



Exploiting Africa's wildlife – the 'Big 5' and 'Little 5'

Contents

Introduction	03
Executive summary	04
Legal wildlife trade – the ‘Big 5’ and ‘Little 5’	05
‘Little 5’ most traded	06
• 1. Ball python	06
• 2. African grey parrot	07
• 3. Emperor scorpion	08
• 4. Leopard tortoise	09
• 5. Savannah monitor lizard	10
‘Big 5’ most traded	11
• 1. Nile crocodile	11
• 2. Cape fur seal	12
• 3. Hartmann’s mountain zebra	13
• 4. African elephant	14
• 5. Common hippopotamus	15
Wildlife crime – Africa’s top 5 most illegally trafficked animals	16
• 1. Elephant	16
• 2. Rhino	16
• 3. Giraffe	17
• 4. Pangolin	17
• 5. Lion	18
Summary and conclusions	19
References	20



Photo: The tallest animals on the planet, giraffes are laid-back, sedentary herbivores. Across Africa wild populations are in decline due to factors like habitat loss and poaching. **Credit:** iStockphoto.com/Torin Eastburn

Introduction

When you think of Africa's 'Big 5' you probably think of the iconic wild animals people most hope to see on a wildlife safari like lions, elephants, leopards, buffalo and rhinos.

After reading this report, we hope you'll remember a different 'Big' and 'Little 5' - the 5 big and 5 little wild animals that are the most commercially traded from Africa to the rest of the world. This trade may be legal, but it doesn't make it right. These are wild animals, not factory-produced goods. A cruel industry that hurts the wild animals being traded damages Africa's biodiversity, which will have negative long-term impacts on livelihoods and economies.

A recent UN global report on biodiversity¹ sent shock waves across the world as it fully uncovered the extent of the extinction threat facing wildlife globally. Unsurprisingly, many of Africa's 'Big' and 'Little 5' most traded species are being driven to extinction. It revealed that direct human exploitation, such as harvesting animals for trade, is the second largest driver of change to nature.

Our report highlights some of the worst impacts of trade on the survival and wellbeing of wild animals in Africa. It also draws attention to Africa's top five most illegally trafficked wild animals.

How did we get to this point? Where animals are exported and exploited for our greed and pleasure. Does the life of an animal mean nothing at all?

Africa alone should not bear full responsibility for protecting its unique and enigmatic wildlife and biodiversity. Globally, we must all (as individuals, non-governmental organisations, corporations and governments) find ways to support African nations that take bold steps to end the exploitation of wild animals.

We hope this report moves you to take urgent action to help protect Africa's wildlife. There are several ways you can help:

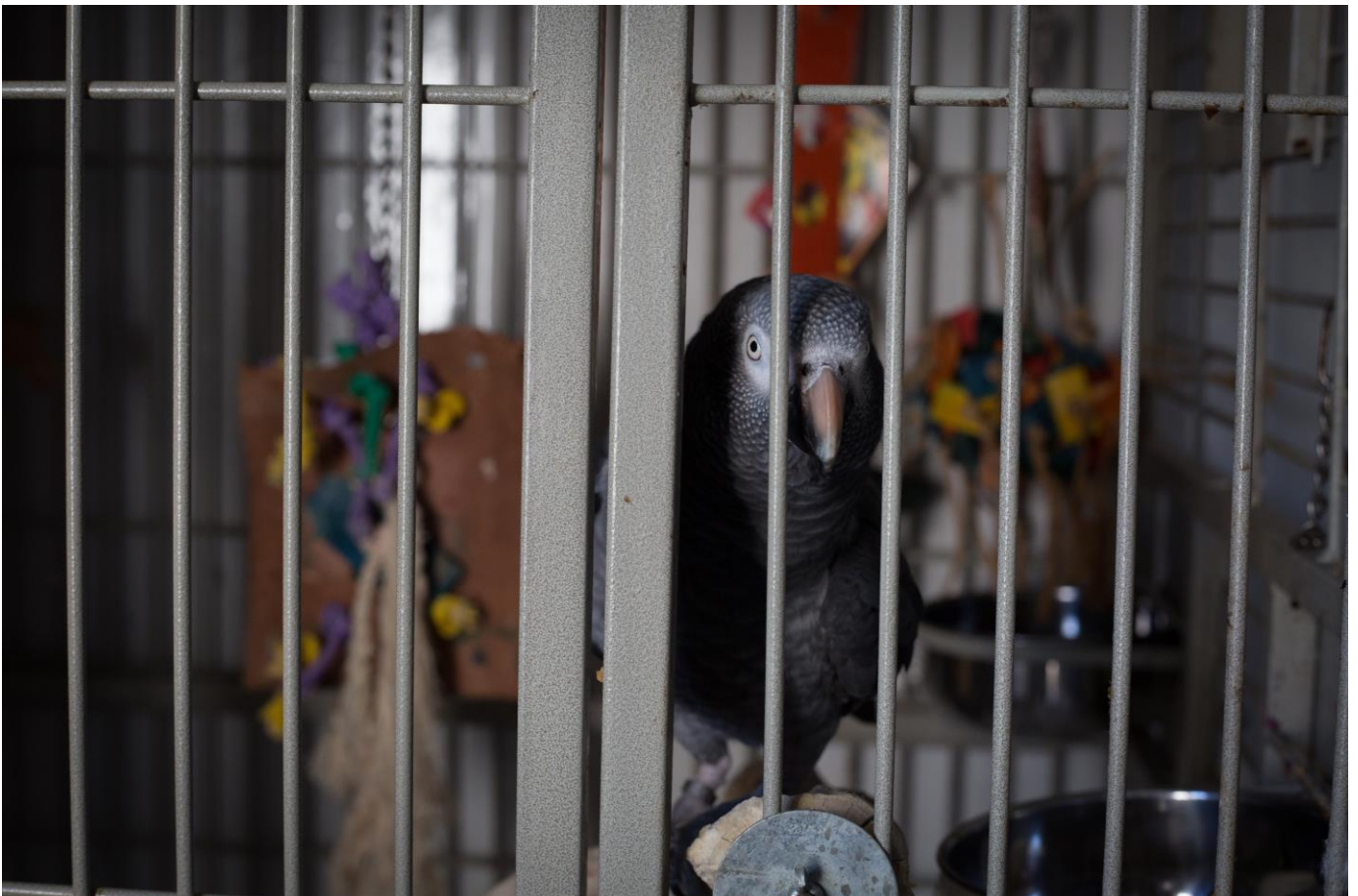
- Don't buy an 'exotic' animal - including birds and reptiles - as pets
- Don't buy any product - whether it's for so-called medicine or fashion - made with wild animal parts
- See these animals in the wild where they belong as part of an incredible, responsible wildlife safari
- Support our campaigns to stop the exploitation of wild animals as mere commodities.

Executive summary

Exploiting Africa's wildlife – the 'Big 5' and 'Little 5'

- Wildlife trade, both legal and illegal, is damaging the conservation of wild populations through unsustainable harvesting, species loss, and the spread of disease².
- Every day, hundreds of thousands of wild animals suffer cruelly at each stage of the trade chain – during capture, captive breeding, transport, sale, slaughter, and subsequent use as pets³. Their welfare needs simply cannot be met in captivity.
- The legal trade in the 'Big 5' African wildlife species – the Nile crocodile, Cape fur seal, Hartmann's mountain zebra, African elephant and the common hippo – involved 1.2 million animal skins being sold between 2011 and 2015 alone.
- The legal trade in the 'Little 5' African species – the ball python, African grey parrot, emperor scorpion, leopard tortoise and savannah monitor lizard – led to more than 1.5 million live animals exported for the exotic pet trade between 2011 and 2015 alone.
- More than 3,000 media articles were published in 2017 on the 'Big 5' African species illegally smuggled – elephants, rhinos, giraffes, pangolins, and lions.
- Increased understanding of the links with other forms of organised criminal and terrorist activity is highlighting how the illegal wildlife trade could threaten the stability and security of some societies⁴.
- Africa's wildlife is a critical part of its biodiversity. Unsustainable harvesting, cruel farming and loss of natural habitat threaten the core of Africa's diverse ecosystems, its economy, and its people.
- Wild animals belong in the wild. Being slaughtered just for their skin is cruel and unnecessary. And a lifetime in captivity as an exotic pet is so contrary to their natural environment – it is simply no life at all.

Photo: African grey parrots are considered 'Endangered' due to catastrophic declines in wild population observed over the last five decades, mainly fueled by wild captures for the exotic pet trade. Credit: World Animal Protection



Legal wildlife trade – the ‘Big 5’ and ‘Little 5’

‘Big 5 and ‘Little 5’ most traded

Those lucky enough to experience a wildlife safari in Africa are likely in search of the ‘Big 5’. Originally, this term referred to the five wild animals considered most dangerous to hunt on foot, but operators offering modern photography safaris have now adopted the term.

Perhaps less well known, the term the ‘little 5’ was created after this marketing success. It prompts tourists to acknowledge the smaller, less noticed but still enigmatic, wild animals of the African savannah. Here we reveal the ‘Big 5’ and ‘Little 5’ wild animals that are legally traded in the highest numbers, based on CITES records of full skins and live animals exported from Sub-Saharan Africa between 2011 and 2015.

Photo below: Nile crocodile skin is used to produce leather products for artisanal trade. It is estimated there are up to 5,000 crocodile farms worldwide. Husbandry practices are primarily designed with a commercial focus, to increase the quality of the crocodile’s skin, rather than allowing expression of natural behaviours. Credit: World Animal Protection





Photo left: The ball python can be found on grasslands and agricultural land across Central Africa and throughout West Africa. Credit: Getty Images

'Little 5' most traded

1. Ball python

The ball python can be found on grasslands and agricultural land across Central Africa and throughout West Africa⁵. Largely nocturnal, they tend to hide in burrows during the daytime and move to trees at night⁶. Their diet of mainly birds and rodents⁶ means they help with pest control in rural communities⁷. In the wild they can live for around ten years.

How and why are they traded?

Taken locally for meat, leather and use in traditional medicine, an even bigger threat to its survival is consumer demand for the international pet trade^{5,8}. It is the single most traded CITES listed species legally exported from Africa. More than half a million (591,830) individual ball pythons were exported between 2011 and 2015 alone⁹, the majority (55%) destined for the pet trade in the USA⁹.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

Ball pythons suffer at every stage of the trade chain. Exported in large numbers, confining wild animals in a crowded small space causes immense stress and increases the risk of disease. They have special requirements for captivity¹⁰, but most end up living in unsuitable conditions, often with owners who lack the necessary specialist knowledge to care for them. Research is needed to understand the full impact of trade on their welfare as well as education and behaviour change programmes to reduce consumer demand.

The ball python is currently considered of 'Least Concern' on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species⁹. Although the majority of them are reported to come from 'ranching' operations, there are concerns about the practices used to maintain numbers. Ranching involves pregnant females and eggs being taken from the wild so that most of their young can be kept for trade while a few are returned to the wild.



Photo above: As the single most traded CITES listed species legally exported from Africa, exploitation is being driven by international consumer demand for this species as exotic pets. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo left: African grey parrots are charismatic birds commonly stolen from their large, social groups in the wild to be sold on the international pet market. Credit: Getty Images

'Little 5' most traded

2. African grey parrot

There are two African grey parrot species: the red-tailed Congo grey parrot and the slightly smaller and darker-coloured Timneh parrot^{8,11}. Together, they can be found across almost 3 million km² of Africa's landscape¹². They are highly social and nest in large groups with complex social lives¹³. They also form monogamous pairs where both parents take care of their chicks¹⁴ and have a long life-span ranging between 20 and 50 years^{13,15,16}.

How and why are they traded?

Since 1975, around 12 million live parrots have been traded internationally, 62% of which were either wild-caught or of unknown origin^{17,18}. A total of 289,006 individual African grey parrots were exported between 2011 and 2015 – most of these by South Africa (88%)⁹. The exotic pet trade is the biggest driver for the trade in African grey parrots¹¹. They are desirable as pets because they are extremely intelligent and can mimic people vocally^{11,13,19,20}.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

African greys suffer during capture, transport and in captivity. The trapping process typically involves hunters placing a gum mixture on branches²¹ in which their feet get stuck, preventing their escape. Up to 66% of all wild caught specimens are thought to be killed pre-export¹¹. As intelligent, social animals they often suffer from isolation, flight restriction and poor diet in captivity²². This can lead to severe distress resulting in feather plucking and even death^{23,24}.

Due to catastrophic declines in wild populations over the last five decades, African grey parrots were recently classified as an 'Endangered' species on the IUCN Red list^{8,25}. International cross-border movement of wild-caught African greys for commercial trade is prohibited by CITES. Despite this, they are still one of the world's most illegally-trafficked birds. From 1982 to 2014, over 1.3 million wild-caught individuals entered international trade²⁶. Although the pet trade is the main threat to their survival, habitat loss and over-harvesting arising from use of poorly-founded quotas have also contributed to wild population declines¹¹.



Photo above: African grey parrots are sought after because of their ability to mimic human speech but suffer significantly during capture and transport from the wild, and in captivity. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo left: Emperor scorpions do not reach sexual maturity until around four years of age, which means that it can take a long time for wild populations to recover from over-exploitation. Credit: World Animal Protection

'Little 5' most traded

3. Emperor scorpion

Emperor scorpions are typically found across the hot and humid tropical forests of Central and West Africa^{27,28}, where they spend most of their time under debris and rocks or inside termite mounds. They live in communities of more than 15 scorpions, and adults take great care of their young. In captivity, they live for between five and eight years²⁹.

How and why are they traded?

An average of 55,447 emperor scorpions were exported from Africa annually between 2011 and 2015, almost all of which were from West Africa⁹. Demand for exotic pets is a key driver of this trade. Ghana was the lead exporter during this time, responsible for 61% of all live trade in this species, followed by Togo (31%), Mali (6%) and Benin (2%). The majority of these scorpions (57%) were destined for the USA, although some went to both Asia (15%) and Europe (12%)⁹.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

There is evidence to suggest that invertebrates have high cognitive ability^{30,31} so how we treat them should be carefully considered³²⁻³⁴. They can suffer without a consistently hot and humid environment so creating the right housing is difficult. Often kept in small containers for long periods before being sold to new owners, it is no surprise they are commonly seen in veterinary practices³⁵.

The emperor scorpion is yet to be assessed for the IUCN Red List but there is concern that key biological traits may put this species at risk from unsustainable commercial trade. Communal living makes it easier for them to be harvested at greater rates because they are collected together. As they don't reach sexual maturity until four years old, it could also take a long time for wild populations to recover.



Photo above: One of the largest living scorpions, this emperor scorpion is currently the third most traded live animal legally exported from Africa. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo left: The leopard tortoise is a herbivorous reptile found in the savannah regions of eastern and southern Africa. Credit: Getty Images

'Little 5' most traded

4. Leopard tortoise

The leopard tortoise, which gets its name from the leopard-like spots and markings on its shell, is typically found across the arid and savannah regions of Eastern and Southern Africa³⁶. Reaching sexual maturity at 12-15 years of age, females lay between 6-15 eggs³⁷. They have long lifespans, with captive animals living between 30 and 75 years³⁸.

How and why are they traded?

A sharp increase in demand for leopard tortoises has seen traded numbers increase from 30 animals per year in 1977 to more than 30,000 animals in 2011⁹. As many as 188,507 live leopard tortoises were exported between 2011 and 2015 alone, most of which came from Zambia (77%), Tanzania (11%) and Kenya (9%)⁹. International demand for the leopard tortoise is thought to be driven by the exotic pet trade with the majority of exports now destined for Hong Kong (56%)⁹.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

Leopard tortoises have specific welfare needs³⁹ and find it difficult adapting to new environments. If these needs are not met, they can suffer stress-related disorders, reduced life expectancy and even death. Many of the captive breeding farms have lacked even basic provisions like suitable nutrition and good veterinary care⁴⁰ let alone the specialist expertise needed to provide the right social environments⁴⁰ needed to avoid fighting⁴¹.

The leopard tortoise is currently considered of 'Least Concern' on the IUCN Red List and has been listed in Appendix II by CITES since 1975. Yet little is known about their overall population size³⁶ and the impact of trade on wild populations. Although the idea of captive breeding on farms is to meet the demands of the legal export trade, in practice, there are concerns that they don't produce enough to keep up with demand⁴⁰.



Photo above: Commonly sought after as pets because of their beautiful shell markings, leopard tortoises are also harvested for local consumption. Credit: Aaron Gustafson



Photo left: The savannah monitor lizard is intensely harvested from the wild and held in captivity on commercial reptile farms. Credit: Mark Auliya

'Little 5' most traded

5. Savannah monitor lizard

Typically found in quiet grasslands of Sub-Saharan Africa, the savannah monitor lizard is widely found from West Africa through to Southwestern Ethiopia and Northwestern Kenya⁴². In the wild they feed on insects, scorpions and snails⁴³, producing an average of 18 eggs, up to four times a year⁴⁴. They have long lifespans, which can reach around 13 years in captivity.

How and why are they traded?

Savannah monitor lizards are currently the fifth most commonly traded CITES listed species from Africa. As many as 34,011 live individuals were exported each year between 2011 and 2015. Usually traded live for the exotic pet trade^{45,46} they are also taken and killed for food and used as ingredients in traditional medicine. Most of the live exports came from three countries - Ghana (54%), Togo (31%), Benin (13%). More than half of these lizards (54%) were destined for the USA. Most of the remainder went to Asia (21%) and Europe (18%).

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

Little is known about conditions in captive breeding farms and during transport, but savannah monitor lizards have complex welfare needs^{47,48}, like a sandy surface, a diet of invertebrates and small rodents, and places for basking and hiding. Most importantly, they must be kept where they can regulate their temperature⁴⁹, otherwise it can damage their health and reduce their lifespan. Sadly, this can often be overlooked by captive breeders.

Intensive harvesting of savannah monitor lizards is of conservation concern. Young animals are targeted by traders in part because their smaller size means cheaper transportation costs⁴⁶. This puts populations at extra risk because harvesting takes place before they can breed. Pregnant females or eggs from wild nests are also collected for 'ranching'. This species is heavily exploited for both the skin and pet trade⁴², but it is currently classified as of 'Least Concern' on the IUCN Red List and only on Appendix II of CITES.



Photo above: The savannah monitor lizard is found in the grasslands of Sub-Saharan Africa and is exploited for the exotic pet trade. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo left: The welfare of individual Nile crocodiles kept in captivity on commercial farms is often inadequate and of major concern. Credit: World Animal Protection

'Big 5' most traded

1. Nile crocodile

The Nile crocodile is a semi-aquatic reptile with a broad snout and thick scale that can weigh up to 1000kg⁵⁰. Typically found throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, its range historically extended into southern Israel and Algeria⁵¹. Nile crocodiles have a varied diet, with young eating insects and adults preferring fish and larger animals attacked on riverbanks. Females lay between 20 and 95 eggs at a time, which they bury in holes on the sand banks of rivers.

How and why are they traded?

The Nile crocodile is commonly exploited for its skin, which is used to produce valuable exotic leather⁵². An average of 189,463 crocodile skins were exported annually between 2011 and 2015⁹. South Africa was responsible for 43.3% of the total exports, followed by Zimbabwe (24.7%), Zambia (17.2%), Mozambique (7.4%) and Kenya (3.1%)⁹. Most of the skins were destined for Asian countries (61.6%) but many were also sent to Europe (26.2%), Africa (8%), the USA (1.6%) and Mexico (1.4%)⁹. Singapore accounted for 34.1% of the demand from Asia.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

In 2016 there were an estimated 4,000 - 5,000 crocodile farms worldwide⁵³. Sadly, instead of prioritising the animals' welfare, farms typically emphasise producing the best quality skins for the highest profits. Even basic welfare concerns, like the size of enclosures and separating certain groups, can be overlooked⁵⁴. Methods of restraint, slaughter, capture and transportation are all serious welfare concerns. Any potential conservation benefits from these farms come at the cost of welfare concerns for animals living in intensive commercial captivity.

Poaching Nile crocodiles for their skin has devastated wild populations over previous decades⁵¹ and the situation is made worse by increasing human disturbance in swamps and rivers. CITES restricted the international commercial trade in crocodiles sourced from the wild to help protect wild populations in 1975^{55,56}. While this offered them some protection, it also caused an increase in ranching by captive breeders^{57,58}. Between 2011 and 2015, some 40-45% of the crocodile skins traded internationally are thought to have come from ranching systems⁹.



Photo above: The Nile crocodile is a large, semi-aquatic reptile slaughtered for its hide to produce exotic leather for artisan trade. Credit: MichalPL/Wikimedia Commons



Photo left: The annual seal hunts allow the clubbing and shooting of seals, causing tremendous pain and suffering to the animals. Credit: World Animal Protection

'Big 5' most traded

2. Cape fur seal

The Cape fur seal is the only species of fur seal on the African coast⁵⁹. They eat a wide variety of prey, including fish from the back of commercial trawlers, and are preyed on by killer whales and great white sharks. Jackals and hyenas also target pups on the shore⁶⁰. Males are around two metres long, while females are slightly smaller⁶¹ and mate with multiple females. This can make them aggressive over territory. The lifespan of the Cape fur seal in the wild is unknown.

How and why are they traded?

Cape fur seals continue to be hunted as trophies and for fashion products such as leather and fur⁵⁹. They are also hunted for meat, the omega-fatty acids in their oily skin⁵⁹ and for their genitalia, which is exported to China for traditional medicine⁶². As many as 243,014 Cape fur seal skins were exported between 2011 and 2015 alone, an average of 48,603 per year⁹. Exported from Namibia (98.3%) and South Africa (1.7%)⁹, the skins were destined for consumers in Turkey (68%), Hong Kong (15%), and China (12%)⁹.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

Every year a barbaric seal hunt is held in Namibia where thousands of seal pups are rounded up into groups and cruelly clubbed or suffocated to death⁶³. Adult males are shot with rifles or clubbed⁶⁴. Some are even skinned alive. Hunters claim the event is to control growing populations but it is a cruel tradition that causes tremendous pain and suffering to thousands of animals every year. Disturbance from humans even drives adults to abandon their pups on the islands⁶⁵, causing stress, hunger and potential starvation⁶⁶.

Historically, hunting was the biggest threat facing Cape fur seal populations⁵⁹. Many colonies in the former breeding islands are now extinct and habitat disruption has shifted the remaining breeding animals to the mainland⁶⁷. The current estimate for the Cape fur seal population is around two million animals⁵⁹. Climate change effects, like more frequent and extreme storms, are also a threat to local colonies⁵⁹. More information and understanding of populations and their role in the wider ecosystem is essential to finding solutions to conserve this species.



Photo above: The cape fur seal is a large, aquatic mammal hunted for commercial trade in seal skin which is used to produce fashion accessories. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo left: Hartmann's mountain zebra is considered 'Vulnerable' to extinction. There is concern that wild population numbers could drop by more than 10% over the next 20 years. Credit: Jean&Nathalie/Foter.com

'Big 5' most traded

3. Hartmann's mountain zebra

The majority of the Hartmann's mountain zebra population is found in the mountain ranges of Namibia and Northern Cape Province, South Africa⁶⁸. Found in high altitude areas of up to 2,000 meters above sea level⁶⁹, they live in social groups of one male in a group of females and foals. Young stallions live in bachelor herds⁷⁰. Closely related to the Cape mountain zebra, they are bigger in size yet narrower with a life expectancy of around 25 years.

How and why are they traded?

Hartmann's mountain zebras are most commonly traded for their skins, which are popular as decorative items, particularly as 'skin rugs'. An average of 1,869 of these zebra skins were exported from Africa each year between 2011 and 2015, almost all of which (90.1%) were from Namibia⁹. More than half (53.5%) of the total zebra skins exports were destined to only three countries - Germany (2,116), the USA (1,511) and South Africa (1,375)⁹. Overall, Europe imported the most (51.6%), followed by countries in Africa (17.1%), the USA (16.2%), and Asia (10.3%)⁹.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

There are animal welfare concerns associated with any form of hunting. For animals shot in the wild, quick kills are not guaranteed, and many suffer prolonged, painful deaths when they are severely injured instead of killed by hunters. This can cause tremendous stress and also disrupt migration and hibernation patterns, devastating entire communities⁷¹. Cross breeding with the Cape mountain zebra has caused physical suffering by increasing their susceptibility to a potentially fatal skin disease⁷².

This zebra is considered 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List and there is concern that its number could drop by more than 10% over the next 27 years⁷³. The largest population is estimated as 132,000 individuals in Namibia. Between 2008 and 2012, an average of 3,538 individuals were harvested annually⁷⁴. Already at risk of extinction due to cross breeding with the closely related Cape mountain zebra⁷⁵ their plight is made worse by humans encroaching on their habitat for farming and declining habitat quality due to overstocked ranch lands in previously protected areas. The impact of drought and climate change on their pasture further threatens wild populations⁶⁸.



Photo above: Hartmann's mountain zebra is predominantly hunted for its skin, which is popular for interior decorative items. Credit: Jnshau Meyer/Foter.com



Photo left: Elephants have strong family bonds and the death of an individual in the herd can cause a huge amount of emotional stress. Credit: iStock

'Big 5' most traded

4. African elephant

There are two species of elephant in Africa - the bush elephant and the forest elephant. Weighing between 2.5 and 6.5 tones, they are the world's largest land mammals and can live for 60-70 years. Both live in matriarchal systems, with a female leading a family of about ten individuals⁷⁶. Females carry their young for around 22 months.

How and why are they traded?

Bush elephants are one of the most traded wildlife species in Africa, commonly exploited for their skin which are used to make decorative items like jackets and car interiors. Although most African elephants are listed in CITES Appendix I - banning their trade in wild sourced animals internationally - some smaller populations have less legal protection. In Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, elephants have been moved to CITES Appendix II⁷⁷, making it legal to trade their skin with certain permits. A total of 8,027 skins were exported between 2011 and 2015 alone⁹, most of which came from Zimbabwe (70.3%) and South Africa (26.9%). They were destined for the USA (44.6%), Asia (24.9%), Africa (13%), Central and South America (8.5%), Europe (6.1%) and Canada (2.3%)⁹. Live trade for use in zoos and entertainment is also a major welfare concern and a near total ban in such trade was made in 2019 under CITES.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

There is serious concern for the welfare of the individual elephants hunted as well as the impact this has on the remaining herd members⁷⁸. They are usually shot but quick kills are not guaranteed so they can die in agony. Elephants have complex social structures and close family bonds. They have a wide range of emotions and are even thought to mourn their dead⁷⁸. Taking or killing a group member causes enormous emotional suffering and disruption for their herd members, especially if they witness a kill⁷⁸.

Elephants used to be widespread across Sub-Saharan Africa⁷⁷. Since 1979, they have lost a devastating 70% of their range and experienced a drastic population decline⁷⁷. Poaching, conflict with humans and loss of habitat are all to blame for this sharp decline. Their habitat has also become fragmented as land is converted for farming and housing, reducing their habitat. There are concerns that legal trade of their skin in some African countries may have contributed to declines numbers. In turn facilitating poaching, explosive demand and the emergence of criminal cartels.



Photo above: An elephant's skin is heavy and wrinkled, varying from dense black to pale grey or brown. Credit: Adobe Stock



Photo left: The common hippopotamus is a large, amphibious mammal that has great cultural and environmental significance across Africa. Credit: World Animal Protection

'Big 5' most traded

5. Common hippopotamus

The common hippopotamus is a large, amphibious mammal⁷⁹ found in rivers and neighbouring grasslands throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Hippos usually live in groups of 10-15 animals⁶⁰ but group size is determined by the availability of water in rivers and lakes, which they rely on to keep themselves cool during the day⁶⁰. Their global population estimates range between 115,000 and 150,000 animals^{80,81}.

How and why are they traded?

Hunted for their skin, teeth and meat and as live animals, 4,866 common hippo skins were exported from Africa between 2011 and 2015, the majority of which were from Uganda (51.4%), South Africa (28.1%) and Zimbabwe (19.5%)⁹. Most of these were destined for consumers in Hong Kong (51.4%), followed by the USA (30.2%), South Africa (8.1%) and Mexico (4%)⁹. The rest were shared among another 22 countries across Asia and Europe⁹.

How does it affect their welfare and conservation?

The biology of the common hippopotamus means it can potentially endure a long and painful death at the hands of hunters. Their thick skin is difficult to pierce or tear, meaning it can often suffer multiple, agonising injuries before finally being killed. The legal slaughter of these iconic animals in this inhumane way is a serious welfare concern. They are not usually traded live but are sometimes taken from the wild for ranches and zoos. Their very specific requirements as semi-aquatic mammals make it difficult to provide for their needs in captivity.

The common hippopotamus is considered 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species. International demand for their parts has contributed to wild population declines across Africa, and the IUCN predicts a further 30% drop in the next 30 years. Illegal poaching for meat, ivory and traditional medicine, and increasing habitat loss in wetlands converted by agricultural development, are also of conservation concern⁸². This species is now considered extinct in South Africa, Eritrea and Liberia.



Photo above: The continual decline in populations of the common hippopotamus is due in part to hunting for skin, meat and ivory. Credit: World Animal Protection

Wildlife crime – Africa’s top 5 most trafficked animals

Top 5 illegally trafficked

Huge profits and relatively low risks for those who flout trade legislation have led to a significant illegal trade in Africa’s wild animals. Thousands of individual animals suffer every year as a result of poaching and many species are being driven to extinction.

Illegal trade is complex and linked with other criminal activity, including drug trafficking, organised crime, and terrorism. Here we reveal the top 5 African wild animals that are illegally traded on a domestic or international basis, as reported by global media sources published in 2017*.

1. Elephant

Elephants are illegally poached mainly for their tusks, which are used to produce ivory ornaments and jewellery. The value of ivory is so great that poaching is often conducted by organised crime syndicates who use sophisticated technology to track and kill these animals. The British Army has been sent to Africa to stop poachers profiting from elephants to fund their terrorist activities⁸³.

Although there are many legal protections in place illegal activity remains rampant. Poaching causes enormous suffering to the elephants who are killed and to the rest of the herd. Quick kills are rare, as poachers often use a random spray of bullets, causing serious pain and injury before making the fatal shot. Some are injured while fleeing, left to endure painful injuries or even death elsewhere.



Photo left: Elephants are illegally hunted for their tusks, which are used to produce ivory ornaments and jewellery. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo right: Typically shot and left to die in agony, their tusks are hacked off with machetes to produce trinkets and carvings. Credit: Digital Visions

2. Rhino

Africa is home to two species of rhinoceros: the black rhinoceros and the white rhinoceros^{84,85}. Weighing between 1.4 and 3.6 tons, these giant, horn-bearing mammals are found in grassland and open savannah in thirteen countries across Africa^{84,85}.

Their only predators are human. Despite a CITES ban on commercial trade in wild sourced rhino parts, criminal networks organise poaching and trading on the black market. Their horns are often cut off before they lose full consciousness, causing enormous pain and suffering. A total of 1,028 rhinos were killed in 2017 in South Africa alone⁸⁶. Demand in Asian countries, where rhino ivory is used in traditional medicine and for carvings, is driving demand for rhino on the black market.



Photo left: Africa is home to two species of rhinoceros: The black rhinoceros and the white rhinoceros. These giant, horn-bearing mammals are found in grassland and open savannah. Credit: Getty Images



Photo right: Despite a ban on international commercial trade in rhino parts, criminal networks organise poaching and trading on the black market. Credit: Digital Visions

3. Giraffe

Illegal hunting, deforestation, civil unrest and the use of land for agriculture and housing are pushing the world's tallest animal to extinction across Africa⁸⁷. The number of adult giraffes across three generations dropped by as much as 36-40% before 2015⁸⁸. In recognition of the threat, the 9 species of giraffe were recently added to CITES Appendix II.

Giraffe parts like tail hair are used to produce indigenous artefacts like jewellery⁸⁹. Their skin is also used to make products such as clothing or covers for drums⁹⁰ and their tails, which were historically seen as a status symbol, are still worn as arm bands by some indigenous groups⁹⁰. Local ecosystems are likely to be affected by their decline as giraffes are considered 'ecologically important' browsers⁹¹.



Photo left: Illegal hunting, deforestation, civil unrest and the use of land for agriculture and housing have driven the world's tallest animal's wild population to decline. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo right: Giraffe parts like tail hair are used to produce indigenous artefacts like jewellery and their skin is also used to make covers for drums. Credit: Jackus Dysonius/Foter.com

4. Pangolin

Pangolins are now considered the most heavily-trafficked mammal in the world⁹². These small, shy animals suffer tortuous and agonising deaths as they can be literally boiled alive to remove their keratin scales, which are highly valued in traditional Asian and African medicine. Their meat is also eaten as a luxurious delicacy⁹³.

There are four species of pangolin in Africa, all of which are considered 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species⁹ due to illegal hunting. They can sometimes be easy to poach because their small size and method of defence - to curl up in a ball - mean they can be easily picked up and taken away in a bag.



Photo left: There are four species of pangolin in Africa, these small shy animals are now considered the most heavily-trafficked mammal in the world. Credit: Adobe Stock



Photo right: These mammals suffer tortuous and agonising deaths as they are boiled alive to remove their scales, which are highly valued in traditional Asian and African medicine. Credit: World Animal Protection

5. Lion

African lions are large, muscular cats that live in sociable prides of a few adult males, related females and cubs. Once spread across most of the continent, the majority (80%) of lions are now found in eastern and southern Africa and are regionally endangered in West Africa⁹⁴. Despite having no natural predators, their population is estimated to have dropped by 43% in the past 21 years⁹⁵ and is expected to fall by 50% over the next 20 years.

This is due in part to illegal hunting and trade in their bones for traditional Asian medicine⁹⁶⁻⁹⁹. Lions face a horrific death at the hands of poachers - they can be poisoned with cyanide, which causes a prolonged and painful death. Bait is also sometimes infused with crop pesticide so as well as killing the lion, the poison is eaten by other animals that feed on the carcass. They are already regionally extinct in 12 African countries, and possibly extinct in a further four⁹⁵ and have lost 82% of their former distribution range over the last century¹⁰⁰.



Photo left: African lions are large, muscular cats that live in sociable prides of a few adult males, related females and cubs. Credit: World Animal Protection



Photo right: African lion populations are estimated to have dropped by 43% in the past 20 years, due in part to illegal hunting and trade in their bones for traditional Asian medicine. Credit: Alamy

*This analysis is based on media reports focused on illegal trade in African wildlife species published in 2017 and identified by the monitoring and analysis service 'Meltwater' (www.meltwater.com).

Summary and conclusions

Wildlife across the African continent is being mercilessly exploited for profit in food, medicine, fashion, décor and the exotic pet trade. Animals are not only harvested for local food and traditions but gathered on a massive scale for international commercial trade.

Although trade in some wildlife and their parts is legal, it doesn't make it ethical, humane or sustainable. It has devastating impacts on wild animal welfare at all stages of the trade chain. A lifetime in captivity for some of the animals traded for use as exotic pets is so contrary to their natural environment – it is no life at all.

The 'Big 5' native African wildlife species legally traded accounted for more than one million animal skins (1,212,569 skins) between 2011 and 2015 alone. The 'little 5' legally traded led to more than a million live individuals (1,516,072) exported internationally for the exotic pet trade. More than 3,000 media articles were published in 2017 alone about the poaching of the illegal 'Top 5'.

Wildlife trade is also destroying Africa's wild populations. Around one million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction globally – more than ever before in human history¹. Human exploitation, like commercial trade, is the second biggest driver of this destruction¹ yet wildlife is critical to Africa's biodiversity, eco-system, economy and people.

There are growing concerns that, in the light of increasing human populations, consumer demand and globalisation, the sustainable use of wildlife for commercial purposes will not be enough to conserve Africa's wildlife and will involve extreme cruelty. Instead, our global priority should be to redirect consumer demand and local livelihoods to alternatives that do not exploit or inflict cruelty on wild animals.

Commercial captive breeding is no 'silver bullet' solution as in many cases it is unable to directly replace consumer demand for wild caught animals, and any conservation benefits are offset by poor welfare in captivity.

World Animal Protection in Africa campaigns for the welfare and survival of all of Africa's wild animals – big and small. That means working with businesses to become wildlife-friendly and making sure Africa's laws are changed and enforced to protect, not exploit, wildlife.

If the life of an animal means anything to you, don't buy exotic animals as pets, don't buy anything made from wild animals, and see wild animals responsibly where they belong – in the wild.

World Animal Protection delivers impactful campaigns to tackle and transform the drivers that cause and maintain the suffering of wild animals globally.

- We work to end the capture of wild animals from their natural habitats for commercial exploitation
- We campaign for an end to intensive captive breeding of wild animals for commercial exploitation
- We reveal the hidden misery behind this trade and run behaviour-change initiatives to redirect consumer demand
- We gather scientific evidence on the welfare and conservation of wild animals that decision-makers cannot ignore
- We urge governments and enforcement agencies to prioritise wildlife protection and to prosecute those who trade illegally.

Ultimately, we will work to ensure that wild animals stay wild.

<https://www.worldanimalprotection.or.ke>

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