



For sale: a bird market in Indonesia. Peter Nijenhuis / flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

Five reasons people buy illegal wildlife products – and how to stop them

September 3, 2020 3.18pm BST

A British tourist on a tropical beach poses for a photo with a cute monkey-like animal. A Vietnamese man buys some rhino-horn powder and brags to his friends about its potency. An orchid collector admires their latest purchase, a stunning bright-pink flower, without worrying too much about where it came from.

These are very three different people, from different parts of the world. But what they all have in common is they are driving – sometimes unwittingly, often not – the illegal wildlife trade. This trade is one of the largest and most lucrative international crimes and poses a major danger to both wild populations and our own health. The complexity of the trade, which involves thousands of species sold for diverse purposes worldwide, can be a barrier to conservationists trying to design ways to address it. For example, reducing demand is vital, but this requires understanding why different consumers buy what they buy.

In our latest academic research, now published in the journal *Conservation Biology*, we have developed a classification of the common motivations behind the purchase of wildlife products. We found that, even in the midst of this complexity, wildlife consumers are driven by five overarching motivations:

1. Practical needs

Some wildlife consumers are motivated by everyday purposes.

Authors



Laura Thomas-Walters

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Stirling



Amy Hinsley

Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford



Diogo Verissimo

Research Fellow in Conservation Marketing, University of Oxford

Can include: Consuming wildlife for food or medicine; using wild-collected materials for building; using animals for labour; using wood or other plant material for fuel.

For example: Dried seahorses are used to treat a variety of ailments in China and Taiwan, including sexual dysfunction, difficult childbirth and arthritis.



Dried seahorses for sale in Hong Kong. Todd Mecklen / flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

Potential solution: Engage the traditional-medicine community to establish a voluntary code of conduct that focuses on sustainable trade, such as refusing to import small or pregnant seahorses.

2. Money

Some wildlife consumers are motivated by financial gain.

Can include: Buying a wildlife product to profit from it, either immediately or as an investment for the future.

For example: Vendors in Turkey and other tourist destinations use slow lorises as props in photo opportunities.



Slow Lorises are native to Southeast Asia but have been exported around the world. NAS CREATIVES / shutterstock

Potential solution: Increase legal enforcement and sanction people caught peddling endangered wildlife. For instance, after the pop star Rihanna tweeted a selfie with a slow loris while on holiday in Thailand, local police raided a group of wildlife touts and made two arrests.

3. Social relationships

Some wildlife consumers are motivated by social relationships.

Can include: Trying to improve your social reputation; consuming due to pressure from family and friends; strengthening relationships with other people.

For example: Rich businessmen in Vietnam buy expensive, illegal rhino horn to enhance their status among colleagues and clients.

Potential solution: A campaign to persuade businessmen that success comes from within, that they do not need to rely on external products to impress others. (This is actually underway, see the ongoing Chi Campaign run by the NGOs Save The Rhino and TRAFFIC.)

4. The experience

Some wildlife consumers are motivated by pleasure, novelty, or curiosity.

Can include: Using wildlife products as part of a leisure activity; pleasing the senses with things that look, smell or feel nice.

For example: Hobbyist orchid collectors in China value their beauty and care little if the plants have been illegally supplied from the wild. Consumer research shows that **colourfulness** is a major motivator.

Potential solution: Breed legal, cultivated orchids to be more attractive to consumers (in this case, to be more colourful), thereby reducing the incentive to buy wild ones.

5. Spirituality

Some wildlife consumers are motivated by spiritual needs, or the need to bring protection, luck, or fortune in business and life.

Can include: Using wildlife products to enhance spiritual wellbeing; religious practices; performing rituals or traditions.

For example: **Lansan tree resin** is used to make incense for religious services in the Caribbean island of St Lucia. Overexploitation for resin means the tree is disappearing from the few Caribbean islands that make up its native range.

Potential solution: Work with harvesters to develop sustainable harvesting techniques.

Both the products and the people involved in the wildlife trade are incredibly diverse, and consumers cannot always be pigeonholed into one neat category. In Indonesia, for example, songbirds are kept as pets. They are highly valued for their beauty and singing ability, and owners enter them into songbird competitions in the hope of winning both social status and cash prizes. In certain parts of Indonesia, the ownership of a songbird is also considered a rite of passage for young men.

People who buy songbirds may care about any or all of these reasons. However, using **economic modelling techniques** conservationists can discover which motivations are the most pressing and design effective interventions to halt this trade. By understanding what drives people to buy wild species, we can figure out how best to stop them.



An orchid enthusiast in China admires a dendrobium. Amy Hinsley, Author provided