



Bi-national Collaboration to Eradicate Wildlife Trafficking in Belize and Guatemala:

Lessons Learned & Recommendations

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Abstract

The project “*Bi-national Collaboration to Eradicate Wildlife Trafficking in Belize and Guatemala*”, funded by the UK Government’s Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, was implemented from February 2015 to December 2017 by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in collaboration with local government and civil society partners in Guatemala and Belize. This document, compiled by WCS with inputs from project partners, summarizes key lessons learned from the various different approaches employed as part of this project to reduce illegal wildlife trafficking (IWT); focusing on those lessons that are likely to be more broadly applicable to other projects with similar objectives. Based on these experiences we present a number of specific recommendations, with the aim of improving the effectiveness of future efforts to combat IWT and potentially other trans-frontier environmental threats in similar contexts. These recommendations include the need for **civil society leadership**, while prioritising efforts to strengthen government capacity and commitment towards combatting wildlife trafficking (CWT); the benefit of **inter-institutional collaboration**, at both the government and civil society level, to maximise the collective impact of individual institutions involved in CWT; the importance of **cross-border collaboration** to combat trans-frontier IWT, which may involve the implementation of distinct but complementary CWT approaches on either side of the border; the potential to use cross-border environmental issues such as IWT as a basis for **strengthening bilateral political relations**, particularly where this is driven by strong binational partnerships at the civil society level; the importance of a **holistic approach** that addresses the multiple different factors driving IWT, while pursuing efforts to better understand the relative importance of these factors and therefore identify the most cost-effective CWT interventions; the consideration also of appropriate **intervention design** based on detailed knowledge of each specific IWT threat, taking into account personnel training and equipment needs; and finally the need to raise the **profile of IWT** as an issue of critical importance, both at the public and political level, to build long-term commitment and financial support to address it.

Background

Illegal wildlife trafficking (IWT) is increasingly impacting species across Central America and the Caribbean as it becomes more organized, sophisticated and global in its operations, threatening to replicate the patterns observed in Africa and Asia. This growing illicit trade undermines local livelihoods and national economies, exacerbates corruption, and threatens national security. In Guatemala, the rich biodiversity of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Petén is being eroded

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by wildlife and timber trafficking, a threat which will only intensify as the human population in this area continues to grow and migrate into the reserve. Furthermore, a growing human population and lack of economic opportunities in south-eastern Petén has resulted in Guatemalan communities illegally extracting wildlife and other natural resources from the Maya Mountains-Chiquibul region of Guatemala and Belize, exacerbating political tensions between the two countries. Effective enforcement action is hampered within both countries by inadequate enforcement capacity, weak political will, and persistent corruption. Civil society leadership in tackling this issue is critical, in particular efforts to strengthen government commitment by ensuring recognition of IWT as a serious crime.

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Lessons Learned

1. Civil society leadership. Strengthening government commitment towards combatting wildlife trafficking (CWT) is a key priority to ensure that progress is not entirely dependent on short-term project funding. Nevertheless, this remained a considerable challenge due to significant shortfalls in government budgets allocated towards CWT in both Belize and Guatemala, and on-the-ground enforcement efforts in particular. Leadership in tackling the issue in both countries is likely to remain at the civil society level for the foreseeable future, while efforts to build political will by ensuring recognition of wildlife trafficking as a serious crime should be prioritized.

- **Recommendation:** Civil society must take the lead in CWT efforts where government commitment and/or capacity are low, and prioritize efforts to strengthen government capacity and commitment towards CWT.

2. Interinstitutional collaboration. Strategic partnerships between the diverse governmental and civil society institutions involved in CWT may considerably enhance their overall impact, both in terms of collaborative implementation of CWT interventions and fundraising to support these interventions. The Mesa Técnica, an inter-institutional civil society consortium established as part of this project to take the lead in pursuing IWT investigations in Petén, has been among the

project's greatest successes⁴. This success can primarily be attributed to the close collaborative relationships that have been built not only between individual members, who are in continual contact to share and act on new information as it is received, but also with trusted personnel in the relevant government enforcement authorities to whom intelligence is passed for further action. Due to the levels of corruption and general lack of commitment towards this issue that exist in both Guatemala and Belize, identifying reliable and motivated individuals with whom intelligence can be shared without compromising the success of an investigation has been critical.

➤ **Recommendation:** Different institutions involved in combatting a particular IWT threat, within both government and civil society, should work collaboratively rather than in isolation to maximise the impact of their CWT efforts, potentially in the framework of a dedicated CWT consortium or network. Effective interinstitutional collaborations can be built on the basis of strong working relationships between key individuals, for which trust on all sides is an essential foundation.

3. Cross-border collaboration. The close coordination that has been established between the Mesa Técnica in Guatemala and partner institutions in Belize, in particular FCD, has been valuable in facilitating the exchange of information on cross-border wildlife trafficking as well as the sharing of lessons learned relating to CWT efforts. There is considerable interest in replicating the Mesa Técnica initiative in Belize, as well as establishing an equivalent body to the EJF to build CWT capacity within the justice sector and provide legal support to wildlife trafficking cases. These cross-border civil society partnerships have also had some success in driving joint efforts to promote binational collaboration on CWT at the government level, although progress has been limited by the political tensions between the two countries.

➤ **Recommendation:** Cross-border IWT can be more effectively tackled through cross-border collaboration, which may include the exchange of intelligence to inform enforcement efforts either side of the border, the implementation of joint enforcement operations, or bilateral efforts to promote the development of alternative livelihoods in impoverished communities. The most effective bilateral collaborations may involve the implementation of distinct but complementary CWT approaches on either side of the border. Binational partnerships at the civil society level may also be effective in promoting binational collaboration on CWT at the government level.

4. Strengthening bilateral relations. A broader aim of this project was to explore the extent to which bilateral collaboration between the Belizean and Guatemalan governments on CWT could improve political relations between the two countries more broadly, which have historically been tense due to territorial disputes. These tensions, which escalated significantly in the first year of the project, have limited the willingness of both governments to engage in bilateral dialogue on IWT. However, through substantial efforts by the project's civil society partner organizations on both sides of the border (Asociación Balam, FCD, EJF and WCS), representatives of both governments were convened on several occasions during the project to explore opportunities for

⁴ In 2015, civil society project partner organizations in Guatemala (Asociación Balam, EJF and WCS) established a close-knit network known as the "Mesa Técnica", an inter-institutional consortium dedicated to pursuing investigations into potential IWT offenses in Petén in close coordination with the competent authorities. Since its establishment, the Mesa Técnica's investigations have led to three court cases, all relating to scarlet macaw trafficking offenses. All of these cases resulted in successful convictions, with four individuals prosecuted in total.

collaboration. While attempts to convene high-ranking politicians to address the issue have not been successful thus far, the bilateral meetings to date represent an important first step. However, the overall trajectory of the bilateral relations between the two countries appears to remain largely dependent on factors outside the control of this project.

- **Recommendation:** The effectiveness of efforts to strengthen bilateral political relations by instigating dialogue on trans-frontier environmental issues may be considerably limited by broader factors that cannot be easily controlled. Nonetheless, strong binational partnerships at the civil society level can serve as an important foundation that may prove effective in stimulating improved coordination at the government level, even in the presence of these limiting factors; a further testament to the importance of civil society leadership.

5. A holistic approach. IWT has numerous complex drivers, which complicate efforts to eradicate it. Wildlife trafficking between Belize and Guatemala is driven by poverty and a lack of alternative economic opportunities in the Guatemalan Adjacency Zone; national and international demand for the local wildlife that renders it a lucrative source of income; and weak enforcement of the law that makes wildlife trafficking a low-risk and therefore attractive form of employment despite its illicit nature. This project tackled each one of these driving factors through distinct but complementary approaches to maximise the overall impact of the project in reducing levels of IWT: strengthen law enforcement efforts in both Belize and Guatemala; raise awareness among the general public and enforcement authorities about IWT and its impacts; and improve alternative livelihood opportunities in Adjacency Zone communities.

The impact of the project on levels of IWT was measured based on the percentage of scarlet macaw nests monitored by FCD in Chiquibul National Park that were poached in the course of the project. The project exceeded its target of a 50% reduction in poaching, with zero monitored nests poached during the project compared to a baseline of 45% of nests poached on average over the preceding five years. The project has therefore been successful in reducing IWT based on its defined measure of success; furthermore, positive results were obtained indicating that the project has had some degree of success in addressing each of the key driving factors. These included the arrest and conviction of two individuals in Belize and five individuals in Guatemala for wildlife trafficking offenses (compared to zero prior to the project); an increase in awareness of IWT among enforcement authorities and decision-makers based on representative surveys⁵; and an improvement in measures of wellbeing among rural households involved in alternative livelihood initiatives supported by the project in Adjacency Zone communities⁶.

Depending on the relative importance of different driving factors in determining levels of IWT, in certain cases it is possible that focusing CWT efforts on tackling one particular driver may result in a greater overall impact than investing the same resources into tackling multiple drivers as part of a holistic approach. It is, however, difficult to quantitatively assess the individual effects of different interventions on levels of IWT to determine their relative impact. In the absence of this

⁵ 76% of those surveyed obtained a higher score in the final evaluation than the average score obtained in the baseline evaluation.

⁶ Access to 70% of goods and services considered as basic necessities improved in the final evaluation compared to the baseline evaluation, with a 12% improvement in access to basic necessities overall.

information, we believe that a holistic approach is the most prudent to avoid the risk that overall impact will be significantly limited by neglecting to address a key driver.

- **Recommendation:** Efforts to understand the relative importance of different factors driving IWT in specific contexts should be made, where feasible, so that CWT approaches that are likely to have the greatest impact can be identified and prioritised. However, if this information is not available or feasible to obtain, comprehensive strategies that address the diverse factors driving IWT are essential to obtain short-term results and establish a long-term foundation for the eradication of IWT.

6. Intervention design. IWT may encompass a variety of different types of threat in any particular geographic area in terms of the different wildlife species or products targeted, which require the perpetrators to employ different tactics and strategies. In turn, enforcement agencies need to employ different tactics and strategies to address different IWT threats, and these strategies must be appropriately designed based on a detailed characterisation of each threat. For example, wildlife poaching may primarily occur during the day but timber extraction at night, meaning that patrols must take place both during daytime and night-time in order to address both of these threats. Enforcement personnel may also have different training and equipment needs depending on the type of threat they intend to target.

- **Recommendation:** CWT interventions must be tailored to specific IWT threats, for which a detailed characterisation of each threat is essential. The design of appropriate CWT tactics and strategies should take into account personnel training and equipment needs.

7. Threat profile. As a relatively recent phenomenon in the Mesoamerica region, there is a need to raise the profile of IWT as a serious threat to wildlife, livelihoods and national security. This is essential to secure long-term funding for enforcement, and should include efforts to improve visibility not only of the threat, but also intervention successes, challenges and lessons learned to better inform future CWT investments.

- **Recommendation:** All institutions involved in CWT must prioritise efforts to raise the profile of the IWT threat, challenges and successes, both publicly and politically, to build long-term commitment and financial support to address the issue. This could include presentations at appropriate national, regional and international fora to raise visibility among key actors and decision-makers.

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