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ISSUES BRIEF: SIERRA LEONE COMBATTING WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Sierra Leone currently lacks the necessary legislative framework to fully implement the requirements of CITES and is also hampered by low levels of capacity within government enforcement agencies responsible for combatting wildlife crime.

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Sierra Leone is home to a variety of wildlife: 15,000 plant species, 170 mammal species, and 274 types of birds. It also has one of the most abundant and diverse fish stocks in Western Africa, as well as valuable timber resources. It is an integral part of formal and informal trade routes that connect West Africa and global markets. However, with an estimated 50 unauthorized border crossings, Sierra Leone struggles to control trade across its porous frontiers.

Between 200 and 2016 the most common illegally traded species in Sierra Leone were African Grey Parrots (21%) and chimpanzees (15%). Sierra Leone was also implicated in several seizures of illegal marine wildlife specimens, such as two shipments of dried sea horses intercepted in Belgium in 2017 which were destined for markets in Asia. Asian demand also drives trafficking of shark fins and intestines, as well as the illegal trade in West African Manatees, which is of growing concern. In addition, there is an active localized trade in bushmeat between Sierra Leone and neighboring Guinea, as well as to regional markets in Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

INADEQUATE CITES LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Sierra Leone is a Category 3 country under the CITES National Legislation Project, meaning that its legislative framework does not currently meet the requirements for the implementation of CITES. Sierra Leone's main environmental laws (the Forestry Act, Fisheries Regulations, and Wildlife Conservation Act) do not fully meet the regulatory standards of CITES and do not provide a strong foundation for enforcement action. For instance, Sierra Leone only regulates the hunting and trade of range species indigenous to the country, not the full list of species in the CITES appendices. Sierra Leone also does not have clear guidelines for issuing permits, a process which is complicated by unclear and in some cases overlapping jurisdictions among the primary wildlife authorities: Customs, Police, National Protected Areas Authority, Forestry Division, and Environmental Crime Unit.

Sierra Leone's penalties for wildlife crime are too low to serve as a deterrent for wildlife traffickers. Offenses are punishable by a maximum fine of 100 Leones (less than one US dollar) or up to six months imprisonment, well below the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) definition of "serious crime" as an offence punishable by imprisonment for at least 4 years or a more serious penalty. In addition, awareness is low among Sierra Leone's judiciary about wildlife crime, hampering the successful prosecution and conviction of offenders.



Samples of shark fins drying in the district of Tombo in Sierra Leone – Photos taken by WA BiCC

CAPACITY GAPS FOR ENFORCEMENT

There were no reported seizures of illegally trafficked wildlife by Sierra Leone authorities between 2013 and 2018, however contraband originating in or passing through Sierra Leone continues to be intercepted by law enforcement officials in other countries. This indicates a significant gap in the capacity of Sierra Leone's wildlife authorities to deter, detect, and prosecute wildlife crime.

GENERAL LACK OF CITES KNOWLEDGE. All levels of government officials (customs, police, and forestry and wildlife officers) lack basic knowledge of CITES requirements and how to identify wildlife species. This gap is especially critical at key entry/exit ports, such as Freetown Seaport and Lungi International Airport where very few officials have received training on CITES or species identification. Local communities are also unaware of both the importance of protecting wildlife species and national laws that prohibit trade in protected species. This contributes to the hunting of wildlife for bushmeat.

INSUFFICIENT STAFF AND EQUIPMENT. Customs, the Environmental Crime Unit, and the Forestry Division do not have sufficient staff to address current levels of wildlife crime in Sierra Leone. Customs does not have sufficient resources to staff all border crossings. Some crossings are staffed only by national police and the army, who have not been trained on how to detect illegally trafficked wildlife. There is also a lack of wildlife-specific detection equipment. Although the major ports have functioning scanners and canine units, these are not used for detecting wildlife crime.

LIMITED CAPACITY FOR INFORMATION MANAGEMENT. Sierra Leone is in the process of training its Customs officials in the use of international trade regulation tools such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) and the World Customs Organization (WCO) National Customs Enforcement Network (nCEN) law enforcement database. These tools can support CITES enforcement, however as yet few Customs officials have been trained on their use and application. There is currently no national database specifically for wildlife crime in Sierra Leone.

LACK OF STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Wildlife crime is not an equal priority across Sierra Leone's enforcement agencies and there is no national strategy to foster more coordinated responses. This is an underlying factor contributing to the lack of interagency coordination at the national level.

LACK OF A NATIONAL STRATEGY. There is no national strategy to combat wildlife trafficking that could provide a basis for stronger coordination, resource sharing, and joint operations. Sierra Leone has an Environmental Crime Unit created in 2014 to strengthen its response to wildlife crime, however the unit is understaffed, undertrained in CITES and national wildlife regulations, and does not have the autonomy to coordinate among enforcement agencies. Strengthening this unit could help to ramp up Sierra Leone's response to the illicit trade in wildlife.

GAPS IN HIGH-LEVEL COORDINATION. Although some government agencies such as Customs and Police collaborate at the field level through regular coordination meetings and information sharing, Sierra Leone has not implemented a higher-level strategic response to wildlife trafficking. Joint enforcement operations involving the Police, Customs and wildlife authorities seldom take place, and Sierra Leone rarely participates in INTERPOL regional and international operations. Opportunities exist to strengthen collaboration with national organizations such as the Forensic Crime Unit and the Financial Intelligence Unit, which could leverage more advanced investigative techniques to combat wildlife crime.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Provide regular CITES trainings and trainer–trainings for all the relevant agencies involved in wildlife trafficking**, such as Customs, Police, wildlife authorities and the judiciary.
2. **Strengthen Sierra Leone’s legal framework to combat wildlife crime** by providing training on existing legislation, adopting stronger penalties, and creating a court focused on wildlife crime.
3. **Improve coordination between relevant stakeholders** by establishing formal procedures and roles, adopting a national strategy to combat wildlife crime, and establishing an interagency coordination unit.
4. **Develop an intelligence/ information network focused on wildlife crime activities**, create a national inventory of species in Sierra Leone and develop a National Biodiversity Action Plan.
5. **Raise public awareness about wildlife trafficking** by distributing outreach materials and holding educational sessions at schools.
6. **Establish a network of specially trained customs officers at all exit and entry points** and improve the capacity of the Environmental Crime Unit.

ABOUT THE BIODIVERSITY THREATS ASSESSMENTS

WA BiCC conducted a series of biodiversity threats assessments across 15 ECOWAS member states including Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Cabo Verde, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. This was done to understand the threats to West African biodiversity and linkages to wildlife trafficking. Stakeholder, policy, and legislation analyses related to wildlife protection and law enforcement were also done across these countries. Recommendations emanating from this project, including the ones found in this issues brief, intend to provide guidance to donors and high-level decision makers on priority activities that support and contribute efficiently to the eradication of wildlife crime in the region.

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