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Hosted by Dr Roman Carrasco

Motivations and the illegal international trade in wildlife



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E.J. Milner-Gulland is the Tasso Leventis Professor of Biodiversity at the University of Oxford (Zoology Department). Before that, she was Professor of Conservation Science at Imperial College London for 15 years, having held previous positions in Resource Economics and Mathematical Ecology at Oxford, Imperial and Warwick Universities. Her first degree was in Pure and Applied Biology at Oxford, and her PhD at Imperial College was on the exploitation of elephants, rhinos and saiga antelopes for trade.

E.J. has a particular interest in developing and applying methods for understanding, predicting, and influencing human behaviour in the context of local resource use in developing countries. She also works on the illegal trade in wildlife and on designing, monitoring and evaluating conservation interventions in order to improve their effectiveness. E.J. received the Marsh Award for Conservation Science from ZSL in 2001, and the Marsh Award for Ecology from the British Ecological Society in 2011, in recognition of her achievements in conservation. In 2014 she was awarded a Pew Marine Fellowship to carry out research on the use of novel approaches to addressing marine bycatch.

EJ's research group is strongly interdisciplinary and has a wide range of research interests within conservation science. Her ethos is to ensure that all the research that she does is addressing issues identified by practitioners, and is carried out collaboratively with end-users. She also has strong interests in capacity building of conservation scientists in the developing world, and in developing conservation interventions which are both effective at conserving biodiversity and improve the lives of local people in the face of external pressures such as climate change, environmental destruction and social and political uncertainty.

The illegal international trade in wildlife is now of major concern to governments as well as conservationists, with 46 governments signing up to the 2014 London Declaration committing to tackle the issue at the highest level. Disrupting the criminal trade networks through which wildlife flows is critical to reducing the flow of illegal wildlife, and is the province of law enforcement agencies. However, at each end of the chain are individuals whose actions may be influenceable by conservationists, whose motivations for hunting or consuming wildlife products need to be understood in order for interventions to be successful. In this talk I highlight new research, using methods from behavioural economics and marketing, which aims to tease apart the factors driving behaviour, and explore ways to change it. My first case study comes from Uganda, where we use indirect questioning methods, choice experiments and scenario analyses to explore the reasons behind decisions to hunt in protected areas. Here, bushmeat for local sale is the primary commodity, and products destined for international markets (like ivory) are generally opportunistic byproducts. Promising interventions to change behaviour include diverting existing benefit-sharing funding towards human wildlife conflict mitigation. At the other end of the chain, consumers in south-east Asia have diverse relationships with wildlife products, including as medicine and status symbols. Using a case study of ivory and rhino horn in Viet Nam, we explore how people relate to wildlife products as luxury goods, their emotional attachment to horn and ivory compared to other luxury products. In our sample, horn and ivory are viewed mostly with indifference and associated with wealth and men. I suggest how these approaches to exploring motivations can support the development of effective, well-targeted conservation interventions.