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Fighting Wildlife Crime: Sharing Information Across Borders

6 March 2013, Tokyo — The illegal wildlife trade brings in US\$ billions per year while impeding international efforts to conserve rare and endangered plants and animals. The true extent of this growing plight, however, remains uncertain due to the lack of a universally implemented framework to monitor wildlife crime and its transboundary syndicates.

Despite international enforcement, tracking the illicit value chain of wildlife poachers, traffickers and consumers has been hindered by gaps in data sharing among agencies and countries. This poses a potential threat to the success of Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs), which depend upon accessible information flows among diverse parties including governments, international agencies, research institutions, local communities and industry.

Today, wildlife experts, enforcement officials and government representatives are meeting in Bangkok at a side event of the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP16) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The event — “Bytes Beyond Borders: Strengthening Transboundary Information Sharing on Wildlife Crime through the Wildlife Enforcement Monitoring System (WEMS) Initiative” — explores ways to tackle transboundary wildlife crime using advanced technology collaborations.

In 2005, recognizing the need to overcome the data divides in wildlife crime enforcement, the United Nations University (UNU) developed the prototype of a transboundary information-sharing platform. The Wildlife Enforcement Monitoring System (WEMS) responds to the need for a regional governance model to compile data on transboundary wildlife crime from national wildlife divisions and incorporate this information in policy decision-making processes.

The WEMS initiative has since grown into a robust research partnership between the UNU Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS), the Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation (ITC) at the University of Twente, the Lusaka Agreement Task Force for Co-operative Enforcement Operations Directed at Illegal Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora (LATF), and the Center for Geographic Analysis at Harvard University.

Stressing the potential of WEMS, Prof. Govindan Parayil, UNU Vice-Rector and UNU-IAS Director, asserted that “destruction of wildlife through illegal and criminal activities is a global issue that transcends national boundaries and has become a threat to national security, preservation of biodiversity and the livelihoods of millions of people. Combating illegal wildlife trade calls for collaboration and information sharing among governments, NGOs, research institutions and enforcement officials”.

At its core, WEMS is a Geographic Information System-based initiative that measures and analyses data to improve compliance monitoring for CITES. The technical infrastructure for WEMS, developed and hosted by UNU, is a secure web-based database where partner agencies can upload data. The WEMS initiative benefits from a foundation built upon interdisciplinary field research involving key stakeholders such as enforcement officials, computer scientists, policymakers and civil society.

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Based on partner-government feedback, UNU redesigned the WEMS prototype in preparation for the regional pilot phase implemented from 2011–2012 in Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Congo-Brazzaville) through the Lusaka Agreement. This project enabled governments to effectively and easily share data on nearly 170 cases of wildlife crime extending beyond their borders, thus solidifying the potential of WEMS as a practical framework in enforcement of and compliance with transboundary MEAs.

ITC Rector Tom Veldkamp noted that this inclusive strategy has been crucial to the project's success, emphasizing that "we cannot solve the challenges in transboundary information sharing on wildlife crime through a vertical approach alone, as the problem itself lies in different spatial and governance scales. Bridging the different agencies or actors also brings in divergent viewpoints, which are at times conflictive. The success of WEMS-Africa has proven that it has overcome these challenges".

According to Bonaventure Ebayi, Director of the Lusaka Agreement Task Force, "information is the panacea for enhanced communication and collaboration. WEMS, as an effective information-sharing tool that facilitates early interventions and preventative measures, thereby safeguarding our much-treasured wildlife from illegal exploitation, and promotes good governance in wildlife conservation".

Based on the positive outcome of WEMS in Africa, the ASEAN region is being considered for the project's next focus. The CoP16 side event brings together experts from CITES, the United Nations Environment Programme, INTERPOL and enforcement officials from CITES member states to review current developments of WEMS-Africa and explore the potential of WEMS-ASEAN.

Underlining the prospects of the initiative in ASEAN, Manop Lauprasert, Senior Officer of the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network's Program Coordination Unit said that "the ASEAN region is rich in biodiversity and home to many endangered species of wild fauna and flora, which are constantly under threat of extinction caused by numerous factors which include their illegal exploitation and trade. Tackling this issue will require the use of new tools and technologies that can support and respond to the needs of ASEAN countries".

UNU Vice-Rector Parayil affirmed UNU's commitment to the project, saying, "I trust that the WEMS model used in Africa will help build the necessary capacity and offer the technological infrastructure to support ASEAN countries in fighting wildlife crime".

By looking into the roles of potential actors partnering in such an ASEAN information-sharing platform, the CoP16 side event offers insights on present research models. It further enables regional and international experts to consider important questions surrounding the public accessibility of project data and how to promote long-term sustainability in various contexts and countries.

For more information about the WEMS Initiative, please visit: <http://www.wems-initiative.org> or contact the following representatives:

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