

Nations pledge to make poaching a 'serious crime'

London Declaration attempts to stem slaughter of wildlife.

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Gerald Hinde/Getty Images

The white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) is one of the most aggressively hunted animals in Africa, and the northern white rhino subspecies is now considered extinct.

In a renewed effort to stop the dramatic rise in poaching that is devastating African wildlife, politicians from around the world yesterday agreed to significantly toughen their stances on the crime.

With more than 20,000 elephants and 1,000 rhinos poached in the past year in Africa, and an estimated global illegal trade in wildlife products of US\$20 billion a year — a figure that does not include timber and fisheries — the problem as never been more pressing.

Following a meeting in London of heads of government and senior ministers, countries including Kenya, Gabon, Tanzania, the United States, China, Germany and the United Kingdom, pledged to strengthen their legislation to ensure that the trade of wildlife is regarded as a 'serious crime' — a technical definition under United Nations rules that should ensure tougher penalties for those convicted of dealing in elephant ivory, rhino horn and other animal products. They also agreed to halt any government procurement of species threatened with extinction, and to support an existing ban on international trade in elephant ivory.

At a press conference, UK foreign secretary William Hague said that the meeting "will turn out to have been a historic conference and a turning point". He added, "I believe today we have begun to turn the tide".

Intense efforts

The pledge, dubbed the London Declaration, comes on the back of a number of high-profile efforts around the world, including a meeting at the end of last year in Gaborone and a conference run by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in March in Bangkok.

Will Travers, president of the Born Free Foundation — a non-governmental organization based in Horsham, UK, that has been involved in this week's talks — says that Tanzania's commitment to support a ban on ivory trading was especially significant. The country has previously pushed to allow 'one-off' legal sales of elephant ivory, something that many scientists believe could further fuel demand and hence poaching.

More resources are still needed to fight wildlife trafficking, says Travers, but the attention now focused on the issue is a huge advance. "We've never had these issues discussed at these levels," he says.

Signed by 41 nations, the London Declaration is the culmination of a week of intense discussions between politicians, conservationists and scientists.

In parallel, on 11 and 12 February the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) hosted a meeting of many of the world's leading experts in an attempt to suggest solutions to the current surge in poaching. At the start of the meeting, Jonathan Baillie, director of conservation programmes at ZSL, said, "Most of us are here because we believe illegal wildlife trafficking is completely out of control."

Status symbols

The surge in elephant and rhino poaching in the past few years is widely believed to have been driven by the growing economies in the far east, especially China, where ivory is seen as a status symbol by part of the nation's increasingly wealthy middle class.

Many speakers said that the problem also stems in part from the lenient sentences given to convicted wildlife traffickers, and from the fact that most of those caught are low-level gunmen and not the brokers and exporters who facilitate products being moved from Africa to the growth markets in Asia.

"Even when caught, the penalties these people suffer are much lower [than those for other crimes]," Davyth Stewart, who works on wildlife crime for Interpol in Lyon, France, told the ZSL meeting. He cited an example from Ireland, in which two men were caught with around half a million euros' (US\$680,000) worth of rhino horn, yet each received fines of just €500.

Stewart also warned that the rising price of illegal wildlife products is driving poachers to become increasingly ruthless. "The poaching is better planned, the poachers are better armed ... We're seeing increasing levels of violence," he said.

He urged those tasked with tackling such crimes to look at the other criminality associated with them, and to target people higher up the poaching chains through tax and money laundering laws as well as through wildlife crime laws.

Amid harrowing tales of slaughtered wildlife, there was a sense at the meeting that the attention now being given to the subject might bring changes that will make a difference to animals currently under threat.

"This is an inheritance we are given for free by nature," says Samson Parashina, president of the Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust in Kenya, said. "We need to defend it."

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Corrections

Corrected: The original version of this story included an incorrect number of signatories to the London Declaration. This has now been updated.