Introduction to special issue

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Wildlife crime is a relatively new line of inquiry for criminologists and criminal justice scholars. Within the last decade, increasing theoretical and empirical attention has led to the development of a viable area of research within criminology and criminal justice. Moreover, growing attention from policymakers and the public has resulted in calls to further disentangle the ecological, economic, socio-cultural, and public health consequences of wildlife crimes. Broadly speaking, wildlife crimes include a variety of illegal activities including poaching, illegal killing of wildlife due to human wildlife conflict, and wildlife trafficking. Not surprisingly, much of the recent interest has revolved around the illegal trading of endangered fauna and flora.

Estimated to generate up to \$10USD billion dollars annually (excluding fisheries and timber), the illegal wildlife market is considered to be one of the largest and most lucrative black markets today (Wyler and Sheikh 2013). It has been suggested that transnational organized crime groups may be involved in the illegal wildlife trade due to the high profits that can be generated, the ability to utilize established networks and trafficking routes, and the resources to either bribe corrupt officials or coerce law-abiding ones (Zimmerman 2003). For example, Sellar (2007) argues that evidence of organized crime indicators, such as the international management of shipments, the use of forged documents and permits, and the bribery of corrupt officials signifying significant financial support, suggests the involvement of organized crime groups. Similarly, Zimmerman (2003) offers a description of organized criminal groups that may be involved in the illegal wildlife market: groups of locals who sell illegal contraband for income, “mafia-style” groups that purchase the contraband from locals and subsequently sell the product for profit and, major international smuggling rings, who may be involved in other illegal markets. In both cases, as one moves down the offender categories more organization and specificity in products tends to be present, as well as the overt focus on profitability.

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However, little is known about the extent at which this is reflective of various markets and species that comprise wildlife trafficking. With respect to the illegal trade in endangered fauna and flora, Schneider (2012) noted: “[the] relationship between organized crime and the endangered species trade, at this point in time, is largely speculative but understandable” (53). Moreover, the assumption that locals operating in groups that participate in poaching activities for income are indicative of the presence of organized crime neglects to properly distinguish between loose, informal ‘networks’ and stereotypical perceptions of organized crime (cf. Hayman and Brack 2002). While the visage of organized crime helps draw attention to the plight of the world’s species, important nuances and idiosyncratic characteristics of specific markets may be ignored or misunderstood. In other words, to better understand the interplay (or lack thereof) between organized crime and wildlife trafficking, a market and species-specific approach is warranted (cf. Moreto and Lemieux 2015a).

This special issue attempts to further shed light on the potential existence and role of organized crime within the scope of wildlife crime, particularly poaching and the illegal wildlife market. Indeed only a handful of empirical studies have examined the nexus between organized crime and wildlife crime (e.g. Warchol et al. 2003; Wyatt 2009, 2014). Importantly, four out of the five articles are based on fieldwork conducted by the authors; a notable fact given the majority of research conducted on wildlife crime and related issues within the criminological literature are based on secondary data sources with few having conducted fieldwork (e.g. Warchol and Kapla 2012; Moreto et al. 2015; Moreto and Lemieux 2015b).

The first article by Pires, Schneider, and Herrera examines the level of organization and structure involved in the parrot trade in the Neotropics, specifically within Bolivia and Peru. The authors specifically investigate whether organized crime groups are involved in the trade or whether the market operates as a more informal network. Derived from 38 interviews with poachers, middlemen, and wildlife market sellers, as well as other individuals with knowledge of the trade, the authors find that the parrot trade is largely unorganized and is based on loose networks of individuals working in a freelance capacity.

Next, Warchol and Harrington investigate South Africa’s illegal abalone market. Using a routine activity approach framework and based on interviews with Park rangers, police, and consultants, among others, as well as field observations and secondary data, Warchol and Harrington explore the dynamics and individuals involved of the illegal abalone trade. In addition to providing insight on how individuals gain access to opportune hunting sites, smuggling techniques, and the behaviors and capabilities of guardians, the authors also classified motivated offenders into three groups: local residents and visiting tourists, small-scale organized poachers, and large, formal commercial operations. Local residents and visiting tourists were considered to be more opportunistic and hunting for their own personal use, whereas small-scale organized poachers and large, formal commercials poached for profit and were linked with Asian criminal syndicates.

Leberatto then presents the findings from his fieldwork on the illegal trade in live wildlife species in Peru. Based on field observations and interviews with 47 individuals involved in the illicit trade of live species in Peru, Leberatto provides an in-depth overview of the inner workings from the taking to trading of wildlife and finds little evidence that points to the involvement of organized crime groups in Peru’s illegal live species trade. Rather, he finds that the market is driven primarily through informal channels and is largely opportunistic.

The next article by van Uhm and Siegel examines the illegal black caviar market. Data for this study was collected from fieldwork conducted in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan and included a snowball sample of 67 informants, including those involved in the trade, and observations of poaching and trading areas. The authors find that the illegal black caviar trade has links with organized crime groups, particularly the Russian mafia. Notably, beyond having access to sophisticated poaching equipment, criminal groups provide protection to both legal and illegal fishermen, bribe corrupt officials, and use their networks to smuggle contraband. Interestingly, the authors note how such groups are able to “blackwash” or launder illegal caviar into the legal market, further highlighting the complexity of the market.

Lastly, White provides a conceptual overview of the National Environmental Security Taskforce or NEST approach developed by the international policing organization INTERPOL to address environmental crimes. The NEST approach promotes the importance of developing partnerships between different stakeholders and agencies that may be involved in responding to environmental crimes. Beyond developing a framework for cross-national, cross-institutional, and cross-agency collaboration to reduce crimes against the environment, White suggests that the NEST strategy may also have a panopticon effect as it relates to organized criminal groups and state corruption.

In closing, I believe that the following special issue provides a timely and unique contribution to the existing literature and further solidifies the role that criminologists and criminal justice scholars have in studying an extremely important topic. I would like to thank Klaus von Lampe for inviting me to be a guest editor, as well as the entire editorial office at *Trends in Organized Crime* for their assistance. My sincere gratitude also goes to all the authors that contributed to this issue. Lastly, and on behalf of the authors, I would like to send a word of appreciation to all the referees who provided helpful constructive feedback.

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