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Animal Trafficking and Money Laundering in India

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Abstract

Animal trafficking has emerged as one of the most lucrative forms of transnational organized crime, generating substantial illicit profits that are increasingly laundered through complex financial systems. Traditionally perceived as an environmental or conservation concern, wildlife crime also constitutes a serious financial offense that threatens legal economies, governance structures and national security. This paper explores the intersection between animal trafficking and money laundering, with a specific focus on the Indian context. It examines how proceeds from illegal wildlife trade are introduced, layered and integrated into the formal financial system using various illicit techniques. The study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology based on secondary data, including international reports, legal frameworks, case studies and judicial developments. It identifies common laundering methods employed by criminal networks, such as the use of shell companies, trade-based money laundering, misuse of legitimate wildlife businesses, hawala transactions and manipulation of cross-border financial flows. Case analyses, including Operation Cobra and the Rajura Tiger Poaching Case, highlight how organized groups exploit regulatory loopholes and weak financial investigations, thereby limiting effective prosecution. The paper further evaluates India's legal and institutional framework, particularly the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, alongside wildlife and customs laws. The findings underscore the need to reconceptualize animal trafficking as both an environmental and financial crime and emphasize stronger financial investigations, inter-agency coordination and international cooperation to effectively combat such illicit networks.

Keywords: Animal Trafficking, Anti-money Laundering (AML), Financial Crime, Illegal Wildlife Trade, India, Money Laundering.

Introduction

The illicit trade in endangered wildlife poses a great threat to pets, domestic animals and wildlife, resulting in far-reaching impacts such as invasive species, disease transmission, difficulties in enforcing environmental legislation, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity. Wildlife trafficking stands as a grave global criminal activity that jeopardizes human health, established conservation efforts, economic well-being and the integrity of legal systems (1). Wildlife trafficking has become one of the most lucrative illegal commodities in the world, following narcotics and human trafficking. It entails poaching, unlawful capture, smuggling, transport and sale of wild animals and their body parts, including those of species that are under threat, for financial reward. As a rampant form of global transnational organized crime, it covers a vast number of countries and yields billions of dollars' worth of illegal income annually. This instance of transnational organized crime is pervasive, extending its reach across multiple countries that bring in billions of dollars in annual illegal profits (2). Wildlife trafficking isn't just a single crime; it frequently combines with serious criminal activities like smuggling, corruption, bribery, fraud and money laundering (3). The trade of both dead and live animals serves various purposes such as food consumption, production of clothing and ornaments, zoo exhibitions, scientific research, developing medicine and acquiring trophies. Fuelled by great potential gains, the illegal trade in wildlife continues to thrive and even the regulated trade in wildlife is filled with corruption and a general disregard for both national and international laws (4).

Despite growing international attention to wildlife trafficking, the financial dimensions of this crime remain insufficiently explored, particularly in the Indian context. Most enforcement efforts traditionally focus on poaching, seizure of wildlife products and arrest of traffickers, while the financial networks enabling these crimes receive comparatively limited attention. As wildlife

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trafficking generates substantial illicit profits, organized criminal groups increasingly employ sophisticated money-laundering techniques to conceal and integrate these proceeds into the legitimate economy. Understanding these financial mechanisms is essential for effectively disrupting wildlife trafficking networks. Therefore, this study examines the intersection between animal trafficking and money laundering in India, highlighting the financial processes, institutional challenges and legal responses aimed at combating this emerging form of environmental and financial crime.

The present research has been undertaken to explore the dynamic relationship between animal trafficking and money laundering, with particular emphasis on the methods through which illicit profits generated from wildlife trafficking are laundered. The study further seeks to identify the key factors responsible for the persistence and growth of animal trafficking in India. In addition, an analysis has been conducted on the adverse impacts of animal trafficking, including its implications for environmental security, economic stability, human health and national security. The research also examines the legislative measures adopted in India to prevent and control money laundering associated with animal trafficking, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of the existing legal framework in addressing this interconnected form of environmental and financial crime.

Animal trafficking is known worldwide as an important transnational organized crime, highly interwoven with financial illicit trades such as money laundering. This illicit business enterprise is of significant concern beyond environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity, as it affects national security, public health through possible transmission of zoonotic diseases and economic stability by subverting legitimate markets and promoting corruption (5). The magnitude of this trade is massive, producing billions of dollars' worth of criminal proceeds every year, making the business extremely profitable for organized criminal networks (6).

The enormous amount of money being produced requires high-level techniques for hiding the illicit nature of money. Money laundering in animal trafficking means incorporating illicit proceeds into the formal financial system using different methods (7). Traffickers take advantage of weaknesses in both financial and non-financial institutions, such as conventional banking, money transfer networks and more and more, digital platforms and social media for payments (8). Shell firms, front companies and trade-based money laundering are prevalent techniques utilized to transfer and conceal the profits of illegal wildlife trade (9). The overlap of wildlife crime with other major crimes, including drug trafficking, corruption and fraud, also promotes money laundering and makes it challenging to trace the financial trail (10). Corruption is specifically identified as a central facilitator of wildlife trafficking and laundering of proceeds arising therefrom, which erodes enforcement and regulation in source, transit and destination countries (11).

Treatment of the illicit financial dimensions of illegal wildlife trade is seen to be essential in order to address this crime successfully and disrupt the organized criminal networks perpetrating it (12). Global institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) suggest that states should identify and evaluate the money laundering risks associated with the illegal wildlife trade and create legal frameworks to facilitate financial investigations and asset recovery (13). In spite of the established significance, financial investigations are not necessarily accorded priority in wildlife crime matters to the necessary level, inhibiting the capability to identify top-tier beneficiaries and freeze criminal proceeds (14).

Strengthened collaboration between wildlife law enforcement agencies and financial intelligence units are essential for effectively tracking and disrupting illicit financial flows (15). The private sector—particularly financial institutions—plays a vital role in detecting suspicious transactions and reporting them to the authorities (16). Risk indicators specific to wildlife trafficking in financial transactions are an area of continued emphasis to enhance detection capacity (17). Case studies and organizational reports such as those from the Wildlife Justice Commission and RUSI offer useful information on how wildlife crime overlaps with other types of organized crime—most notably the incorporation of money laundering—informing more strategic and effective law enforcement responses (18, 19).

The international nature of animal trafficking and its related money laundering necessitates coordinated international action. International sharing of expertise, intelligence and evidence is essential to prosecute transnational criminal networks and to trace illicit proceeds (20). Though some progress in awareness raising and legal frameworks has been made, there are still important challenges to investigating and prosecuting the financial crimes that accompany animal trafficking and emphasis and stronger capabilities are still needed throughout all concerned sectors (21).

Methodology

This paper "Animal Trafficking: A Niche Journey of Money-laundering", the research utilizes a qualitative and analytical strategy, referencing previous literature, reports and legislation to discuss the intricate interrelation between animal trafficking and money laundering. The implicit methodology in the paper entails the following primary elements:

Research Approach

The study mainly follows a descriptive and analytical method. The study describes the complex character of animal trafficking and money laundering and analyzes the linkages and mechanisms between the two illegal practices.

This research adopts a doctrinal legal research methodology combined with qualitative policy and case-law analysis**.** The doctrinal approach focuses on examining statutory provisions, legal frameworks and judicial interpretations related to wildlife trafficking and money laundering in India. In addition, the study integrates policy analysis and case study examination to understand how financial investigations are conducted in wildlife crime cases.

Data Collection

The data for the study are gathered by an exhaustive review of secondary sources. These include:

Academic Literature: Reading scholarly articles and publications on animal trafficking, wildlife crime and money laundering.

International Organization Reports: Using reports and publications by organizations like the UNODC, FATF and WWF that focus on wildlife trafficking and financial crime.

Government Reports and Legal Documents: Analysing India's legislative actions and enforcement mechanisms covering wildlife protection and money laundering, such as the Major legislative frameworks addressing wildlife trafficking and its financial dimensions have been established, including the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, the Customs Act, 1962 and the Smugglers and Foreign Exchange Manipulators (Forfeiture of Property) Act, 1976 (22, 23).

India plays a complex role in the global illegal wildlife trade, functioning simultaneously as a source, transit and destination country**.** The country possesses rich biodiversity and numerous endangered species, making it vulnerable to poaching and illegal harvesting. Wildlife products such as tiger parts, pangolin scales, ivory, red sandalwood, reptiles and exotic birds are frequently trafficked through international networks. India also serves as a transit route for wildlife products moving between South Asia, Southeast Asia and global black markets. These dynamics make India an important case for examining the financial dimensions of wildlife trafficking and the role of anti-money laundering frameworks in addressing such crimes.

Case Studies and Judicial Trends: Examining specific cases and overall judicial trends in relation to wildlife crime and money laundering prosecutions in India.

Information from NGOs and Other Relevant Organizations: Including insights and data from organizations engaged with wildlife conservation and illegal trade suppression, including TRAFFIC and WCS.

The research approach is formulated for fulfilling the mentioned objectives:

Deconstructing the Complicated Relationship: This is done by the convergence of information from different sources reporting on how animal trafficking proceeds are laundered.

Pinpointing Key Factors: The paper brings out several factors leading to animal trafficking in India from available information.

Tracing Adverse Consequences: The study makes reference to reports and studies in identifying the environmental, economic, human health and national security effects of animal trafficking.

Reviewing Legislative Measures: The research involves scrutinizing relevant Indian laws and examining the roles of various agencies in combating money laundering related to animal trafficking.

Analytical Framework

An analytical framework has been adopted in this study to examine the financial dimensions of wildlife trafficking. Within this framework, the techniques and methods employed by traffickers to launder illicit proceeds generated from the illegal wildlife trade have been identified and analysed. Attention has also been given to the vulnerabilities exploited within both financial and non-financial sectors that facilitate such activities. Furthermore, the efficacy of existing legislative measures and enforcement mechanisms in India has been evaluated to assess their role in combating money laundering linked to wildlife crime. In addition, gaps and challenges associated with addressing the financial aspects of wildlife trafficking have been identified, with a view to highlighting areas requiring policy and institutional strengthening.

In summary, this paper utilizes a desk-based qualitative approach, referencing a range of credible sources to offer a general analysis of animal trafficking as a means of money laundering, with a focus on the Indian context.

Meaning of Animal Trafficking

Wildlife trade involves the buying and selling of wild animals or plants—typically retrieved from their natural habitats or bred in captivity—either as live specimens or as derivatives (Wildlife Conservation Society).Wildlife trafficking refers to any crime in the environment concerning the illicit trade, smuggling, poaching, capture, or collection of endangered species, protected wildlife (animals and plants governed by harvest permits and quotas) and their derivatives or products (9).

The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) ranks wildlife trafficking as the fourth largest type of transnational organized crime, following drug trafficking, human trafficking and counterfeiting. Its value per year is around £15 billion. Wildlife trafficking or animal trafficking is the illegal trade in protected species and their parts, such as the unauthorized capture, transport and sale of dead and live animals. It also includes the trade in animal products such as bones, feathers, skins and organs. It is an international underground market fuelled by the demand for hunting trophies, luxury items, traditional medicine and exotic pets (24).

Multi-faceted Factors Fuelling Animal Trafficking in India

India's animal trafficking is motivated by various reasons, which are:

International Demand for Raw Material: India's rich wildlife heritage makes it a target of preference for international networks of trafficking. Illegal trade is driven by international demand for endangered or rare animals, which compromises India's wildlife. The massive demand for red sandalwood and ivory as resources, much in demand for luxury products, is a main driver of animal trafficking. There is also high demand for body parts of rhinoceros and tiger used in traditional medicines (24).

Demand for Meat: Wildlife meat consumption is another major factor behind trafficking. Animals such as the Bengal slow loris, soft-shell turtles, deer, antelope, wild cattle and sea cucumbers are primarily trafficked for consumption (24).

Wildlife Demand and Exotic Pets: Increasing demand for exotic pets, particularly birds such as cockatoos, macaws and grey parrots, is one of the key drivers for wildlife trafficking in India. Indian birds, fish and reptiles also have a big international market in the pet trade. Shockingly, there are even instances of zoos potentially participating in the illicit purchase of exotic animals (25).

Economic Factors: Poverty and inadequate livelihood opportunities within certain communities motivate people to be involved in wildlife trafficking as means of generating a living. Possible financial rewards made from trapping and selling rare, protected, or endangered species might be especially appealing to economically pressed individuals (25).

Traditional Beliefs and Superstitions: Some animal species are caught and sold due to their perceived magical or healing qualities based on traditional superstitions and myths. Certain body parts, such as bones, skins, or organs of specific animals, are used in traditional medicine or rituals (26).

Inadequate Law Enforcement: The continuation of wildlife trafficking is also due to weak law enforcement and insufficient resources allocated for addressing the issue. Lack of manpower, corruption and insufficient penalties for offenders make it easier for traffickers to operate with minimal fear of consequences (27).

"**Harvesting" Wildlife:** A new explanation for killing animals and exploiting them in trade has surfaced, framing it as "harvesting" rather than killing. This concept involves eliminating species that have become overpopulated in order to restore ecological balance and harmony (27).

Loss of Habitat and Fragmentation: Deforestation, urbanization and infrastructure expansion cause habitat loss and fragmentation, forcing animals into smaller areas, making them more susceptible to capture and trafficking (27).

Lack of Awareness and Education: Limited public awareness about the consequences of animal trafficking and the significance of wildlife conservation can exaggerate this illegal trade. Educating communities, consumers and law enforcement officials about the value of biodiversity and the need for protection is crucial (28).

Profitability: According to the United Nations, the illegal wildlife trade, estimated between USD 7 billion and USD 23 billion annually, is one of the most profitable criminal activities. The majority of the trade takes place between Africa, where the wildlife is found and Asia, which has the bulk of the demand and where transactions take place. Notably, the demand stems from various products, including the widely recognized items of elephant ivory, rhino horn and pangolin, which are commonly utilized in traditional Chinese medicine (28).

The current illegal trading market is necessitated by various sophisticated factors involving illegal breeding schemes in zoos and wildlife reserves, particularly for trading purposes. Human activities across numerous sectors have posed serious risks to threatened animals globally. Combating animal trafficking requires a joined-up approach, which includes strengthening law enforcement, strengthening penalties for perpetrators, enhancing public awareness, promoting sustainable livelyhoods and collaboration between countries to combat the illegal wildlife trade.

How Money Laundering is Done through Animal Trafficking

Wildlife crime has close links with money laundering, corruption, homicide and serious violence. Money laundering is the process by which illegally gained financial gains ("dirty money") are transformed into legally acquired earnings ("clean money"). Illegal wildlife trade is a most financially rewarding criminal enterprise, grossing billions of dollars every year. To legalize such illegal proceeds, wildlife traffickers frequently utilize legitimate financial avenues like banks, money exchange services and virtual currency exchanges. Criminal profits from illegal wildlife trade constitute illicit revenue and transferring such money through the financial system makes traffickers money launderers. Money laundering is generally understood to occur in three distinct phases. In the first phase, criminal proceeds are introduced into the economy. This is followed by the layering stage, during which the origin of the illicit funds is deliberately obscured through a series of complex transactions. In the final phase, known as integration, seemingly legitimate financial transactions are utilized to reintroduce the laundered funds into the formal economy, thereby concealing their illegal origin. For example, an illegal wildlife trafficker can establish a shell company as a cover for illegal money. This shell company appears legitimate at first glance but is actually utilized to launder and channel illegal money. The criminal could export animals from overseas through this company and then sell them illegally in the black market. The profits from these sales are then deposited into the shell company's bank account. The trafficker can then withdraw this money as if it were legitimate income (UNODC) (29).

Flow of Proceeds from Wildlife Crime into the Economy

From the Suspicious Transaction Reports (STRs) submitted to the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada (FINTRAC), several common money laundering methods associated with wildlife crime have been identified. These methods include the use of wire transfers, e-mail money transfers and cash transactions for the movement of illicit funds. In addition, the involvement of nominees, such as family members, has been observed as a means to obscure the true ownership of assets. The use of front companies, particularly in sectors such as construction, transportation and logistics, has also been employed to facilitate the laundering of illegal proceeds and to provide a façade of legitimacy to financial activities.

Examples of ways in which money laundering is perpetrated through animal trafficking include, In regions where legal wildlife markets operate, such as Thailand's domestic ivory trade, regulatory systems have been exploited to integrate illegally sourced wildlife products into the legal economy. Commercial wildlife-related industries, including taxidermy, clothing and the pet trade, have been utilized to conceal protected species among legally traded ones, thereby facilitating the laundering of illicit proceeds and presenting them as legitimate profits. Open-air wildlife markets and eateries serving wildlife products have also been used to mix legal and illegal species, enabling the channelling of unlawful revenues through legitimate business financial systems. It has further been suggested that proceeds generated from wildlife trafficking may be used to finance terrorist and insurgent groups. Legal enterprises involved in wildlife trade and breeding have been misused as mechanisms for laundering illicit wildlife profits, not only by directly selling endangered species to consumers but also by concealing the origins of illegal funds, with money laundering forming a significant component of such operations due to the high value of endangered species. In addition, wildlife trade has been employed as a front for laundering proceeds from other serious crimes, such as drug trafficking, where legitimate businesses have provided cover for illicit financial activities. Furthermore, non-cash transactions involving wildlife and other illegal goods have been conducted by criminal networks, enabling the laundering of money outside the formal financial system; even in cases where no direct monetary exchange occurs, tax liabilities may still arise, as bartered goods are required to be recorded at their fair market value (30).

Operation Cobra Case

Operation Cobra, a series of effective international law enforcement operations, has become an important response to the growing crisis of illegal wildlife trade. Born out of an increasing awareness of the devastating effect of poaching and trafficking on global biodiversity, these operations unite law enforcement agencies, customs authorities and conservation groups from many countries. For instance, the individual operation called Operation Cobra III, which was undertaken in May 2015, involved 62 nations from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. The core objective is still the same: to dismantle the criminal networks utilized in illegal trade of endangered animals, from the poachers at ground level to traffickers transporting wildlife across borders to dealers selling them in illegal markets (31).

Today, the overarching Operation Cobra structure continues to adapt, responding to the constantly changing strategies of wildlife traffickers. It is still an essential framework for global cooperation, promoting information exchange, enforcement coordination and the development of legal structures to fight wildlife crime. The emphasis is more on using advanced methods to monitor and disrupt organized criminal networks, with the understanding that wildlife trafficking frequently involves other transnational crimes.

The Operation Cobra operations' aftermath generally includes large seizures of illegally trafficked goods and many arrests. Operation Cobra III, for example, had 139 arrests and more than 247 seizures in over 37 countries. Seized goods included elephant ivory, rhinoceros horns (65 horns seized in Mozambique along with 340 tusks), pangolins, rosewood, tortoises and medicinal plants. Tens of thousands of illicit wildlife products were seized in European nations such as the UK, Austria and Germany, while sizable seizures also happened in China, Singapore and South Africa. Such initiatives not only result in saving numerous animals' lives directly but are also effective to send a serious message for warning against future crimes. In addition, the intelligence collected from such operations frequently holds significant indicators of trafficking networks' modus operandi and helps to develop longer-term strategies (32).

In terms of how it relates to my paper, Operation Cobra is a key factor in interrupting the early stages of this "niche journey." Through disruption of illegal wildlife physical movement and arrest of those who engage in it – as demonstrated by the scope of arrests and seizures within interventions such as Cobra III– these efforts affect the creation of illicit proceeds that then have to be laundered directly. Although Operation Cobra's main focus is not to follow financial paths, its efficacy in stemming illegal commerce makes it increasingly hard for traffickers to gain large caches of "dirty" money initially. The threats surrounding the commerce, increased through such enforcement initiatives, can muddy the money-laundering process. Thus, Operation Cobra serves as a frontline defense of utmost importance, lessening the amount of illegal proceeds that find their way into the financial system and emphasizing the intrinsic connection between wildlife crime and financial crime (33).

The Rajura Tiger Poaching Case (India)

This high-profile case, involving tiger poaching within Maharashtra's Rajura forest range's Central Chanda division, saw a chargesheet being filed before the Judicial Magistrate First Class (JMFC) at Rajura on Tuesday, March 26, 2025. An investigation discovered a "well-coordinated, pan-India wildlife crime syndicate" with known international connections, as per the report. Even as the inquiry specifically dealt with poaching and the black marketing, it discovered a "mammoth financial trail totalling over Rs 7.5 crore," forcing sleuths to place their educated estimate of killing at least over 100 tigers around the nation over the last half-a-decade by syndicated poachers being an association that might have engaged (34).

The investigation spelled out the smuggling route as follows: tiger parts were being smuggled from India's north-eastern states to Myanmar and further into China's black wildlife market. The multi-agency, two-month probe, conducted by Special Investigation Teams (SITs) in local, state and national jurisdictions, thoroughly followed this vast criminal network. The agencies that took part in the operation were the Maharashtra forest department, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) authorities, the Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF), the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), among others who collaborated. The chargesheet named 29 main suspects, of which 13 were arrested and taken into magisterial custody when the report was released (35).

Relevance to Money Laundering

The Rajura tiger poaching case, as indicated by information available from the reported investigation, is a key case study demonstrating the monetary magnitude of wildlife trade in India and its built-in connection to money laundering. The fact that a monetary trail of over Rs 7.5 crore has been found indicates that these are not just environmental offenses but profitable criminal operations making a considerable amount of unlawful proceeds (35).

The case, as it has been reported, shows the difficulty of effectively combating the money laundering component of wildlife crime. Even though the major money trail was realized, the investigating authorities had requested the help of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to monitor these money flows. But while the report states that the ED had "yet to give its consent to join the investigation," which reflects a possible delay in dealing with the money laundering aspect. This is consistent with the overall issue covered in your paper on the narrow ambit and successful prosecutions of financial probes in wildlife crime cases in India, even as there are strong legal frameworks such as the PMLA (35).

Harmful Effects of Animal Trafficking

Environmental Security: Illegal wildlife trade presents a major danger to environmental security in two manners. Firstly, it destabilizes ecosystems by inflicting biodiversity decline due to over-exploitation and poaching of wildlife. Secondly, such illegal trade enhances the introduction of invasive species and diseases and thus further disorganizes ecosystems' balance and stability (35).

Economic Impacts: Trafficking of illegal wildlife and domestic animals is frequently intertwined with transnational organized crime, leading to instances of violence and loss of human life, in addition to the detrimental impact on animal populations (UNODC) (36).

Human Health Impacts: Taking live animals out of their natural environments can lead to risks like aggression, harm and the possible spread of diseases to humans. The Eurogroup for Animals reports that about 72 percent of emerging zoonotic diseases - diseases transmitted from animals to humans - originate from wild or free-ranging animals (36).

Nation's Security impact: The illicit trade in wildlife endangers national security. Wildlife product trafficking is currently dominated by organized crime groups operating large-scale global networks, with the proceeds used to finance civil wars and terrorism activities. The illegal wildlife trade is also closely associated with other types of illicit trafficking and money laundering (36).

Social and Economic Development: The illegal wildlife trade poses major obstacles to achieving sustainable social and economic development. The corruption accompanying this trade, as well as the security challenges emanating from violent means employed in acquiring wildlife products, discourages investment and undermines growth in source, transit and demand countries. These factors weaken government efficiency, discourage public participation, erode the rule of law, damage the state's credibility and public trust and hinder the growth of local communities (36).

Strengthening Financial Investigation in Wildlife Crimes

Wildlife trafficking, once a niche concern primarily for environmentalists, has now garnered broader attention due to its interconnectedness with various forms of illicit activities.

In order to address the financial aspects of illegal trade in wildlife, nations must evaluate and comprehend the money laundering risk associated with this offense. They also need to make sure that their laws enable law enforcement agencies to act against the financial activities of wildlife traffickers and initiate comprehensive financial investigations.

Banks can be a central part in halting wildlife trafficking linked to money laundering by issuing a formal, public commitment to having a zero-tolerance policy for illegal wildlife trade. The pledge must not only be for the bank and its subsidiaries but also for all individuals and organizations it does business with, such as clients and suppliers (Sanction Scanner).

Further legislative adjustments need to enhance the functionality of anti-money laundering legislation with regard to illegal wildlife trade-related crimes. They aim to broaden the scope of the laws and bolster enforcement to guarantee effective implementation.

It is essential that all nations regard illegal wildlife trade (IWT) as a money laundering mechanism because the gains from the IWT find their way into the international market through money laundering chains. This identification is essential because IWT can potentially turn into a global threat.

It is the duty of every nation to safeguard vulnerable species and must hold in-depth negotiations with all stakeholders involved. The emphasis must be placed on developing public-private partnerships to properly prevent, detect and break up illegal wildlife trade (IWT). This includes tracking the financial resources that sustain IWT and dismantling the organized crime networks, poachers and traffickers involved in it.

Legislative Measures to Curb Money Laundering in Relation to Animal Trafficking

In any case involving wildlife crime or trafficking, it is imperative to include financial investigation as a fundamental component of the overall investigation process. India has a strong and comprehensive legal and enforcement system that effectively address money laundering carried out by individuals engaged in wildlife crimes.

FIU-INDIA: The Indian Financial Intelligence Unit has the mandate of generating critical financial intelligence on money laundering and terrorism financing for law enforcement agencies. This is achieved by collecting and distributing Suspicious Transaction Reports (STRs), Cash Transaction Reports (CTRs) and Cross Border Wire Transfer Reports (CBWRs) that are filed by financial institutions referred to as Reporting Entities. These intelligence reports are critical in combating money laundering activities conducted by wildlife criminals (37).

The Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs): The international forum of 167 FIUs provides a safe means of sharing financial intelligence and best practices to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. India, as a member of the Egmont Group, should utilize this platform to assist wildlife law enforcement in combating cross-border wildlife trafficking (37).

The Counter Wildlife Trafficking programme of WCS: The program in India works to assist concerned agencies to identify, investi-gate, arrest, prosecute and obtain convictions against criminal syndicates engaged in wildlife trafficking. The program partners with the government to enhance conviction levels and disrupt organized trafficking networks, thus ensuring conservation of species within their habitats. It also serves as a resource, granting officials access to vital knowledge, tools, technology and specialist assistance required in order to effectively combat wildlife crime (37).

TRAFFIC: India took a historic step in 2008 by initiating wildlife conservation training for sniffer dogs. Although the scheme initially managed to train 13 dog squads within four years, it suffered setbacks. But in 2013, the program was re-launched with renewed vigor, resulting in the induction of 25 anti-poaching dog squads, including fresh recruits, in nine Indian states (37). Recently, TRAFFIC India and WWF have supported intensified training for forest professionals and law enforcement agencies to further intensify wildlife protection efforts (37). These programs are conducted in collaboration with various government organizations in India.

The Customs Act, 1962: According to Section 2, 'goods' mean 'currency and negotiable instruments' as well as 'any other movable property.' Section 121 also deals with the confiscation of proceeds arising from the sale of smuggled goods, including contraband relating to wildlife (38).

Wild Life Protection Act, 1972: Chapter VIA of the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), 1972, legitimizes the seizure of property obtained illegally through hunting and the sale of wildlife contraband. Section 58A states that this chapter is only applicable to a person who belongs to one of the following categories:

(a) Any person convicted under this Act and sentenced to three years or more;
(b) Any relative of the person named in clause (a);
(c) Any existing holder of property which was at one time held by a person who comes within clause (a) or (b), except where the existing or any previous holder obtained the property in good faith and for fair value (39).

Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002: Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) is the main law to deal with money laundering as well as financial crimes linked with wildlife trade. Crimes under Sections 9, 17A, 39, 44, 48 and 49B (Section 51 as well) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 are dealt with through Paragraph 6 of the PMLA Schedule. Likewise, offenses under Section 135 of the Customs Act, 1972 are dealt with by Paragraph 12 of the PMLA Schedule. Therefore, any wildlife crime that is enrolled under these provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) or the Customs Act is a predicate offense and can be investigated under the PMLA. Similarly, if a government employee is charged with corruption in wildlife crime or smuggling under Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, they can also be prosecuted under the PMLA. Section 3 of PMLA defines "Money Laundering" as: 'Anyone who attempts directly or indirectly to commit, knowingly helps, knowingly is a party to, or is engaged in any activity in relation to the proceeds of crime and presents it as untainted property shall be guilty of money laundering' (40). “Proceeds of Crime" has been defined in Section 2(1) (u) as any property obtained, directly or indirectly, by any individual in relation to the criminal activity of a scheduled offense or the amount of such property. In the Finance Act of 2015, this definition has been widened to include property outside India and it has further specified that the equivalent value of such property in India shall also be treated as proceeds of crime (40).

Section 4 sets out the "Punishment" for money laundering, that whoever is convicted of money laundering shall be imprisoned for a period of not less than three years, extendable to seven years and in addition, may be fined up to five lakh rupees. The PMLA also provides for attachment and confiscation of property associated with money laundering (40).

Section 5(1) provides an officer of the rank of at least Deputy Director with the power to seize any property that is proceeds of crime or used in committing an offence of money laundering, subject to recording the grounds of the action. The seizure generally occurs after the filing of a Police Report or Charge Sheet and the attachment is effective for 180 days from the date of seizure, subject to confirmation by the Adjudicating Authority. But in situations of utmost urgency, the officer empowered can affix the property even prior to the filing of the Charge Sheet or Complaint by the Law Enforcement Agency (LEA), as provided in the second proviso of Section 5(1) of the Act (41).

The officer who has done the attachment is required to file a complaint with the Adjudicating Authority under Section 6 of the Act within 30 days of the attachment. Then the Adjudicating Authority will send a Show Cause Notice to all concerned parties and give them an opportunity to show their side of the case through legal counsel. If the Adjudicating Authority finds the properties to be associated with money laundering, then it will formalize the Provisional Attachment Order (PAO) by means of a proper order. The PAO would be in operation until the completion of the criminal trial and thereafter be deemed as final when issued with a confiscation order by the Special Court. After formalization of the PAO, the Director or authorized officer would forthwith take possession of the properties. After the termination of the money laundering trial, in case the Special Court convicts the defendant for money laundering, it will direct the confiscation of the properties to the Central Government in accordance with Section 8(5) of the Act (42).

The Smugglers and Foreign Exchange Manipulators (Forfeiture of Property) Act, 1976: This law permits the seizure of assets illicitly acquired by smugglers, including wildlife smugglers and foreign exchange manipulators. The properties subject to seizure are divided as follows:

a) Persons convicted under the Customs Act, 1962;
b) Anyone who is served with a detention order under the Conservation of Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities Act, 1974;
c) Relatives of persons referred to in clauses (a) or (b);
d) Relatives of persons named in clauses (a) or (b);
e) Any present holder (referred to as the present holder) of property previously owned by a person described in clauses (a) or (b), unless the present holder, or any person who held the property between the original owner and the present holder, is or was a good faith transferee for fair consideration (43).

The Indian Forest Act, 1927: The Indian Forest Act of 1927 was enacted to amalgamate and amend then-prevailing forest legislation, including the movement of forest products and levy on timber and other produce. Its chief objective was to control the utilization and transfer of forest produce, ensure sustainable use of forests and consolidate the powers of forest officers for the protection of such natural resources. The Act has been revised over time to deal with new environmental issues and to acknowledge the rights of local communities, attempting to balance ecological conservation with the livelihoods of forest-dependent people (44).

The Biological diversity Act, 2002: The Biological Diversity Act of 2002 was formulated to extend legal assistance to the conservation and sustainable use of India's excellent biological diversity so that the benefits from the use of biological resources and traditional knowledge are equitably shared. It formed biodiversity management committees at the local, state and national levels to manage and control access to these resources with the objective of conservation. The Act also promotes scientific studies and the growth of biodiversity-related industries and protects indigenous knowledge associated with these resources (44).

The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960: The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 was established to protect animals from pain and suffering, as well as to promote their overall welfare. It provides legal steps to stop acts of cruelty, monitors the humane treatment of animals in science and entertainment and establishes criteria for their carriage and living environment. The Act allows officials to intervene in animal abuse cases and seeks to raise public awareness and sensitivity towards animal welfare (45).

The Criminal Procedure Code, 1974: The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) of 1973 is the primary legislation that governs the procedural facets of criminal law in India. It defines the procedure to be adopted at the time of investigation, prosecution and passing of judgment on criminal cases so that justice might be delivered fairly. The CrPC lays down definite guidelines for police procedures, such as arrest, bail process and the collection of evidence, with the aim of safeguarding the accused as well as the victims' rights. It serves to be a comprehensive procedural code for the judiciary and law enforcement agencies all over the country (46).

The Arms Act, 1959: The Arms Act of 1959 governs the regulation and control of firearms and ammunition in India, covering phenomenon such as ownership, manufacturing, sale, transfer, import and export. Its main aim is to prevent the misuse of firearms and maintain public security and safety. The Act classifies weapons based on their use and imposes strict licensing procedures for their legal possession and use. It also outlines punishment for non-conformity and emphasizes the importance of responsible use of guns for preventing crime as well as protecting public order (47).

Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (FEMA): Although the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) primarily governs foreign exchange and cross-border financial transactions, it has been recognized as an important tool in addressing money laundering associated with international wildlife trade, particularly in situations where illegal proceeds are held abroad, repatriated into the country, used for the acquisition of properties or assets, or laundered through export–import fraud. Various scenarios falling under the scope of FEMA have been identified in this context. Instances of unreported foreign exchange arise when proceeds generated from wildlife smuggling are retained in foreign currency without proper reporting or approval from the Reserve Bank of India, thereby constituting a violation. The use of hawala transactions has also been widely observed in facilitating illegal wildlife trade, where funds are transferred to or received from overseas locations through informal, non-banking channels, in contravention of FEMA provisions. Trade-based money laundering through false invoicing, including over- or under-invoicing of endangered species, exotic animals, or animal products, has been identified as a common method, falling within the purview of FEMA as well as being relevant under customs regulations. Furthermore, cases involving failure to repatriate export proceeds have been noted, wherein traffickers falsely claim the export of legitimate animal products but do not bring the earnings back into India, thereby violating FEMA provisions (48).

Judicial Trends on Animal Trafficking Cases with Relation to Money Laundering

Wildlife crime is typically considered a "High Profit and Low Risk" offense, with a very low conviction rate of only 2-3 percent in India. Despite being financially significant, financial investigations into these crimes are limited to only a few cases, highlighting a critical gap in the effective prosecution of wildlife crimes, particularly in terms of addressing money laundering (48).

India has put in place a strong mechanism to tackle financial crimes and money laundering associated with wildlife crime. The Enforcement Directorate has taken a proactive approach by filing Enforcement Case Information Reports (ECIRs) under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) in a number of cases related to wildlife crime, which indicates progress towards mainstreaming financial crime investigations into wildlife crimes (48).

However, the urgent priority is to enhance coordination among Forest Authorities, Police, Customs Authorities and the Enforcement Directorate when handling wildlife crime and trafficking cases. Strong interagency cooperation is necessary to create strong cases addressing the wildlife crimes and the money laundering that is involved. Despite the over 70,000 pending wildlife crime cases in courts, Enforcement Cases under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act are limited to only a few cases. It presents the deficiency of prioritization and prosecution in focusing on financial features of the crimes of wildlife (48).

Till now, just one case of wildlife crime (the Surajbhan Case) has been successfully convicted under the PMLA, with the accused being sentenced to four years in prison and paying a fine of Rs. 10,000. The Court also ordered the forfeiture of Rs. 52.7 lakhs that the Enforcement Directorate had seized during the investigation of this case. Although this is conviction is important, it represents the infrequency of such convictions and the continuing need for more effective enforcement of money laundering statutes in wildlife cases (48).

In summary, India possesses the legal instruments and some enforcement measures to address money laundering associated with animal trafficking, judicial trends show low convictions in the overall cases of wildlife crime, a huge backlog of cases in progress and modest success in prosecuting the money laundering component.

Conclusion

Animal trafficking has been identified as a major form of transnational organized crime that generates billions of dollars in illicit revenue annually, primarily through the exploitation of endangered species for purposes such as traditional medicine, exotic pets, trophies and ornamental use. Beyond its environmental and conservation implications, it has been established that a significant yet often underemphasized dimension of this crime is money laundering, through which the origin and ownership of illegal proceeds are concealed. Various laundering techniques, including trade-based money laundering, cash smuggling, shell companies and the use of offshore financial systems, have been employed to legitimize illicit gains. Vulnerabilities within both financial and non-financial sectors, such as banking institutions, money service businesses and digital platforms, have been systematically exploited, thereby undermining the integrity of the global financial system.

This study contributes to the existing literature by re-conceptualizing wildlife trafficking not only as an environmental crime but also as a financial crime, particularly within the Indian context. It highlights the interconnected nature of illegal wildlife trade and financial crimes, while drawing attention to institutional gaps, weak enforcement of financial investigations and the limited integration of anti-money laundering frameworks in wildlife crime control. The findings indicate that the consequences of such activities extend beyond biodiversity loss to include threats to public health through zoonotic disease transmission, increased corruption and potential links to other forms of organized crime and security risks.

However, certain limitations have been identified in the study, particularly the reliance on secondary data and the limited availability of publicly accessible financial intelligence related to wildlife crime. These constraints may restrict the depth of empirical validation of financial flows and laundering mechanisms. Future research should therefore focus on empirical investigations, including case-based financial analysis, the role of emerging technologies in facilitating illicit financial flows and comparative studies across jurisdictions to better understand global enforcement challenges.

In light of these findings, it is emphasized that effective responses must extend beyond traditional conservation approaches to include robust financial investigations, enhanced inter-agency coordination and stronger international cooperation. Greater awareness and capacity-building within financial institutions and the private sector are also required to detect and report suspicious transactions linked to wildlife crime. Enforcement strategies should be directed not only at poachers and traffickers but also at the financial enablers who sustain these networks. Addressing the financial dimension of wildlife trafficking is therefore essential for disrupting organized criminal structures and ensuring long-term environmental and economic security.

Abbreviations

AML: Anti-Money Laundering, ED: Enforcement Directorate, FATF: Financial Action Task Force, FEMA: Foreign Exchange Management Act, FIU-IND: Financial Intelligence Unit – India, IWT: Illegal Wildlife Trade, NTCA: National Tiger Conservation Authority, PMLA: Prevention of Money Laundering Act, UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, WCCB: Wildlife Crime Control Bureau.

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Author Contributions

Neha Rai: conceptualization, study design, literature review, data collection, legal and policy analysis, selection and interpretation of case studies, writing - original draft, revision, final draft, Chander Mohan Gupta: academic guidance, supervision, critical review of the manuscript, refinement of the research framework.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this paper.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly accessible sources, including academic journals, government publications, international organization reports, legal statutes and reputable news sources. All relevant sources have been appropriately cited in the reference section. No new datasets were generated during the current study.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance Process

The author declares that generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were used only for language refinement, grammar checking and structural clarity during the preparation of this manuscript. No AI tool was used for generating original research content, legal analysis, interpretation of data, or conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the content presented in this paper.

Ethics Approval

This study is based entirely on secondary data, including publicly available literature, legal texts, case law, institutional reports and policy documents. No primary data involving human participants, animals, or confidential information was collected. Therefore, ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required for this research.

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