

Public Attitudes on
WILDLIFE CRIME
in **HONG KONG**

SURVEY

November 2020



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INTRODUCTION

ADM Capital Foundation (ADMCF) commissioned the Hong Kong Public Opinion Program (HKPOP)¹ to conduct a public opinion survey of Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong citizens aged 18 or above, to gauge people's understanding and attitudes towards wildlife crime including current government policies and penalties.

Based on a random telephone survey with 1,008 respondents the following provides some of the key

responses. The full report can be viewed at <https://www.admcf.org/research-reports/public-survey-on-wildlife-crime-in-hong-kong/>.

The survey indicates that despite Hong Kong being a wildlife trafficking hub, residents are largely unaware, yet when informed believe the situation to be unacceptable, under policed and under investigated.

WILDLIFE CRIME IN HONG KONG

In recent years wildlife trafficking has reached unprecedented levels and is one of the key drivers of species extinctions globally.

Wildlife crime has been recognized at a global level by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the World Bank, United Nations Environment, Interpol, as well as by multiple source and importing countries across the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further thrown the spotlight on the legal and illegal wildlife trade, which is thought to be the source of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

Hong Kong, despite its small size with a population of just 7.5 million, is among the busiest airport passenger, air cargo and shipping ports in the world. Its borders with China provide passage for tens of millions arriving by foot, car, train and bus, annually.

It should then be of little surprise that the city is also a hub for the illegal trade in wildlife, both of body parts and live animals.

WILDLIFE CRIME, A DRIVER FOR SPECIES EXTINCTION

Facts: Over the last 100 years, 543 species are known to have been lost, a rate of loss that would normally take 10,000 years to occur*.

“The ongoing sixth mass extinction may be the most serious environmental threat to the persistence of civilization, because it is irreversible”*

The illegal wildlife trade is valued at US\$7-23billion annually and is the world's fourth-largest criminal enterprise after drug smuggling, counterfeiting and human trafficking.

Source:

* Ceballos, G. *et al* (2020) Vertebrates on the brink as indicators of biological annihilation and the sixth mass extinction, *PNAS*, 117(24): 13596-13602

<https://www.pnas.org/content/117/24/13596>

¹ Formerly known as the Public Opinion Programme at The University of Hong Kong, now under the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI)

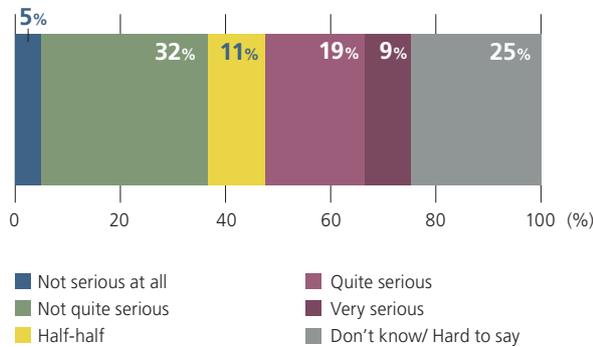
UNAWARE

The survey began by asking whether the respondents have heard of the term “wildlife crime” [野生物種罪行]. Results revealed that only 14% had. Of these, males as well as those of age 50-59 and 70 or above demonstrated significantly higher awareness of the term.

Just over a third of respondents thought the wildlife crime situation in Hong Kong was not serious (37%) while slightly more than a quarter thought the opposite (27%) and another quarter could not give a definite answer.

The majority (57%) of respondents disagreed that Hong Kong was a major hub for wildlife trafficking. Only 18% showed agreement and 20% did not have a view.

How serious do you think the wildlife crime situation is in Hong Kong?



Note: For all charts, figures have been rounded up to the nearest integer after considering the second decimal place, and because of the rounding procedure, the total of some figures may not add up to 100%.

WILDLIFE CRIME IN HONG KONG

Facts: From 2015-2019, endangered wildlife seized by Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department:

1,935
tonnes
plants and
animals
products

Valued
at over
HK\$
570
million

18,123
endangered
live animals
seized

Hong Kong has some of the most significant wildlife seizures in the world by volume e.g. 25% of global pangolin scale seizures occurred in Hong Kong from 2014-2018.

UNACCEPTABLE

The survey indicated that almost unilaterally, activities associated with wildlife crime were deemed unacceptable, with animal cruelty and organized crime being the most egregious. These aspects were followed closely by poaching of wild animals, illegal trading/possession of animals and money laundering.

Meanwhile, respondents in general thought that the government or related authorities should bear the biggest responsibilities in tackling wildlife crime in Hong Kong, namely “Customs & Excise Department” (71%), “Agriculture, Fisheries, and Conservation Department” (70%) and then “Government as a whole (including all departments and authorities)” (56%).

CRUELTY

Facts: Live animals that are trafficked are often wild-captured, transported in horrendous conditions and live a life of misery in captivity, if they survive.

African grey parrot’s mortality rate is 66% when transported via plane. The birds are often stuffed into small dirty containers, unable to breath. Wild populations have also declined up to 99% in some areas.*

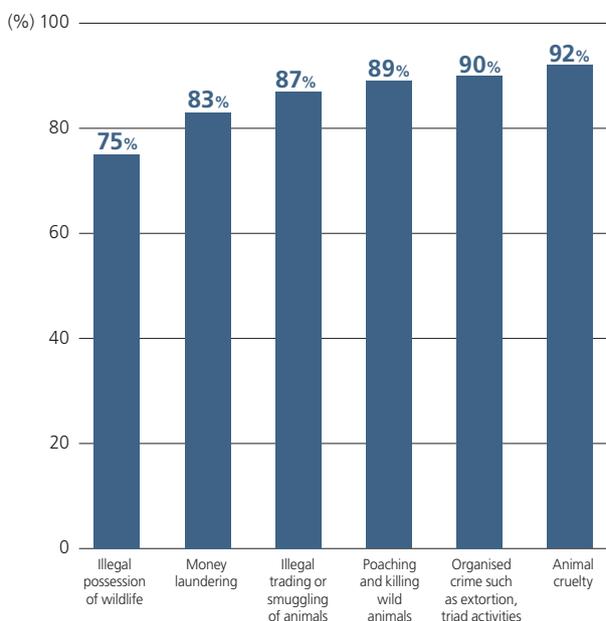
Pangolins transported live are often bound in tight mesh nets and force fed water, stones and soil to increase their weight for sale. They often suffer a slow and painful death as a result.**

Source:

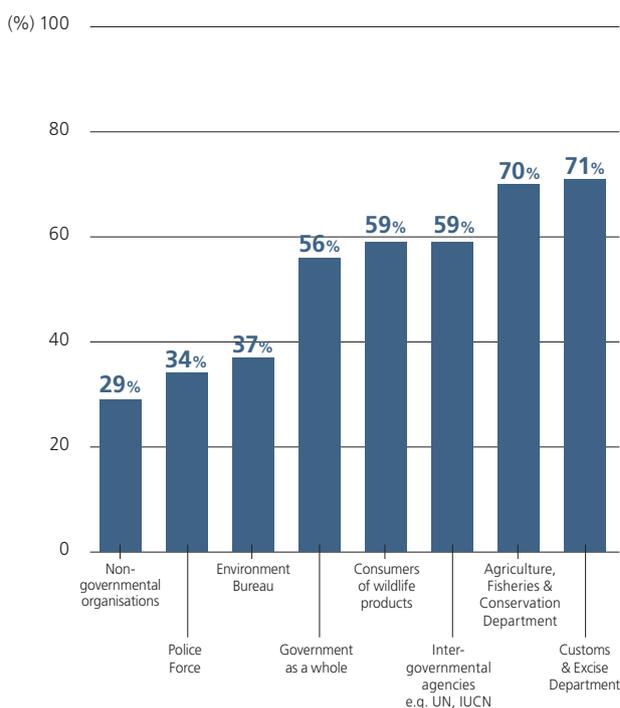
* World Animal Protection (2019) Wild at heart: The cruelty of the exotic pet trade. London, UK.

**Personal communication 2019

Which of the following do you think are most unacceptable in Hong Kong?



Which of the following should bear the biggest responsibilities in tackling wildlife crime in Hong Kong?



UNDER POLICED AND UNDER INVESTIGATED

Having been informed that the maximum penalty for wildlife trafficking offences was ten years imprisonment and a fine of ten million Hong Kong dollars (if a person infringes the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance in Hong Kong), 63% of the respondents believed that the current punishment was just right, 21% thought it was too strict and 11% considered it too lenient.

These penalties were introduced by the Hong Kong government in May 2018 and clearly reflect the serious nature of wildlife crime. In the government’s own words, to:

provide a sufficiently strong deterrent against illicit wildlife trade, and to send a clear signal to the international and local communities that the Government is committed to the protection of endangered species and to combating endangered species smuggling²

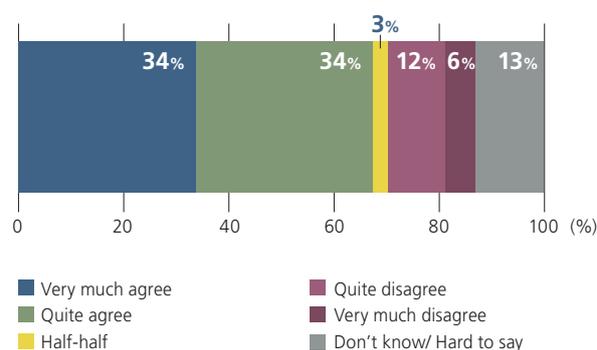
Importantly, however, over two-thirds of the respondents (68%) agreed with the view that wildlife crime in Hong Kong is under-policed and under investigated.

PROSECUTIONS

Facts: From May 2018 to October 2020, a review of 121 individuals prosecuted for engaging in the illegal wildlife trade revealed that the majority of defendants prosecuted in Hong Kong have been:

- Citizens of Mainland China
- First-time offenders
- Low-wage workers or unemployed
- Committed the offence as a favour to friends or employers

Hong Kong is under policed and under investigated



² Paragraph 48, Report of the Bills Committee on Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants (Amendment) Bill 2017 (LC Paper No. CB(1)508/17-18) dated 23 January 2018, at <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr16-17/english/bc/bc06/reports/bc0620180131cb1-508-e.pdf>

And

LCQ22: Secretary for Food and Health, response to Legislator Elisabeth Quat question: Prohibiting the trade of products containing ingredients from bear bile - (May 30 2018)

WILDLIFE CRIME SHOULD BE REGARDED AS ORGANISED AND SERIOUS

The majority of respondents, 73% agreed that wildlife smuggling should also be regarded as organized and serious crime in Hong Kong.

At the same time, 66% and 77% thought the impact of wildlife crime to the natural environment was big in “3 to 5 years” and “10 to 20 years” correspondingly. Those of age 18-39 were significantly more likely to agree with this view.

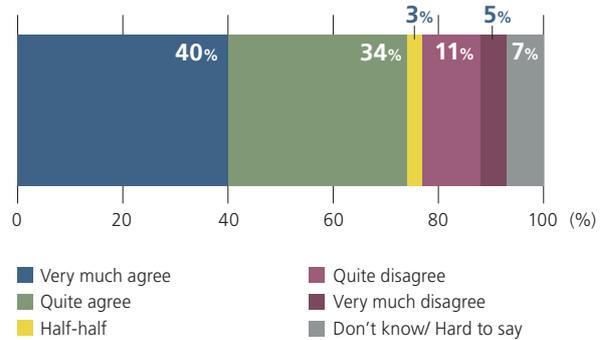
SERIOUS AND ORGANISED WILDLIFE CRIME

Facts: Hong Kong has been repeatedly exploited and is perceived as a key hub in the operations of multiple transnational criminal groups, including but not limited to the:

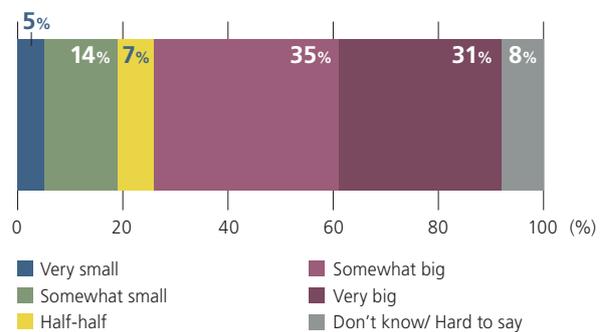
- Zhao Wei Transnational Criminal Organisation that is headquartered in Hong Kong and is being sanctioned by the USA for human, drug and wildlife trafficking
- Syndicates headed by Li Zhifei and Graham Chen that trafficked rhino and elephant products into China via Hong Kong over multiple years

The Hong Kong Government has acknowledged the exploitation of the city by “gangers” and “cross-border smuggling syndicate[s]” who “take advantage of our extensive logistic network”.

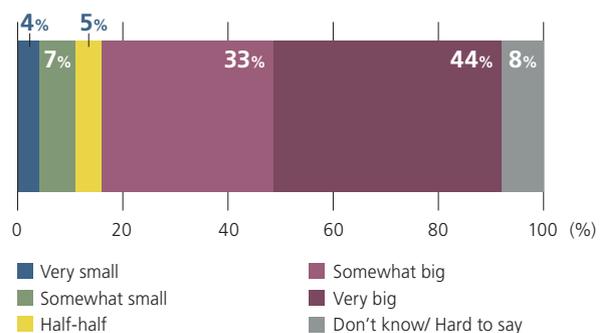
Wildlife smuggling should be regarded as organized and serious crime in Hong Kong



Impact of wildlife crime to the natural environment in 3 to 5 years (short-term)



Impact of wildlife crime to the natural environment in 10 to 20 years (long-term)



LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR WILDLIFE PROTECTION SHOULD BE STRENGTHENED

This survey demonstrated that Hong Kong people, in general, have limited or unilateral understanding of wildlife crime, despite the significant role that Hong Kong plays on a global scale, as a wildlife trafficking hub. This suggests that there is insufficient education and information provided to the community on the issue.

Combatting wildlife crime is important for a number of reasons. Not only is it a driver of wildlife extinctions globally, it involves a multitude of criminal activities including poaching, money laundering, trafficking, cruelty, illegal trading and its perpetrators have been associated with other criminal enterprises such as human and drug trafficking. It results in loss of biodiversity, loss of government revenues as well as loss of human life and has been associated with the transference of zoonotic disease such as Ebola and SARS-CoV.

When asked about the wildlife crime situation in Hong Kong, public views were split, pointing to a lack of awareness and information. No majority view was obtained on whether wildlife crime in Hong Kong was serious and whether it contributed to the global wildlife extinction crisis. Yet, over half of the sample disagreed that Hong Kong was a major hub for wildlife trafficking, despite the global recognition of Hong Kong's role in the illegal trade.

However, when examples of wildlife crimes were mentioned, such as wildlife smuggling, most respondents expressed intolerance towards the many facets of such crimes, including cruelty and the organised nature of the criminality.

Most respondents thought the responsibilities in tackling wildlife crime in Hong Kong lie in the hands of various government authorities such as Customs & Excise Department, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Conservation Department, as well as the government as a whole.

Importantly, the majority were of the view that wildlife crime in Hong Kong was under policed and under investigated. It's impact to the natural environment was big, no matter short-term or long-term, and wildlife trafficking should be treated as organized and serious crime.

Respondents leaned heavily towards the view that regulation and law enforcement for wildlife protection should be strengthened.