

OPINION & ANALYSIS

How Prince William's initiative is giving wildlife trafficking a right royal beating

United for Wildlife, which brings together 250 members and partners, is positively impacting conservation efforts

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PASSION Prince William has long taken an interest in protecting the natural world and preserving endangered species.

Image: REUTERS/Hannah McKay. File photo

This week, representatives of the Commonwealth came together to celebrate the 54-nation international organisation. Attending the annual multifaith service at Westminster Abbey in London, they were joined by Prince William, who has made combating the illegal wildlife trade (IWT) one of his main areas of focus using the immense power of partnerships.

A passion for conservation and the environment has run through several generations of the British royal family, and Prince William has long taken an interest in protecting the natural world and preserving endangered species. He set up United for Wildlife (UfW) in 2014, and I was honoured to become its vice-chair in 2018. Our aim is to facilitate collaboration among the transport sector, the finance sector, other corporates, not-for-profit organisations and law enforcement to prevent wildlife trafficking across the world.

United for Wildlife now counts over 250 members and partners, across sectors and across borders, to raise awareness, encourage the sharing of intelligence and best practices, and to join up investigations from the poacher in the bush right up to the financier.

This week in Kasane, Botswana, United for Wildlife is co-hosting a conference to expand our important regional work across Southern Africa. From Angola to Zimbabwe, nations have gathered to address the urgent need to detect, disrupt and bring to justice those responsible for and profiting from this heinous crime. We gathered together in Johannesburg in person in January 2020 and formed this chapter. Since then, SA has been a leading light in the world in using a newly created public-private partnership, known as SAMLIT, to jointly address the illegal wildlife trade.

We launched our Middle East and North Africa chapter last month on Prince William's official visit to Dubai – another crucial region in the wildlife trade. And now we return to Southern Africa to expand our membership and support every nation in the region that wants to prioritise combating IWT.

The trade in protected species, including such iconic animals as elephants, rhinos and lions, generates revenues of about \$20bn a year, making it the fourth most profitable global crime after drugs and human and arms trafficking. Tragically, 95% of the world's rhinos have been lost in the last 40 years, and as few as 400,000 elephants remain in the wild across Africa after decades of persistent ivory poaching. Just a few months ago, 24 rhinos were killed in KZN, the Western Cape and Mpumalanga.

The IWT is a serious and organised crime, and demands a targeted and collaborative response by civil society. For too long, the trafficking scourge has been left to conservationists and conservation enforcement agencies. But they are unfairly matched against transnational organised-crime syndicates.

This is where UfW comes in. Six years ago, the Buckingham Palace Declaration galvanised the transport sector into action to combat illegal wildlife trafficking routes. It was signed by more than 40 companies. Speaking at the declaration's signing, the prince argued passionately: "The poaching crisis is not just a tragedy because of the impact it is having on animals, but because of its effect on some of the most vulnerable people on our planet." The Transport Taskforce now numbers more than 100 air, freight and sea transport firms.

In 2018, we established a second task force, focused on financial services. Having served as group general counsel for Standard Chartered Bank, a large international bank doing business in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, I know how important the financial sector is, and its intention and capacity to effect positive change. That's why I have been so pleased to help lead this effort, and we now count more than 45 financial institutions as our members, including many key players in Africa.

The pandemic has created new challenges to those fighting to save protected species, but it hasn't stopped our members from carrying on. In 2020, Prince William noted the relationship of our work fighting IWT to Covid-19: "As we continue to face up to the ongoing shocks of this crisis there is a notable opportunity for those of us committed to ending the illegal wildlife trade. Never before have the public health risks of the wildlife trade come into such sharp focus. Never before has there been greater public awareness about the dangers of zoonotic diseases like Ebola, SARS, MERS and Covid-19."

With so much effort from our members and partners, we're able to say our work is having positive impact. At the start of 2022, we reported that our task forces had supported 325 law enforcement investigations, 153 seizures and 142 arrests. Still, we cannot be complacent as poaching protected species remains an urgent situation.

Teamwork is at the heart of UfW's work. No single actor has all the answers. We will continue to work with partners across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, and Southern Africa will remain key for us. As delegates gather in Botswana for our conference to engage on how we can improve our interventions, we can pause to reflect that we are marking a real difference in disrupting the crime, helping bring the criminals to justice, and standing up for protected species, biodiversity and our planet.

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