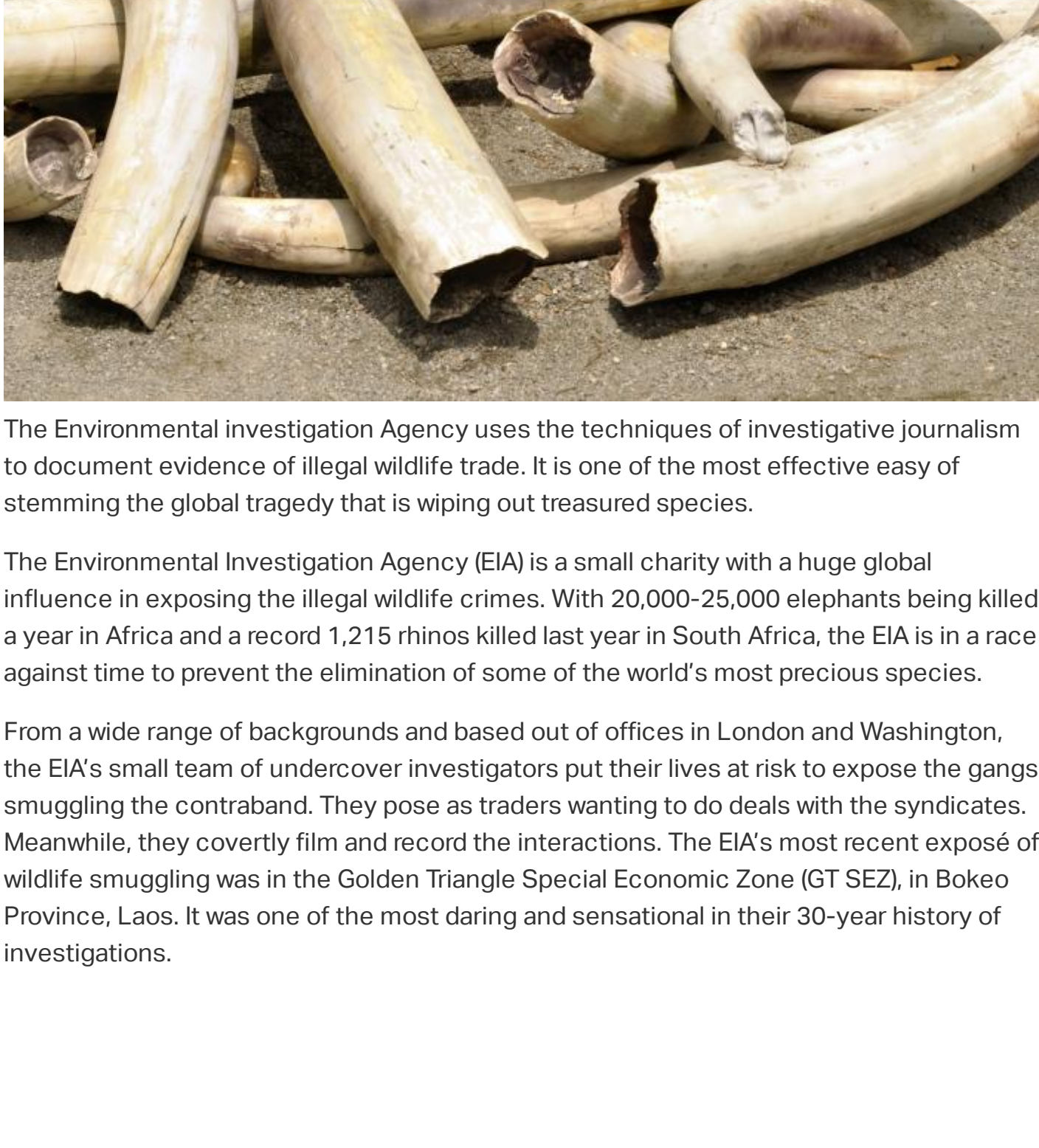


# Undercover Investigators Risk Lives to Expose Illegal Wildlife Syndicates

APRIL 22, 2015 • GLOBAL CHALLENGES • BY [DAVID SMITH](#)

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The Environmental Investigation Agency uses the techniques of investigative journalism to document evidence of illegal wildlife trade. It is one of the most effective easy of stemming the global tragedy that is wiping out treasured species.

The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) is a small charity with a huge global influence in exposing the illegal wildlife crimes. With 20,000-25,000 elephants being killed a year in Africa and a record 1,215 rhinos killed last year in South Africa, the EIA is in a race against time to prevent the elimination of some of the world's most precious species.

From a wide range of backgrounds and based out of offices in London and Washington, the EIA's small team of undercover investigators put their lives at risk to expose the gangs smuggling the contraband. They pose as traders wanting to do deals with the syndicates. Meanwhile, they covertly film and record the interactions. The EIA's most recent exposé of wildlife smuggling was in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GT SEZ), in Bokeo Province, Laos. It was one of the most daring and sensational in their 30-year history of investigations.

The EIA's Sin City report called the resort complex a "lawless playground" for rich Chinese hopping over the nearby frontier. GT SEZ, run by the Chinese company Kings Romans Group, comprises a casino, hotel, shops, restaurants, a shooting range and massage parlours. **Visitors openly buy endangered species products including tigers, leopards, elephants, rhinos, pangolins, helmeted hornbills, snakes and bears – smuggled in from Asia and Africa. Restaurant menus included "sauté tiger meat" and bear paws, as well as "tiger wine", a mix of crushed tiger bones and rice wine.**

Julian Newman, EIA's Campaigns Director and one of the lead investigators based out of the EIA's in the London branch, says the EIA's undercover stings are one of the best ways to combat the gangs.

"There are three parts to the supply chain and we are in the middle. At one end, there are the national parks in Africa providing ivory, or the tiger reserves in India, or the forests in Burma. At the other end, there is the market with increasingly affluent consumers from the Far East, especially China, but also the US and Europe," he said. "Work is done to combat poachers in source countries and public education campaigns get the message across in destination countries. But these methods take a lot of time to have an effect. In some ways, the fastest way to achieve results is to tackle the gangs smuggling the contraband."

Newman and his fellow investigators spend months researching the movement of contraband along supply chains to market. They invent plausible identities as traders and contact the gangs, placing themselves in great danger.

"Not too many groups can traffic six tonnes of ivory in one go so if you can target some of those you can have a good short-term effect. Using the techniques of undercover journalism is effective. We follow our noses using insiders, informants, information on the web and contacts on the ground. Once we have established a convincing cover story, the gangs are usually quite open and boastful about how smart they are whilst all the time we are recording them."

Once the EIA has evidence, it shares the information with law enforcement agencies. A short time later, it makes the findings public. Media exposure can be a powerful tool in exposing perpetrators. A civil organisation, the EIA is doing a lot of work carried out by police in an ideal world. But because wildlife crime is not given the same high priority as trafficking people, or smuggling narcotics, most police forces devote limited resources to it.

"Wildlife and forest crimes should be treated as serious crimes for the purposes of law enforcement and given the same priority. Technology, such as using drones to track poachers, has a part to play, and using celebrities to get the word out is also useful, but old-fashioned police work is still the most effective way of combating the wildlife smugglers," Newman said.

In Tanzania, he says, the wildlife smugglers will place a couple of tonnes of ivory in shipping containers designated for food or plastic waste.

"Given the right resources it's not that hard to seize the poached ivory before it leaves Africa for China," said Newman. "The gangs smuggling out of Tanzania can only use three ports - Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, then Mombasa, in Kenya. The problem is so many officials are corrupt. Gangs at Zanzibar port told us about their good relationships with officials. Good detective work would expose both the gangs and the corrupt officials."

The detection method would be more effective than battling to rid Africa of the inexhaustible supply of poachers, he says. In South Africa, for example, most of the poachers come from poverty-stricken parts of Mozambique. The gangs' offers make easy temptations.

"Law enforcers have killed hundreds of Mozambique poachers but still they keep coming. But it's much harder to replace the traffickers as it takes time for them to set up connections with corrupt local officials and establish proxies they can use locally. The real issue is the question of political will. A lot can be achieved when the orders come from on high," Newman said.

**A flagrant example of a lack of political will is in Laos, where the Government has a 20% stake in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone. Newman says that the Laos authorities could walk into Sin City and seize, arrest, prosecute and launch investigations into the criminals controlling the trade. But the financial interests have so far caused the Government to ignore its international obligations under the Cites legislation. The need, he says, is action from the Prime Minister to set up a task force dedicated to stamping out wildlife crime. This is unlikely to happen any time soon, however.**

There are, however, positive examples of Governments that are willing to intervene. The EIA used "political will" to its advantage back in 2005, when it managed to coax the President of Indonesia to back its campaign against the unbridled smuggling of illegal timber from Indonesia to China. The EIA/Telapak report entitled the Last Frontier exposed the syndicates behind the looting of merbau trees from Indonesia's Papua Province. The investigators showed how syndicates paid around US\$200,000 per shipment in bribes to ensure no interception of the contraband logs near the shoreline.

"The release of our findings was timed with the election of President Yudhoyono who had stood on an anti-corruption agenda. At the press conference, we named people involved in the crimes and we managed to hit the news hard. The next day, the President's palace officials asked for a copy of the report and he later summoned the cabinet and TV cameras and told them to solve the problem. Within a few days, he sent a task force to Papua and stopped the trade in its tracks. It wasn't perfect because the illegal logging in Indonesia is still an issue, but it was an unprecedented breakthrough."

Individual countries, however, can only do so much alone to combat the destruction of the world's fauna and flora. Last year, 46 nations met at a conference in London to pledge tougher penalties against poachers and to recruit more law enforcement officers. But to date the implementation of the "London declaration" have been mixed. **The biggest disappointment since the London conference has been the failure to convict all but a few players in the international wildlife mafia. Traffic, the wildlife trade-monitoring network, says this is partly because organised crime can pay the best legal brains to defend them. But it also comes down, once again, to the issue of political will.**

**South Africa, which is home to 90% of Africa's rhinos, has failed to deal with issues of internal corruption. The general consensus is that the Government could do far more. Mozambique, similarly, has been castigated for its abysmal record in tackling wildlife crime. It is a complex picture, however and other nations are stepping up their campaigns against the poachers. Tanzania is losing more elephants than any other country but President Jakaya Kikwete attended the London Conference and has toughened law enforcement over the past year. Kenya and Ethiopia have also taken proactive steps by burning tonnes of stockpiled ivory and Thailand has launched a huge public campaign.**

The United States has also been proactive. Last year, President Obama released the National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking. "There have been a lot of moves under Obama. Among the most important are the bans on commercial imports of elephant ivory and the domestic ban on ivory sales which prevents sellers using channels like eBay to sell it," said Newman.

The biggest problem remains China, which has by far the biggest markets for both illegal animal products and illegal timber. The Government has not taken such far-reaching measures as the US. Newman dismissed the Chinese Government's one-year ban on the import of ivory as a "largely cosmetic" move.

He traces many of the issues back to the UN's disastrous 2008 decision to allow China to buy more than 60 tonnes of legally stockpiled ivory from Southern Africa. "We opposed that decision vehemently at the time. The idea was to dampen demand down for black market ivory by injecting legal stocks into the market, but the reverse has happened. The injection has fuelled rather than dampened the market and the price has gone up. Now we have the veneer of legal ivory as a cover for illegal ivory. Traders have told us that 90% of the market in China is coming from illegal sources."

China has done some good things, Newman says, including busting a big gang of smugglers in the province of Fujian and giving them 15-year sentences.

"But whilst China's baseline policy is to utilise wildlife rather than preserve it, it will always be a struggle to get the change we need," Newman said.

See also: [The Economics Of The Illegal Wildlife Trade](#)



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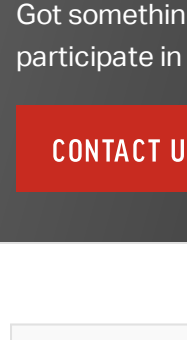
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