

Aviation Taking Action Against Wildlife Trafficking

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The Wildlife Trafficking Threat

Wildlife trafficking is a global problem. It includes the importing and exporting of protected species of wild animals and plants, derivatives or products thereof in contravention to international and/or domestic law. Depending on the jurisdiction, it can also include smuggling, poaching, and illegal capture or collection.¹

Wildlife trafficking (including illegal timber and fisheries products) is estimated to be the fourth largest illegal trade following drugs, counterfeit goods, and human trafficking.² Traffickers frequently use air transport as a fast, relatively low-risk, high-profit means of illegally transporting wildlife from source to consumer. While interception and arrest of wildlife traffickers are the responsibility of law enforcement; with the proper means, the many thousands of air transport staff operating along the supply chain (e.g., cabin crew, baggage screeners, and others) are uniquely placed to support law enforcement by identifying and reporting any wildlife trafficking suspicions.

In addition, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has created a new awareness of zoonotic diseases and the need to understand its risks.³ The illegal wildlife trade has been identified as a factor that can increase the emergence and spread of

zoonotic diseases.⁴ Proper sanitary controls and quarantine requirements are also at risk of being disregarded by wildlife traffickers.

The ROUTES Initiative

In October 2015, the USAID Reducing Opportunities for Unlawful Transport of Endangered Species (ROUTES) Partnership was established, bringing together transport and logistic companies, government, industry agencies, development groups, law enforcement, and conservation organizations to disrupt wildlife trafficking from legal air transport supply chains. The goal of ROUTES was to help aviation stakeholders counter wildlife trafficking within their respective roles and to support law enforcement, not act as law enforcement.

Convened by USAID and led by the NGO TRAFFIC⁵, ROUTES core team included several US government agencies, industry associations IATA and ACI, and NGOs WWF and C4ADS with respective roles and functions (Figure 1). There was a wider international group of collaborators across the industry, conservation, and governments that worked together, including Freeland Foundation that was a core partner for the first few years.



FIGURE 1: ROUTES partnership.

1 UNODC. Criminalization of wildlife trafficking (2019)

2 UNEP-INTERPOL. The Rise of Environmental Crime (2016).

3 Ibid. World Bank Group, UNEP, UNDP & others Analysis of International Funding to Tackle Illegal Wildlife Trade (2016).

4 WHO. WHO-convened global study of origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part. (2021) and Statement on the seventh meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. (2021).

5 <https://www.traffic.org/about-us/illegal-wildlife-trade/>

Since its inception, ROUTES has engaged with a diverse range of stakeholders across the air transport supply chain, including airlines, airports, ground handling companies, and industry associations, focusing on those with operations along known wildlife trafficking routes within and between Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

With the support of its partners, and nearly \$10 million invested by USAID, ROUTES has developed targeted materials, including e-module training, policy guidance, and communication materials, to increase the aviation industry's attention on wildlife trafficking, and to make it as easy as possible for aviation stakeholders to take action against wildlife trafficking. These materials remain readily accessible beyond the lifespan of the Partnership.

ROUTES evolved from the recognition of a surging threat to wildlife from wildlife trafficking, which was being carried out through exploitation of the transport sector, in addition to increasing operational and reputational risk to transport companies. This conservation crisis was caused by growing demand for wildlife as fashion, food, medicine, and pets.

ROUTES and associated initiatives like the United for Wildlife (UfW) Buckingham Palace Declaration determined that transport leaders can help to champion such solutions by integrating wildlife trafficking prevention into policies, strategies, and practices for long-term action against wildlife trafficking.

ROUTES defined a goal and objectives to help the aviation industry with integrating the approaches and solutions shown in the graphic here:



FIGURE 2: ROUTES objectives.

Evidence

Before ROUTES, very little analysis existed on wildlife trafficking in air transport. The Partnership published extensive research on various aspects, such as the scale of trafficking, types of wildlife and products commonly trafficked, smuggling methods, and routes involved in wildlife trafficking. These resources informed the industry and helped prioritize their responses to wildlife trafficking. Much of the data gathered was presented in an online ROUTES Dashboard⁶ created by C4ADS. The ROUTES Dashboard allows open access to an interactive map-based visualization (Figure 3) system that generated detailed analysis, including identifying high-risk routes for wildlife trafficking.



FIGURE 3: A map produced by the ROUTES Dashboard showing the flight routes for all wildlife seizures recorded in the C4ADS Air Seizure Database between January 2009 and July 2021.

6 <http://www.routesdashboard.org>

ROUTES Activities

ROUTES' engagement with the aviation industry grew from three stakeholders in the first year to 45 by the last year. Stakeholders included airlines, airports, industry associations, and more (see Figure 4 for annual breakdown).



FIGURE 4: ROUTES aviation sector partners annual breakdown.

The first critical step in engagement was to illustrate how the issue of wildlife trafficking was material to each company's operations, how wildlife trafficking exploited security gaps in supply chains, and how trafficked wildlife posed health and safety risks to passengers and employees. Once the pertinence of the issue was established, with the support of ROUTES, stakeholders determined the appropriate next steps. In some cases, that was meeting with other stakeholders to commit to joint actions; for others, it was setting up training for employees in strategic positions or updating reporting protocols. Each company was able to address wildlife trafficking to fit its unique needs best. The ROUTES materials were available to support them and were developed to be customizable to the needs of each company/organization. The ROUTES materials are free to download and use by the aviation sector via the ROUTES website⁷.

ROUTES also hosted two regional partnership workshops in South Africa and Latin America. In South Africa, ROUTES partnered with UfW to bring together transport companies, customs and security, government, and conservation stakeholders to establish a Southern Africa Transport Task Force. By bringing these stakeholders together, they could build new relationships and identify how they can collaborate to address wildlife trafficking. In Latin America, ROUTES hosted a virtual workshop (due to COVID) that brought transport companies, government, law enforcement, and conservation organizations together, primarily from Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Mexico. ROUTES partners supported these stakeholders by concentrating on this region as they developed country-specific action plans to address wildlife trafficking. These workshops were a launchpad for continued collaborative efforts beyond the ROUTES Partnership.

Recognition and engagement of the aviation sector

ACI developed guidance to help airports meet the UfW Buckingham Palace Declaration commitments⁸, a handbook⁹ and an e-module¹⁰ specifically for airports containing possible actions, references to relevant materials and case studies. ACI has also developed a virtual assessment of Wildlife Trafficking prevention measures for airports under the umbrella of the Airport Excellence (APEX) program. IATA has developed guidance and amended protocols and procedures including the Live Animal Regulations¹¹ that lowers the risk of exploitation and has launched a wildlife certification scheme that provides independent assurance that an airline is delivering on its wildlife commitments. Many airports and airlines have joined the fight against wildlife trafficking. IATA and ACI have adopted Resolutions to counter wildlife trafficking, including:

- ACI World's commitment to the UfW Buckingham Palace Declaration and support to the ROUTES Partnership was re-affirmed in a Resolution against

⁷ routespartnership.org

⁸ <https://store.aci.aero/form/buckingham-palace-declaration-guidance-document-on-potential-interpretations-for-airports/>

⁹ <https://aci.aero/2021/06/28/industry-partnership-delivers-support-for-airports-in-fighting-wildlife-trafficking/>

¹⁰ <https://olc.aero/product/combating-wildlife-trafficking/>

¹¹ <https://www.iata.org/en/publications/store/live-animals-regulations/>

wildlife trafficking adopted by the Twenty-sixth ACI World General Assembly¹².

- In June 2016, IATA's 72nd Annual General Meeting adopted a Resolution on the Illegal Trade in Wildlife¹³ which provides a clear and unequivocal statement of the airlines' position on wildlife trafficking.
- In 2020 at the Thirtieth ACI World General Assembly, a Resolution encouraging airports to support the protection of biodiversity, and thereby also help averting future pandemics was adopted¹⁴.

The issue of wildlife trafficking has been raised several times in ICAO Assemblies and Panels, in particular thanks to papers presented by ACI and IATA.

In July 2021, the ICAO Facilitation Panel unanimously endorsed a proposal by ACI and IATA to adopt the following recommended practice under the UN Convention on International Civil Aviation, Annex 9¹⁵:

“Contracting States should ensure that procedures are in place to combat wildlife trafficking, including clear reporting systems and relevant competent authorities’ points of contact for airport and airline operators.”

The ICAO Council approved the recommended practice in March 2020, effective as of 18 July 2022. The recommended practice establishes some of ROUTES’ critical recommendations and paves the way for widespread and long-term uptake of the ROUTES-supported reporting app. This represents one of ROUTES’ greatest achievement and assurances of long-term action against wildlife trafficking.

Impact

Policy guidance and influence was a critical part of ROUTES’ approach. Both IATA and ACI developed specific guidance documents and recommended practices supporting their respective members to institutionalize wildlife trafficking

prevention. Both industry associations also established accompanying assessment programs for guiding, monitoring, and demonstrating their efforts – critical for incentivizing long-term and continual improvement in wildlife trafficking prevention practices. There were many initiatives to help the aviation sector provide a lasting impact. ROUTES and Crime Stoppers International (CSI) jointly developed a novel mobile reporting app, Wildlife Sentinel¹⁶, to empower air transport staff to report suspicions of wildlife trafficking to law enforcement anonymously. The app is available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese on Android and iOS mobile platforms. Over 120 reports were submitted to CSI via the app within the first two months.

ROUTES also catalyzed industry and enforcement responses that resulted in the interdiction of illegal wildlife smuggled by air. For example, in September 2021, 3,493 shark fins and 117 kilograms of fish swim bladders were seized at El Dorado International Airport, Colombia, following a report from a transport company. The airport staff had recently attended the ROUTES stakeholder workshop, and the airport had made ROUTES training compulsory for any transport staff coming into the airport. This example was one of several seizures following ROUTES airport training.

The Next Three Years

The ROUTES partnership generated a wealth of resources, learning, and best practices that will be sustained into the future. With the e-learning programs, aviation sector policy changes (e.g., ICAO Annex 9), sensitization of the industry, reporting tools, and global/regional transport sector wildlife taskforces, many elements will help to scale efforts.

One ROUTES innovation with lasting promise involved supporting and coordinating the development of an automated algorithm to detect priority wildlife products in security screening x-ray systems at airports by analyzing

12 <https://aci.aero/2016/09/28/airports-council-international-expressed-the-commitment-of-airports-to-join-the-effort-to-stop-the-transportation-of-illegal-wildlife-products/>

13 <https://www.iata.org/contentassets/e79883665f7142818a1b73f0f3d52dc6/resolution-agm-2016-wildlife.pdf>

14 <https://aci.aero/2020/11/16/aci-world-annual-general-assembly-urges-global-climate-change-effort/>

15 https://www.icao.int/Meetings/FALP/Documents/FALP12-2021/WP/revise%20WP25/WP25_Collaborative%20Approach%20in%20the%20Fight%20Against%20Wildlife%20Trafficking%20-%20REVISION%201.pdf

16 <https://routespartnership.org/news-room/new-mobile-reporting-app-helping-combat-corruption-and-wildlife-trafficking>



the x-ray data generated for aviation security. The algorithm development by Sandia National Laboratories, USA, with funding by USAID, achieved excellent accuracy rates in detecting target wildlife products. It has proven successful through repeat testing in practice. This technology has the potential for expansion to detect a broader range of smuggled wildlife products and other illicit goods without impacting aviation security. The US Department of State has invested nearly \$1.5 million (2021-2023) to implement the algorithm with the ROUTES team in selected airports in Africa to establish a new tool in the fight against wildlife trafficking by air.

And finally, ROUTES focused on learning, with an emphasis on making public-private partnerships effective. Some recommendations for consideration in leveraging change when working with public/private aviation sector stakeholders are mentioned here:

- Use tailored evidence to show how wildlife trafficking affects each particular stakeholder
- Understand the motivations of the stakeholder and that every stakeholder is different
- Seek industry leaders to help influence stakeholders from within their sector
- Provide simple solutions for action with accompanying guidance, resources, and support
- Support stakeholders to gain recognition for their efforts
- Exploit aviation technology and systems to provide digital intelligence on wildlife trafficking

ROUTES has shown that with expert help, resources and leadership, the aviation industry can make a significant and lasting difference in supporting important environmental, social, and governance goals. The benefits of helping protect wildlife will resonate and favor the industry, society, and the planet.