand reduction.

Global environmental meetings like the 2018 London IWT Conference are important sites providing glimpses into the production of environmental governance in real-time (Duffy 2014b). Political ecologists have examined how global conservation meetings provide platforms for the promotion of particular actors and the diffusion of knowledge that frames conservation challenges through a lens of market processes and neoliberal conservation. This framing suggests that market-oriented practices serve as win-win solutions for biodiversity and nature-based markets and profit-making (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Corson and MacDonald 2012; MacDonald and Corson 2012). The 2018 London IWT Conference, however, highlights another set of actors that understand the conservation challenge of IWT to be serious organized crime, that poses urgent socio-ecological threats, and which requires responses mediated through a law enforcement-first approach.

Framing the illicit extraction, harvesting, and trade in biodiversity as serious organized crime emphasizes the transnational aspects of IWT, its putative convergence with other types of 'serious' crime, and its destabilizing potential. This conservation-crime convergence, we argue, is characteristic of a conservation policy landscape that increasingly promotes and privileges responses such as legal and judicial reform, criminal investigations, intelligence gathering, law enforcement technologies, and informant networks. Proponents argue

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/declaration-london-conference-on-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-2018> [last accessed: 11/1/2010]

these law enforcement-first approaches support good conservation and crime reduction outcomes. The conservation-crime convergence thus reflects the increasing purchase of crime and policing in the knowledge structures and networks that shape conservation policy and practice. The 2018 London IWT Conference reflects and contributes to a broader and longer-term process of moving IWT away from a conservation issue, towards an issue of criminality that is re-configuring conservation policy and practice across multiple scales.

Given the increasing prominence of criminological thinking and framing within conservation circles, we suggest that political ecology of conservation and wildlife crime would benefit from greater engagement with critical criminology (Carrington and Hogg 2017; Brisman 2019; Michalowski 1996), and specifically southern criminology (Carrington, Hogg, and Sozzo 2016; Hogg, Scott, and Sozzo 2017; Travers 2019) and green criminology (Gore 2017; Ngoc and Wyatt 2013; Wyatt, Beirne, and South 2014; White and Heckenberg 2014). One of political ecology's strengths lies in deconstructing the uneven power dynamics that shape ideas of conservation and their material consequences. Critical criminology offers a similar heuristic toolkit for interrogating the uneven power dynamics that shape ideas of crime, criminality, how they are (de-) politicized, and how they frame policy decisions. We contend that thinking critically about processes of power as they relate to crime, criminality and policing can add further conceptual rigor to political ecological work that deconstructs conservation and environmental crime.

We begin by outlining key insights from political ecology and collaborative event ethnographies (CEE) to think through how global meetings act as catalysts for framing conservation challenges and solutions to them, which then inform biodiversity conservation policy and practice. We then provide an overview of the 2018 London IWT Conference, its political context, and our approach to studying the Conference through CEE. This is followed by an examination of how IWT was framed as a serious crime, and the implications this holds for conservation politics and practice. We end by suggesting that critical criminology can provide political ecology with further conceptual rigor needed to unpack and critically interrogate the conservation-crime convergence.

## **2. Global meetings and the creation of biodiversity conservation policy**

Political ecologists have used Collaborative Event Ethnography (CEE) to understand key dynamics related to global conservation policy emerging from global environmental meetings (Campbell *et al.* 2014, Campbell, Hagerman, and Gray 2014; Corson, Campbell, and MacDonald 2014; Duffy 2014b; Gray, Gruby, and Campbell 2014). Using a team of multiple researchers to observe and gather data on the formal and informal dynamics of global meetings, CEE is "a methodological tool to study global environmental politics and governance in practice" (Büscher 2014: 132). CEE's primary contribution to global political ecology is in revealing how certain forms of expertise and authority on environmental challenges can become reified while other voices are marginalized or rendered silent through the performance and spectacle of global meetings (Duffy 2014b). Paramount to political ecology is uncovering how this uneven privileging of some views and voices and the marginalization of others shapes environmental policy.

While a meeting like the 2018 London IWT Conference might host thousands of people from a variety of geographical and professional backgrounds, existing uneven power dynamics of environmental politics can permeate conference spaces and planning, so that not everyone gets to participate equally in the event, or in knowledge generation, or in the policy framing process (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Campbell *et al.* 2014; Duffy 2014b). In the context of global environmental meetings, it is often key knowledge brokers who define the environmental problem at hand, and present technical solutions as well as drawing attention to the consequences of lack of action (see Duffy 2010). In this way, global meetings help "facilitate shifts in environmental policy and practice, by setting agendas, popularizing issues, generating new information, providing alerts[...]" (Campbell *et al.* 2014: 3). To understand global environmental politics and policy it is thus important to draw attention to the ways in which global meetings, and the networks that constitute them, operate to frame issues, solutions, and set agendas and priorities; and also who gets to do so (and who does not) (Haas 2002; Paterson, Humphreys and Pettiford 2003). These discursive and social practices have material consequences as they shape the allocation of resources and prioritization of actions on the ground and in global policy (Massé and Margulies under review).

Concerning conservation, global meetings act as catalyst moments to define specific concepts and discourses around which biodiversity protection and related policy become organized. At the World Conservation Congress and Conference of Parties (CoP), for example, stakeholders meet to codify and announce conservation priorities to the global conservation community and the wider world. To date, much of the work on conservation meetings focuses on the discourses and groups of experts that have cemented neoliberal conservation and capitalist-driven forms of biodiversity protection based on the privatization, commodification, and marketization of "nature" (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Corson and MacDonald 2012; MacDonald and Corson 2012). Accordingly, global meetings have created opportunities for ideas about green markets to take hold and become integrated into global conservation policy rhetoric and practice. This framing problematically reduces the vast array of challenges related to effective governance and conservation of biodiversity, and overlooks problems with the neoliberal solutions on offer. Despite such critiques, these ways of understanding and doing conservation policy and practice have been so mainstreamed and de-politicized that they are now taken for granted by NGOs, government, and policy circles at and across multiple scales (Büscher 2013; Youdelis 2018). This is the power of global meetings in establishing hegemonic, often reductive, discourses that guide biodiversity conservation.

Dynamics of neoliberal conservation shape the political economy of poaching, anti-poaching and responses to IWT, and thus cannot be ignored in the context of conservation's securitization in response to IWT (Asiyanbi 2016; Dunlap and Fairhead 2014; Lunstrum 2018; Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Massé and Lunstrum 2016). As we demonstrate below, however, the 2018 London IWT Conference signifies the increasing prominence of ideas and practices related to crime, policing and law enforcement in conservation policymaking spheres.

Like conservation, ideas about crime, law, policing and related policies – or criminological thinking – are also subject to (de-)politicization. They too are shaped by uneven power dynamics that can privilege ideas and voices from the Global North and uncritically promote positivistic crime science, policing and legalistic approaches to understanding and addressing crime in differing contexts (Carrington and Hogg 2017; Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016). Such dynamics are important in understanding how crime, perpetrators, causes and the needed solutions are defined, understood, and justified (Lampkin and Wyatt 2019; Lynch, Michalowski and Groves 2000; Ruggiero and South 2013; White and Heckenberg 2014). We now find these dynamics from criminology and policing overlapping and intersecting with conservation concerns, policymaking and practice.

As we demonstrate below, the 2018 London IWT Conference deployed the broad category of "serious crime" and the associated tagline of "End Wildlife Crime" in ways that reduce the complexity of vastly different forms of illicit extraction, harvesting, and trade in biodiversity and a multitude of related activities from hunting, fraud, transport, corruption, and money laundering, into a single category of "wildlife crime." Moreover, it purports that "wildlife crime" could be "ended", and that a set of experts were there to inform the global conservation and law enforcement community precisely how.

### **3. The 2018 London IWT Conference as a site of global political ecology**

On 11-12 October 2018, the UK Government convened the London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade at Battersea Evolution, an events centre. It was the fourth global conference on IWT convened at the UK Government's initiative. As a high-level meeting bringing together Heads of State, government representatives, the military, NGOs, the private sector, academics and community representatives, all participants were invitation-only and had to be accredited by the UK Government. The civil servants tasked with delivering the conference used their networks to ask for recommendations of who should be invited. Those who attended were thus part of an invited epistemic community, or "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain" (Haas 1992: 3). The domain in question was the burgeoning concern of the illicit harvesting, extraction, and trade in flora, fauna, and their parts.

The official aim of the London Conference was to "strengthen international partnerships across borders and beyond government", with a focus on three themes related to IWT: tackling IWT as a serious organized

crime, building coalitions and closing markets.<sup>4</sup> Despite a wide-ranging participant list – that was internationally diverse and spanned beyond government actors – the dynamics of the London Conference reflected those commonly found in other global environmental meetings: namely that some voices and forms of authority were privileged over others. Not everyone had equal access or was able to participate equally. These uneven dynamics manifest in straightforward ways, such as who spoke on stage, in what capacity, and who received access to state representatives and policy makers. Importantly, the London 2018 Conference was the first conference in the series of four IWT meetings that sought to include representation for some communities living in and around protected areas, and for rangers themselves. With this said, it was elite actors from governments, celebrities, big NGOs and the private sector – especially from the Global North – who largely held privileged speaking positions and had access to each other. On stage and behind the microphone they tended to tout traditional ideas about crime and policing, privileging a framing of IWT in those terms. Actors and voices from the Global South, and especially voices from people living in and around protected areas, and those who promoted alternatives to a law enforcement-first approach, were noticeably marginalized.

#### *Historical context of the 2018 London IWT Conference*

The 2018 London IWT Conference is situated in a broader context of growing levels of commitment and activity by the UK Government, and many others, on the illegal wildlife trade. The spikes in poaching of elephants in East Africa and rhinos in Southern Africa from 2008 onwards prompted international calls for an urgent response to prevent the extinction of these species as a result of the illegal wildlife trade (Duffy 2014a). Joining the ranks of the rhino and elephant were concerns about the illicit extraction and trade in a wide variety of species from pangolin, glass eels, abalone, timber, and a variety of other plant and animal species (Nelleman *et al.* 2016). The UK Government has sought to present itself as taking leadership amongst international networks tackling IWT. This position can be dated to May 2013, when Prince Charles convened a high-level meeting at Clarence House in London to 'kick start' a government response to the rise in elephant and rhino poaching by calling for a "war" on poachers.<sup>5</sup>

The outcome of this meeting was the decision to hold the first London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade in 2014. The conference was for Heads of Government and the purpose was to develop the London Declaration on the Illegal Wildlife Trade. The 2014 Conference cemented the notion that IWT was no longer a conservation issue, but primarily one of crime and security. The Conference was "hailed as a turning point in global efforts to tackle these damaging activities."<sup>6</sup> Following a relatively legalistic approach to IWT, the Declaration emerging from the 2014 Conference states that signatory countries are committed to addressing "the problem of the illegal wildlife trade by adopting or amending legislation, as necessary, to criminalize poaching and wildlife trafficking, and related crimes including by ensuring such criminal offences are "serious crimes" within the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime" (2014 London IWT Declaration).

The 2014 London Conference also coincided with the establishment of United for Wildlife (UfW) by The Dukes and Duchesses of Sussex and of Cambridge under their Royal Foundation (Duffy 2016). Initially, the idea of UfW was that the British Royal family could use their convening power to develop an umbrella organization to foster collaboration between seven of the world's largest wildlife conservation organizations: the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Conservation International (CI), Flora and Fauna International (FFI), The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). UfW was showcased at an event held at Zoological Society of London, which coincided with the 2014 London Conference.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://bfp.g.co.uk/2018/11/how-the-uk-is-tackling-illegal-wildlife-trade/> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>5</sup> Prince Charles calls for a war on animal poachers, *The Guardian* (UK) 21/05/2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/may/21/prince-charles-war-animal-poachers> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/london-conference-on-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-2018/about> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]



As part of the commitments of the first London Conference on IWT, the Government announced the £10 million (US\$13m) Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund (it was later increased to a total of £18.5 million [US\$24m] by 2018). In June 2014, the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for International Development invited applications for the first round of the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund. The funds were allocated to develop the Elephant Protection Initiative and to support practical actions to combat poaching and trafficking in line with the London Declaration.<sup>7</sup> The first London Conference was followed by a second conference in Kasane, Botswana in March 2015<sup>8</sup>, and a third in Hanoi, Vietnam in November 2016<sup>9</sup>, before returning to London in 2018.

There have been longstanding concerns about how IWT negatively affects species and the ecosystems they inhabit. In 1973 the fear that the illegal trade in rhino horn would drive the species to extinction prompted governments to negotiate the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) as the main international regulatory instrument for trade in wildlife (Biggs *et al.* 2017; Duffy 2013). However, the renewed concern about illegal wildlife trade since 2008 has in part been linked to the ways in which IWT could constitute a security threat, and a form of serious organized crime (Nellemann *et al.* 2016; Massé and Margulies under review). Therefore, concerns about biodiversity, and especially the illegal killing and trafficking in fauna and flora, are no longer siloed within environmental politics, but are now integrated into the politics of global security and crime (Duffy 2014a, 2016; Marijnen and Verweijen 2016).

How the politics of crime comes to matter has received far less attention in the political ecology and environmental politics literature than the politics of security. The four IWT Conferences convened by the UK Government, especially the 2018 London IWT conference, have helped to solidify the crime approach to IWT. We examine how the 2018 London Conference helped produce global conservation governance, by drawing on the key questions of political ecology and those related to collaborative event ethnographies of conservation meetings: namely how are conservation challenges framed, by whom, and with what implications for policy solutions?

#### *Studying the 2018 London IWT Conference*

As a group, the six authors conducted a CEE of the 2018 London IWT Conference. The Conference involved high level negotiations between Heads of State and other representatives of Governments, who occupied an exclusive mezzanine floor in Battersea Evolution. The conference also had a series of plenaries, sessions and panels for invited speakers on a variety of themes. The ground floor was an exhibition space ringed by stalls from a variety of organizations advertising their activities and products for tackling the illegal wildlife trade. These ranged from a dedicated stall for the British Army Counter Poaching team, to National Geographic, the International Consortium for Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC) and the International Union for Conservation Plant Specialist Group.

The event ethnography consisted of the authors splitting attendance across as many sessions as possible, and taking notes on what was being said and by whom. All authors were present for the two days of the conference, covering 20 of 25 sessions. Where possible, we ensured overlap in each session so authors could compare notes to minimize biases and inconsistencies (May *et al.* 2000). To account for all public sessions, some of the authors watched the sessions that were not attended in person online.<sup>10</sup> We did not attend closed-door sessions. We also took notes on the more informal aspects of the Conference including networking coffee breaks and the various stalls and installations in the Exhibition Space. We focused our observation and analysis on the questions of:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/illegal-wildlife-trade-iwt-challenge-fund> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-wildlife-trade-kasane-statement> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-01/HCWS295> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Illegal+Wildlife+Trade+conference+London+2018](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Illegal+Wildlife+Trade+conference+London+2018) [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

- 1) how IWT is discursively understood;
- 2) how the problems which comprise IWT and solutions to them are framed;
- 3) whose expertise helps shape and determine these perspectives; and
- 4) what the policy and political implications are resulting from these practices.

Conducting collaborative event ethnography with a focus on a specific theme or dynamic in this way is common (Brosius and Campbell 2010).

It is important to note that as a group of researchers we have heterogeneous interests and backgrounds related to IWT and the security politics of conservation. To this extent we each brought with us a different understanding of IWT, its politics, and areas of focus and expertise. Moreover, one of the authors attended the 2014 London IWT Conference. Together, our backgrounds present an analytical strength. We were well placed to draw on our existing knowledge on conservation and IWT, thus placing the conference and discourses presented there within a much broader geographical, temporal, and multi-scalar context (Büscher 2014). While acknowledging the need to account for our pre-existing knowledge, collaboration in a diverse team can act as a check on potential bias and lead to more nuanced interpretations and analyses than that which might be offered by a single individual or two-person team (Campbell *et al.* 2014; Corson, Campbell and MacDonald 2014).

The group held several preparation meetings prior to the conference to discuss and plan the methodological process. We developed a note-taking guide to remind ourselves of what type of data and observations to record. This did not constrain observations and note-taking, but it provided a minimum framework for each researcher. We had several de-briefing meetings to discuss our observations and emerging themes during and after the conference. Consistent communication and feedback helped us reflect during the data gathering process, thereby making sense of the dynamics each researcher was taking note of, and adjusting our research plan as required.

After an initial reading of all the notes, three team members met to discuss preliminary themes and to design a coding structure using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Coding, and the development of a coding structure, was an iterative process with multiple rounds of developing thematic codes, testing them, and refining the codes on a subset of the group notes. In addition to thematic codes, a 'case' coding structure was also created. Cases are codes meant to represent certain events and types of "actors." For example, in addition to being coded thematically, each excerpt was also coded according to the session it came from and the role of the person who said it. For the latter, actors were coded according to the following cases: "Academic", "Politician/Political Actor", "Celebrity", "Community Voice", "Private Sector", "Law enforcement/conservation practitioner." This coding facilitated understanding around how different actors frame issues of IWT and how active they are in producing certain understandings and knowledge about IWT and biodiversity-security connections. Two of the authors coded the entire data set.

Our note-taking, coding and analysis of notes from the conference did not merely focus on what was said, but who said it, how, and in what context. What was not said, or what was left out, became just as important as those ideas that were voiced. Being physically present at the 2018 London IWT Conference and related meetings thus afforded us insight into which narratives, ideas and practices about IWT were circulated, by whom, and within what networks (see Brosius and Campbell 2010).

## 4. Producing wildlife crime

### *Framing IWT as wildlife crime*

The 2018 London Conference was the culmination of a series of meetings convened by the UK Government to organize ideas, policy, and actors around "[t]ackling IWT as a serious organized crime," as emphasized in official communications.<sup>11</sup> As a result, existing and accepted ideas and ways of doing things

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/london-conference-on-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-2018/about> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]



from the context of crime, policing, law enforcement and security sectors were privileged and promoted. Kicking off the Conference was a series of presentations from the highest levels of the British Government that set the tone for the Conference and framing of IWT. After introductions, the audience was presented with a video speech delivered by then British Prime Minister Theresa May. She stressed the "need to treat IWT in the same way of other serious organized crime." This was echoed by then British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, who framed the issue of IWT around the question of "...how can we protect the magnificent natural world from criminal gangs?" The problem, he stressed, is one of "bandits looting the natural wealth of Africa." The Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, followed Hunt by repeating and reinforcing the message of IWT as serious organized crime perpetrated by "criminal, ruthless gangs." "It is time," he said, "to treat it [IWT] as serious organized crime, fuelled by corruption and ruthless criminal networks." Multiple sessions at the conference incorporated "IWT as serious organized crime" in their titles, and high-level speakers from Government, big NGOs, the private sector and even celebrities repeated the refrain that IWT is, and needs to be treated, as a "serious organized crime." The framing of IWT as a serious organized crime perpetrated by criminal gangs was set.

Throughout the 2018 London IWT Conference, the speakers presenting IWT as organized crime used a series of narratives that focused heavily on the structure and character of organized criminal networks. The perpetrators of the crime were construed as "bandits", that were part of "criminal gangs", "networks" and "syndicates", making up the fabric of a wider "criminal industry". This reference to "industry" serves to suggest that there has been a widespread professionalization of wildlife crime: rather than opportunistic, those involved are "sophisticated", "coordinated" and "adaptable" criminals. An additional integral component in defining IWT as "organized crime" is the application of emotive language to describe the criminal networks. The portrayal of "gangs" as "ruthless", "unscrupulous", "despicable" and "evil" by leading politicians like Theresa May, Michael Gove, Jeremy Hunt, Jeff Sessions, royals such as the Duke of Cambridge and international NGOs, plays into underlying associations that exist between gangs and violent crime. This definition situates IWT in a broader political climate that is concerned about the destabilizing effects of organized crime, and thereby embeds conservation politics into the politics of organized crime and instability.

Unfortunately, these portrayals of 'who' constitutes the organized criminal groups and people involved in IWT are simplistic, and further entrench the myth that most or all wildlife crime is organized and violent. While there *are* cases where IWT does demonstrably involve organized crime or shares characteristics of organized crime (Ayling 2013; Österblom *et al.* 2011); for the most-part, the evidence for certain trades assumed to be driven by organized crime, is "anecdotal", lacking entirely, or guilty of conflating organized crime with crime that is organized (Pires *et al.* 2016: 5). Moreover, generalizations that frame all IWT as serious organized crime do not capture the realities, including how networks are structured and the often informal, mundane and opportunistic ways in which a lot of wildlife crime happens (Ayling 2013; Pires *et al.* 2016; Titeca 2018; To *et al.* 2014; Wyatt 2013).

In defining IWT as "serious organized crime", a significant proportion of the 2018 London Conference was devoted to explaining the mechanisms of how transnational IWT takes place, and with what implications for security. The emphasis was placed upon crime's transnational aspects, and its convergence with other forms of "serious" crime. During the conference, "convergence" emerged as a central buzzword to cement and communicate the idea that IWT is interlinked with other forms of transnational organized crime. The comparisons focused upon parallels and crossover between trade routes, actors and the de-stabilizing activities they help fund. Jeremy Hunt opened the event saying, "the same criminal networks that smuggle tusks, horns, hardwood also traffic in drugs, guns, modern slavery, and fund conflict." This became a common refrain throughout the two-day meeting. In the closing remarks of a session on disrupting illegal financial flows, speakers from a global conservation NGO and a private intelligence organization went as far to suggest that "in every single case" the networks that are trafficking wildlife transnationally across continents are involved in other forms of serious organized crime such as the trafficking of drugs, guns, people, minerals and even nuclear material. However, little to no evidence was provided to support these statements, which were delivered as though they were uncontested facts. While there is overlap between actors and networks trafficking in wildlife and other products, to suggest that this happens in every case and that all wildlife trafficking converges with or is organized by transnational organized crime networks fails to accurately reflect the nuances of how the

harvesting and trade in some wildlife products actually occurs (Ayling 2013; Pires *et al.* 2016; Titeca 2018; To *et al.* 2014; Wyatt 2013).

Central to the definition of "serious and organized" IWT is the push to define IWT as an economic or financial crime. We see this, for example, with a 2017 Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report that examines and highlights the financial dimensions of wildlife crime.<sup>12</sup> The Global Head of Financial Crime for a global bank reinforced the message that "money is at the heart of what fuels this crime." As such, an Advisor for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, exhorted participants "to start looking at this as a serious economic crime." The Conference program included several sessions with representatives from the conservation, intelligence, banking, government, and law enforcement sectors that were specifically focused on discussing wildlife crime as a "financial crime." As with "organized crime," there was a lack of definition about what constitutes "financial crime", but references were made both by British politician Michael Gove to "tainted" money, and by the Executive Director of an intelligence organization to the "dirty" money that flows through laundering schemes and fraudulent enterprises, as well as fraud, tax evasion and the use of illicit funds to finance other nefarious activities.

In line with efforts to draw links between IWT and economic crime, and in a clear nod to economic insecurity, there was a distinct focus upon the manner in which IWT destabilizes economic growth, thereby leading to financial insecurity for the "poorest" and "making all of us poorer", as the then Prime Minister of the UK expressed. Leading figures, like the Duke of Cambridge, repeatedly positioned IWT as both "an economic crime against ordinary people and their future", and simultaneously as an economic crime against states – in terms of lost revenues that could have been funneled into infrastructure, services or conservation projects. In discussions of financial crime at the 2018 London Conference on IWT, the issue of corruption was often mentioned. Although financial crime and corruption are linked, for some, corruption is the defining feature of "serious and organized" IWT. As such, Cathy Haenlein from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) remarked how efforts were made to "place corruption front and center" at the conference, with a session organized around corruption and discussing how to intervene into corrupt structures and networks. Moreover, she argued that corruption is "not just another aspect of IWT, it is the air wildlife traffickers breathe."

In addition, in light of widespread pushback against previous high-profile stories that ivory was a major source of funding for Al Shabaab – and therefore that IWT generated threat finance – the characterization of how IWT threatens national security differed from the discourse thus far: namely connections between poaching, terrorism and insurgency (Duffy 2016; Haenlein and Smith 2017; Pennaz *et al.* 2018). While there were few references made to the contested Boko-Haram/ivory connections and "tentacles of terrorism", such as by Michael Gove, concerns around national security expressed at the Conference were primarily linked to corruption. These concerns centered on how IWT as a form of corrupting transnational organized crime can destabilize good governance, rule of law and lead to civil conflict.

The focus on corruption and governance recognizes that existing deficiencies in state structures and the existence of corrupt governance pathways have a major impact upon national security, and that it is not just non-state armed actors involved in IWT that pose a threat to national security. Hence, the framing of serious and organized IWT as fueled by corruption and a form of financial crime integrates a host of other actors into the wider structure of the criminal networks. Defining IWT in terms of corruption demands consideration of the facilitating role of customs officials, police, the judiciary, banks and politicians, amongst others. Incorporating corruption as a cornerstone of wildlife crime emphasizes the far-reaching extent of IWT, and powerfully reinforces the narrative that wildlife crime is no longer just a conservation issue, as it infiltrates everyday structures of governance that are designed to protect both people and nature. Addressing wildlife crime, it was argued, necessitates criminological thinking and taking lessons from the sectors of policing and law enforcement, thus moving away from traditional spaces, practices and institutions of conservation.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/follow-money-using-financial-investigation-combat-wildlife-crime> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

*Framing solutions to IWT – ending wildlife crime*

Political ecology has long been concerned with how discourses about environmental challenges stimulate and shape interventions and policy responses to these challenges. At the 2018 London IWT Conference, the framing of IWT as a serious crime that needs to be addressed as such, promoted and privileged solutions used to address other types of crimes. It also promoted and privileged voices and actors who are deemed to have authority and expertise in addressing crime. This helps move the policy discussions about how to tackle IWT away from the orbit of conservation towards law enforcement and policing. As was made clear at the Conference, there is a growing sense that IWT is a challenge that is beyond the reach and parameters of conservation. As an official from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) stated: "The 'wildlife world' did not expect itself to be the target of serious organized crime – they weren't ready, they're still not ready."

The majority of solutions to IWT proffered at the Conference fell under the rubric of law enforcement and policing. There was a widespread call for the standardization of laws and penalties against wildlife crime. Support was also given to closing markets via trade bans for high profile products such as ivory. A representative of UNODC's Global Programme for Combatting Wildlife and Forest Crime noted that at the Conference there had been a perceptible "shift to thinking towards more organized crime, and we need to change law enforcement response to adjust for this." There was a general consensus that greater criminalization of IWT was required, and this could be achieved via stronger and harsher laws, and what Ali Bongo Ondimba, President of Gabon, called "specialized law enforcement teams" working together transnationally. Delegates at the 2018 London Conference on IWT suggested a diverse range of specific mechanisms for law enforcement that would serve to strengthen laws, their enforcement and related prosecutions. The overwhelming call for law enforcement responses centered on designing new legal arrangements, penalties for poaching and a greater focus on law enforcement and investigations. For example, an expansion of law enforcement practices promoted for tackling IWT as a serious organized crime includes the increasing faith in intelligence-led approaches to uncover and expose the illicit networks driving IWT. These investigations are typically predicated upon using undercover methods of surveillance and informant networks in order to follow IWT products and eventually disrupt and dismantle wildlife crime networks. In one example, a representative of a global conservation NGO's Wildlife Crime Unit (WCU) in Indonesia explained that the unit had undertaken over 150 sting operations in 2017, involving over 200 traffickers, poachers, smugglers and dealers. 95% of those apprehended were prosecuted, and 77% received penal sentences.

Investigations and intelligence tie wildlife crime to financial crime. The confidence in pursuing financial investigations as a route to tackle IWT as serious organized crime was reflected in the UK government's decision to use the conference to formally launch the UfW Financial Taskforce, a financial investigation unit dedicated to wildlife crime, to which they pledged £3.5 million (US\$4.5m). The refrain "follow-the-money" was repeated several times in plenaries and in a specialized panel on financial crime. In introducing the two-day Conference, the Duke of Cambridge stressed that "we need to get creative in how we address IWT and wildlife crime, and looking at the financial side is one way of doing this." Financial investigations were lauded as a creative way of bringing in methods from other crime sectors to secure better prosecutions for wildlife criminals. One delegate from a wildlife crime investigation NGO suggested that "it's not rocket science, we do it every day in other crime fields", thus further emphasizing that the conservation and wildlife crime enforcement community is potentially missing opportunities by neglecting financial investigations and existing ways of fighting crime in other policing sectors.

The imperative behind follow-the-money is that tracing assets and laundered money can enable authorities to work with the banking sector in order to reach higher levels in the chain to uncover trafficking networks and kingpins. It was noted that money raised via IWT is often laundered through mispriced trade deals, and Chris Thouless, Director of Elephant Crisis Fund reinforced that the standard approach of catching people "red-handed" will not work if authorities wish to reach the highest echelons of criminal networks. Pursuing financial investigations was described as "Al Capone tactics" by the Duke of Cambridge, and taken up by others such as Jeffrey H. Wood, Acting Assistant Attorney General for Environment and Natural

Resources, US Department of Justice. The "Al-Capone" approach was widely reported in the press<sup>13</sup>, and makes reference to the fact Capone was eventually convicted for tax evasion (not murder), and that prosecutions for money laundering are typically much higher than for wildlife crime. Financial investigations as a means to tackle IWT as a form of serious crime were heavily pushed as an effective response strategy that recombines the knowledge and techniques of the banking and financial crime sector in a new issue area.

#### *Anti-poaching and Protected Area enforcement*

While there was a perceptible promotion of more traditional forms of investigations and crime fighting at the Conference, there was still an advancement of some forms of militarized anti-poaching responses, even if not using the language of "militarization" overtly (Massé 2019a). The Conference continued to discuss and promote approaches that drew upon military hardware, thinking and tactics, even though they were couched in a more neutralizing discourse of law enforcement. For example, a video was played in one session of female rangers who operate in the Zambezi Valley. The women were shown clad in military fatigues and equipment, doing military drills, promoting an idealized vision of counter-poaching that is 'empowering' yet militarized (see Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Massé 2019b).

In another example, the British Army's anti-poaching team had a strong visible presence. The Army had a large stand designed to resemble an anti-poaching camp, right at the entrance to Battersea Evolution exhibition hall, so that it was the first thing that many delegates saw on entering. UK politicians promoted the deployment of the British Army to train rangers and provide the latest anti-poaching technologies. The promotion of militarized anti-poaching teams is important because they were presented as delivering credible solutions to IWT as a form of serious crime. The British Army were lauded by Theresa May for being highly-skilled and providing "professional training" to anti-poaching teams in African countries. Thus, rather than using the language of militarization, the language of professionalization was used to justify the deployment of the military to increase the (conservation) law enforcement capacity of ranger forces on-the-ground in protected areas.

The need to take a policing-first approach to poaching also contributed to a promotion of technological solutions. Technologies, many developed for other policing and crime sectors, were heavily promoted as a response to IWT. The Minister of State at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for example, heralded the application of technological solutions as "the key" to forging a "revolution" in conservation. Representatives from companies promoting technological approaches suggested that they were "excited to apply technologies developed in other contexts in this new context, and to find ways of solving problems where existing solutions haven't worked." These technologies include camera traps, remote-controlled cameras, drones, remote sensing systems, and surveillance of mobile phone communication, amongst others. This focus on technology also renders conservation practice more compatible with wider approaches informed by the military, and policing and law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, it facilitates the entry of new private sector actors and security and intelligence companies into conservation, bringing their specific modes of thinking with them (Lunstrum 2018; Duffy *et al.* 2019). Alongside university researchers and not-for-profit initiatives, a wide variety of private sector companies such as Cisco Systems, Google Cloud and Amazon Web Services were given space at the government Conference to parade their technological innovations. They were able to effectively 'sell' their companies and products to a global audience.

A problem, however, is that technology companies moving into the wildlife crime sphere can see this as a reputation-building move and another potential avenue to gain capital. They have not always devoted

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bigissue.com/latest/environment/britain-is-backing-the-al-capone-approach-to-ending-illegal-wildlife-trade/> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]; <https://time.com/5421701/prince-william-urges-tougher-punishment-for-poachers-and-wildlife-smugglers/> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/royal-family/2018/10/11/prince-william-urges-police-use-al-capone-tactics-catch-drug/tactics-catch-drug> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

resources to investigating why past solutions have not worked (Lunstrum 2018). Instead, some tech-companies have assumed that technology will prove to be a silver bullet for tackling wildlife crime, especially poaching, without necessarily understanding the contexts of IWT. These dynamics were not entirely lost on some key proponents of technology for conservation attending the conference, such as a representative of a tech-oriented philanthropic organization who, while not relinquishing their technological optimism, recognized that "we are not going to solve illegal wildlife trafficking with technology [...] all of those things are not solving illegal wildlife trafficking but they contribute to a scalable solution."

## 5. Conservation in the era of wildlife crime: new actors, knowledges, practices

The 2018 London IWT Conference can be understood as cementing IWT as serious crime. This effort has a host of implications for the response to IWT as a conservation challenge. This discursive move impacts conservation policy and practice, from the local level of protected area management to global cooperation agreements. It is important to note that calls made at the conference to characterize IWT as a serious crime were not new, but part of a trajectory of securitization and criminalization that has been underway for several years (for example see 2016 EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking<sup>14</sup>; 2017 UN Resolution on tackling illicit wildlife trafficking<sup>15</sup>; and Massé and Margulies under review). The aim of characterizing IWT as a serious organized crime is partly to attract similar levels of attention and resources given to other forms of crime that have been branded 'serious' in the terms of the international community, most notably by the UN. Using the word 'serious' in the definition of IWT serves to align it formally with other areas such as human trafficking, which have their own UN protocols recognizing them as forms of transnational organized crime. The UN encourages member states to codify IWT as a 'serious crime' in their national legislation, a move that has material and policy implications: it mobilizes countries to coordinate and allocate resources to tackling IWT in accordance with UN priorities. The codification as serious crime also enables countries to make use of UN tools and institutions (such as ICCWC<sup>16</sup>) in order to address IWT. Thus, framing IWT as a serious and organized crime is a strategic move. As a representative from the Centre on Illicit Networks and Organized Crime suggested, "if you can connect your wildlife traffickers to organized crime, you should be able to move your government to action." This wider uptake of IWT as serious organized crime has promoted renewed reflections on the need for combatting wildlife trafficking. The former Secretary-General of CITES, John E. Scanlon, has called for IWT to have its own protocol under the United Nations Declaration on Transnational Organized Crime.<sup>17</sup>

There is, however, no universally agreed definition of what constitutes wildlife crime. Instead it is applied as an umbrella term which lacks precision and specificity. Drawing on lessons that crime can be politicized, especially at global policy levels, wildlife crime is a malleable and expansive term which can be deployed in ways that organizations with diverse interests and agendas can mobilize (Blaustein *et al.* 2017). For example, the UNODC defines wildlife crime in its 2016 World Wildlife Crime Report as "harvesting and trade contrary to national law."<sup>18</sup> However, this definition is not exhaustive as it does not capture the multitude of activities and importantly *harms* that wildlife crime and more specifically wildlife trafficking might entail (Wyatt 2013). References to IWT as serious organized crime were particularly prevalent amongst the speeches

<sup>14</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/cites/trafficking\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/cites/trafficking_en.htm) [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>15</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/71/L.88> [last accessed 03.05.2019]

<sup>16</sup> ICCWC is the International Consortium on Combatting Wildlife Crime and was established in 2010. It is the collaborative effort of five inter-governmental organizations working to bring coordinated support to the national wildlife law enforcement agencies and to the sub-regional and regional networks. The ICCWC partners are the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Secretariat, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the World Bank and the World Customs Organization.

<sup>17</sup> See reflections from former secretary general of CITES, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/do-we-need-wildlife-crime-convention-john-e-scanlon-am/> and reflections from ex-CITES Chief of Enforcement, <https://globalinitiative.net/do-we-need-a-global-agreement-on-wildlife-crime/> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

<sup>18</sup> UNODC (2016) World Wildlife Crime Report p.13: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/World\\_Wildlife\\_Crime\\_Report\\_2016\\_final.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/World_Wildlife_Crime_Report_2016_final.pdf) [last accessed: 11/1/2020]

delivered by politicians, celebrities and royalty. This is unsurprising given that such a terminology is effective in spectacularizing IWT and garnering political and public attention. This in turn privileged policy approaches that were anchored security, policing and enforcement sectors, while marginalizing those voices arguing that solutions to IWT lay in the other pillars of the 2014 London Declaration: sustainable livelihoods and demand reduction.

We witnessed many such acts of narrative marginalization at the London IWT Conference. Many actors, such as those from communities living in and around protected areas and wildlife economies, had very unequal and uneven access to participation in platforms and processes serving to define IWT and solving it. A specific "Community Voices" session was held on the afternoon of the last day of the Conference when many Heads of State and representatives from government, and thus the key policy makers, had already left. Yet those same government representatives had already met behind closed doors to discuss the signing of the Declaration as well as to launch the UfW Financial Taskforce and the UK Ivory Ban. In an online commentary, former Chief of Enforcement for CITES, John Sellars, reflected on the neglect of a diversity of voices and unequal access to the stage, writing: "There were an awful lot of white faces among the speakers, presenters, and panel members at IWT 2018. Some came terribly close to talking-down to their audience."<sup>19</sup> Uneven participation from people living in and around protected areas and a neglect of their expertise and knowledge, as well as that from the Global South more generally is par for the course at global conservation meetings (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Campbell *et al.* 2014; Duffy 2014b). The increasing enrolment and privileging of actors and ideas associated with traditional crime, security and policing sectors, however, reinforces this unevenness.

Political ecologists have long called for greater participation and inclusion of knowledge and experiences of people living in and around protected areas, particularly from the Global South, in creating conservation policy. Scholars of southern criminology similarly critique the lack of inclusion of knowledge and experience from the Global South in understandings about crime and how to address it (Carrington and Hogg 2017; Carrington, Hogg, and Sozzo 2016; Travers 2019). The 2018 London IWT Conference and the calls to End Wildlife Crime reflect the convergence of these problematic knowledge-power relations. The conference privileged and promoted long-standing, and long-critiqued ideas and ways of doing conservation that largely emanate from the Global North and its elite policy spheres of big NGOs (BINGOs) and North American/European government. In addition, and reflecting a newer dynamic, was the similar uncritical privileging and promoting of primarily Western ideas and practices about crime, criminality, necessary responses and their application to the illicit harvesting, extraction, and trafficking of flora and fauna. The influence of this narrow vision on crime and policing as evidenced above is resulting in worrying changes in conservation practice.

#### *Shaping and contesting the mandates of conservation*

In some ways, the move to a focus on investigations and intelligence away from overt militarization of conservation can be viewed as a welcome one, as it shifts attention away from protected areas and militarized or heavy-handed ranger-poacher encounters. Addressing corruption and the leaders of organized syndicates who often prey on vulnerable young people to hunt or illicitly extract wild flora and fauna is needed. There are, however, several concerns that were not mentioned during the Conference about what these developments might mean for conservation policy and actors.

There is a broader concern here about the expansion in mandates of conservation organizations, especially BINGOs (big international NGOs) based in the Global North, to take on a crime fighting role that includes investigations, intelligence gathering and issues of corruption and financial crime when these expand far beyond their mandate and staff capability. Undercover operations are increasingly conducted outside the remit of national law enforcement agencies and being undertaken by NGOs such as the Wildlife Justice Commission, EAGLE Network and conservation NGOs like WCS and WWF. Typically,

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<sup>19</sup> <https://wildaid.org/do-we-need-a-wildlife-crime-convention> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]; and reflections from CITES Chief of Enforcement - <https://globalinitiative.net/do-we-need-a-global-agreement-on-wildlife-crime> [last accessed: 11/1/2020]



NGOs investigate and infiltrate criminal networks to obtain evidence, before handing over dossiers of information to the relevant enforcement authorities, and sometimes support these authorities in pursuing prosecution. Conservation organizations and institutions are increasingly looked to, or take it upon themselves, to conduct investigations and intelligence gathering when they do not have the needed training or capacity to do so (Duffy *et al.* 2019). This raises important questions about the ethical dimensions of NGOs pursuing undercover operations, especially in term of the methods they use to collect, store and share intelligence data and the impact of these operations on the communities and individuals being investigated.

The promotion of investigative methods carries with it an expectation that conservation-oriented state agencies in the Global South should also move towards a crime and law enforcement centered approach. However, this received pushback at the meeting from participants representing some Global South countries. As representative from one Central African state forestry institution argued at the Conference:

Forestry departments cannot go deal with organized crime; this is a ridiculous notion. That is not their mandate nor is it their skillset. They are there to manage forests and forest use. Why are issues of corruption, trafficking, and crime downloaded to forestry and conservation departments? Forest departments cannot address this and face criminals operating on a global scale.

A participant from Central Asia also presented a dissenting voice at the Conference by pointing out potential contradictions and political motivations that may underly the uneven integration of militarized law enforcement logics and activities into the conservation sphere. During the *Voices From the Frontlines: Communities and Rangers* session, the panelist from Tajikistan ironically asked their fellow panelists and audience why the same actors promoting militarized approaches are not using guns and their own military to protect critically endangered European species such as bats and butterflies. Many people in the audience – representing those not able to access a microphone or the stage – let their approval of this comment be heard through applause.

These examples represent some of the isolated incidents in which participants had a platform to express their discontent with the 'one-size-fits-all' models of conservation and approaches to ending wildlife crime being promulgated at the 2018 London IWT Conference. Drawing attention to the political and financial motivations behind a 'law enforcement-first' approach, these voices ardently challenged such moves to universally transplant approaches in diverse Global South contexts that disregard alternative bottom-up possibilities for conservation and addressing IWT. Moreover, with expectations that conservation organizations and conservation funding globally should increasingly focus on crime fighting through law enforcement, investigations and intelligence gathering, this is where conservation funds and resources go, directed away from other priorities and activities. This imbalance is further exacerbated when knowledge and thinking from crime science is uncritically accepted and increasingly shaping the work and staffing of conservation bodies.

#### *From community-based conservation to community-based intelligence*

Intelligence-led approaches were also blended with ideas of working with communities. Integrating local community members into intelligence-led law enforcement was seen by some as a key factor for the success of law enforcement. A Senior Ranger who is a point person for law enforcement monitoring in his country expressed his opinion that "communities need to give rangers information on the presence of poachers." This was a popular refrain, with communities often being positioned as "our eyes and ears", in terms of being vital sources of intelligence and information about poaching and trade in wildlife products.

Previous meetings and an abundance of academic and grey literature stress the importance of community involvement in wildlife conservation and providing sustainable livelihoods (Booker and Roe 2017; Hübschle and Shearing 2018; Roe and Booker 2019). But the focus on conservation as crime fighting often equates using local communities as sources of intelligence on poaching and trafficking with community-based conservation. It was suggested more than once that local people can support rangers and law enforcement by giving them information on trafficking and poachers. For example, at a session on "Communities and IWT" the speakers

often repeated that communities are essential to combatting IWT. The Head of Law enforcement for African Parks in Malawi's Majete Wildlife Reserve phrased it as such: "without communities we cannot win the war against illegal wildlife."

Importantly, the voices of what might be considered "average" community members were not necessarily present, as in addition to the above Head of Law Enforcement, the panel consisted of a Director General of a Department of National Parks, a National Secretary of a People and Parks Program, and a high-profile conservationist and community-anti-poaching organizer. These individuals all have important insights and community-level experience to offer. However, the session was less about community voices and more about how to mobilize communities to support law enforcement to fight poaching. As the ranger explained: "Rangers can be supported by the communities through sharing proper information [on] wildlife, trade in animals, on presence of poachers. The main gap between communities and rangers is not sharing intelligence." He went on to say, "communities are part of solutions; we need to work with them to benefit from their local knowledge, [...] they know the environment better than us." It was even suggested that alongside wildlife day and ranger day there could be an "informant day" focused on integrating local communities into conservation strategies.

With a focus on policing and law enforcement, the problem of community engagement is largely framed in terms of law enforcement not being able to tap into the knowledge local people have about IWT. Ideas about community involvement in conservation were framed less in terms of local ownership and management of biodiversity, land and conservation, and more in terms of people within and around protected areas being valuable sources of local intelligence to be harnessed by law enforcement and conservation organizations. Tapping into local knowledge about ecology and existing ways of conserving biodiversity is replaced with harnessing local people as intelligence informants on illicit activity. Research suggests there are means by which communities can be involved in intelligence and anti-poaching that are non-exploitative. But these must be bottom-up, community-led interventions; not imposed by outsiders, especially foreign agencies, lest they risk failing and exacerbating tensions, violence, and destabilizing communities (Booker and Roe 2017; Massé *et al.* 2017).

There was also a perceptible shift in how sustainable livelihoods were discussed at the Conference in comparison to the 2014 London Declaration. Discussions at the 2018 Conference largely focused on how IWT detracts from the income, livelihoods, and prosperity of people in and around protected areas. As Prince William expressed, "this is an economic crime against local people who value wildlife as an economic asset." He reinforced that "it is the poorest communities who are robbed of their natural resources." Notwithstanding that many engage in illicit hunting and extraction of flora and fauna and other aspects of IWT as a way out of poverty and as a calculated livelihood strategy (Hübschle 2016; Titeca 2018), this discourse overshadows much-needed discussion about investment in sustainable livelihoods as a long-term preventative approach to addressing IWT (Cooney *et al.* 2016; Hübschle and Shearing 2018; Roe and Booker 2019).

Law enforcement and policing have a role to play in the broader context of combatting IWT, including targeting those actors who operate at higher levels and prey on vulnerable people to take what is often the high-risk/low-reward job of harvesting and extracting wildlife products. As many at the Conference agreed, this is needed. But, the dominant discourse of a law enforcement approach has clouded over discussions concerning the local-level drivers of the harvesting and extraction of wildlife products, as well as the need to invest in sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and community ownership of conservation and biodiversity as a long-term preventative strategy. Stressing this point, a non-North American/Western European speaker from the Voices from the Frontline Panel, pointed to the EndWildlifeCrime logo on the banner behind the panel and said: "Let's remove wildlife from that and then ask ourselves if there has ever been an example of 'ending' a 'crime'." The answer, he said is no, which is why efforts need to focus on practical measures to reduce illicit harvesting of flora and fauna and that starts with the drivers. "Criminalization", they stated, "doesn't work."

It is evident that a conservation-crime convergence is underway whereby dominant actors in conservation and government are promoting the deployment of knowledges and practices that are built on Western conceptualizations of law enforcement, policing and crime prevention. Although this move may afford less attention and resources to widely critiqued militarized anti-poaching and conservation initiatives, the 'law

enforcement-first' agenda carries with it particular power relations and assumptions that need to be unpacked. Moreover, the distinction between spheres and dynamics of crime, security, and militarized engagement are increasingly blurred (Bachmann, Bell and Holmqvist 2015). The current elite focus on IWT as serious organized crime has pushed a deeply Western-centric vision of crime prevention and law enforcement into a diverse field of practice, without serious consideration of the repercussions or inadequacies of such an approach in unique contexts. It is therefore imperative to question the privileging of hegemonic voices and knowledge structures in order to reveal the power relations at play and to open up space for considering marginalized, alternative approaches to tackling IWT. Building upon a broader knowledge base and suite of practices may enable more effective conservation, rather than relying on a blinkered criminological approach with its limited focus on law-enforcement and legalistic solutions. Moreover, with its focus on deconstructing how crime and responses to it are framed and produced, and considering what voices are marginalized along the way, an application of critical criminology, including its green and southern criminology cousins, is well suited to sharpening the analytical purchase of political ecology approaches to conservation, particularly when IWT is discursively and practically tackled as a 'serious and organized' crime.

## 6. Conclusion

In 2014, Duffy called for more collaborative event ethnography (CEE) of environmental meetings "to uncover and critically interrogate how global conventions work, how alliances are forged, how particular ideas come to the fore, and how others are silenced" (2014b: 129). This article directly responds to this call by drawing on insights from CEE to examine how the 2018 London IWT Conference cemented IWT's integration, and that of conservation, into a global politics of crime and policing. As UK Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt stated at the opening of the 2018 London IWT Conference "we are here to combat this trade using the most effective methods." This article asks: who the 'we' refers to; what knowledge structures and power relations determine the 'most effective methods' to be; and whose voices and what approaches are sidelined in the push to establish IWT as a form of 'serious and organized' crime that should be responded to accordingly.

The 2018 London IWT Conference was a key site and moment in the emergent political ecology of conservation-crime convergence. The conference provided a momentary glimpse into a concentrated microcosm of carefully curated actors and voices coming together to crystallize the longer-term trajectory of defining IWT as a "serious organized crime." The reasons participants gave for addressing IWT focused less on the ecological impact of illicit harvest and trade and more on the destabilizing social effects of wildlife crime, notably corruption, financial insecurity and supposed links with other forms of transnational organized crime. To respond to this, Conference participants favored a suite of policing, legalistic and law-enforcement focused approaches that served to push conservation rhetoric and practice further away from two of the pillars of the 2014 London Declaration: sustainable livelihoods and demand reduction. Thus, whilst the messaging of the 2018 London IWT Conference may have moved beyond oft-critiqued militarized discourses and methods, the ostensibly new vision for tackling IWT from a 'crime' perspective seemingly continues to favor similar kinds of actors and voices that move IWT away from a conservation issue towards one of criminality and security. Despite sessions on communities and demand reduction, and the inclusion of participants selected to represent community voices, the conference marginalized voices that sought solutions to IWT in the form of addressing its underlying drivers and causes, namely sustainable livelihoods and global demand reduction. Instead, the conference promoted first and foremost the notion that IWT is unequivocally a 'serious and organized crime' and should be responded to as such.

The article illustrates that an updated global political ecology of conservation must account for the ways in which IWT is increasingly framed and responded to as a multifaceted and 'serious' type of crime. To do so, political ecology need not only critically interrogate and account for the privileging of certain expertise, knowledge, and ideas about conservation; it must also deconstruct the discourses of crime and policing that pervade the on-going conservation-crime convergence and increasingly shape understandings of the illicit harvesting and trafficking of flora and fauna as 'serious crime' that requires responses based in criminological, legalistic and law enforcement thinking and practices.

To fully account for these developments, and to expand the theoretical purview of political ecology, this article argues for the merits of combining the analytical strengths of political ecology with the complementary deconstructive potentials of critical criminology. Critical criminology is well placed to examine how crime, its causes and solutions are defined and shaped by uneven power differentials. Green criminology in particular critically examines processes and power-relations surrounding environmental and conservation crimes. Thus, in beginning to combine political ecology with insights from critical criminology, the article provides a more nuanced account of how ideas of crime and policing have become politicized and frame policy decisions in the field of conservation – which has typically been the theoretical purview of political ecology.

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