

Chair Huffman Opening Statement
Wildlife Trafficking Hearing
April 27, 2021

This hearing is being held virtually today because we find ourselves still battling a global pandemic. A pandemic that stems from zoonotic disease and the trade in wildlife.

Here at the Natural Resources Committee, we have held numerous hearings and worked on several bills to address the wildlife trade and trafficking. We know that wildlife trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar transnational criminal activity, and it's the fourth most profitable type of transnational crime.

Today is the first time that we will be looking at how complicit online social media platforms, like Facebook, enable these harmful and illicit practices.

In this subcommittee, we often talk about how conservation of species and their habitats is critical for biodiversity as well as the communities that depend on these ecosystems. But across the globe, there are few remaining places where humans have not impacted wildlife. There are countless human-related threats to species, including habitat destruction, industrial and commercial activities, pollution, disease, and climate change impacts. Illegal poaching, transit, trade, and sale of animals by individual criminals is yet another serious threat to biodiversity.

It is especially concerning that these individuals and their crimes are no longer confined to brick-and-mortar markets or the dark web. These illegal transactions are now almost exclusively taking place out in the open on virtual marketplaces, most notably through social media platforms like Facebook.

Social media companies and the servers predominantly responsible for hosting this illegal activity are based in the United States. As criminals around the globe increase their use of these platforms to attract buyers and facilitate their operations, we must hold these companies accountable. The largely unregulated virtual marketplace poses extraordinary challenges for combating illegal actions online. Effective enforcement actions will require global collaboration of private interests.

The illegal trade of wildlife and wildlife products contributes to a shockingly lucrative crime economy, estimated to be worth up to \$23 billion per year over the past decade. This kind of revenue, and the trafficking systems it creates, undermines security in the United States and threatens stability of the entire global geopolitical structure. It has destabilized local communities and national governments by exacerbating corruption and reducing ecotourism revenue.

In addition, several organized crime syndicates, insurgent groups, foreign military units, and even terrorist groups have been linked to wildlife trafficking. Legal loopholes, jurisdictional gaps, and online anonymity allow them to operate with impunity. They use social media to create content, groups, pages, or forums to market their illicit goods and easily connect to consumers drawn to their content by algorithms.

A 2016 report by TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring network, noted that Facebook Inc. is a primary facilitator of wildlife and natural resource trafficking. Facebook Inc. operates Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Novi. Upwards of 70 percent of illegal cheetah trade occurs via Instagram alone. Criminals also capitalize on loopholes, like Facebook Groups and Pages that allow a layer of protection and control for group Administrators. As you can imagine, we have a lot of questions for Facebook, but they declined our invitation to testify.

In 2018, Chair Grijalva and I wrote a letter to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission urging them to investigate a complaint regarding Facebook's failure to disclose to its shareholders the illegal wildlife trafficking that continues to occur on their site. In a subsequent 2018 letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Chair Grijalva reiterated concerns that sites owned by Facebook are primary enablers of wildlife trafficking crimes.

Despite joining the Global Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online - an agreement between technology, e-commerce, and social media companies to shutdown online marketplaces for wildlife traffickers - wildlife and natural resource trafficking has since accelerated on the platform.

Regardless of Facebook Inc.'s PR claims that their Community Agreement prohibits wildlife trafficking on its platforms, benchmark failures continue at every turn. For example, the sale of ivory products on Facebook has increased by nearly 50 percent since the 2016 report. Since 2018, wildlife trade on Facebook has increased in every country within Southeast Asia, a major hub of this illegal activity. Similarly, wildlife trafficking for many endangered species has also increased on Facebook since 2018.

The problems don't stop there. A recent BBC investigation revealed that land-grabbers are openly selling illegally-taken parcels of the Amazon rainforest, including public and Indigenous lands, on Facebook Marketplace. When confronted about the matter, Facebook issued a statement asserting they will not take independent action to halt the trade of Amazon rainforest on its platforms. Even more alarming, Facebook has allowed the sale of wildlife linked to COVID-19 and other zoonotic diseases, highlighting additional public health consequences of their failure to act.

The internet has made a previously difficult task increasingly more complex, but it is our job in Congress to tackle these challenges and I hope this hearing will be an important step in the fight against illegal wildlife trafficking in the online marketplace. I look forward to the testimony today and hope that my Republican colleagues will work with me to tackle these issues.