THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
WEBINAR

CHINA'S ROLE IN POACHING AND WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING IN MEXICO

Washington, D.C.
Tuesday, March 29, 2022

PARTICIPANTS:

MODERATOR: DINA FINE MARON
Senior Wildlife Crime Investigative Reporter
National Geographic

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN
Senior Fellow and Director, Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors
The Brookings Institution

ADRIAN REUTER
Senior Advisor, Illegal Wildlife Trade for Latin America and the Caribbean
Wildlife Conservation Society

VALERIA TOWNS
Professor
Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. MARON: Good morning everyone, and thanks for joining us today. My name is Dina Fine Maron, I'm a wildlife crime investigative reporter at National Geographic, based in Washington, D.C. And we've here today to talk about China linked wildlife crime in Mexico and how Mexican cartels are increasingly moving into the wildlife crime space.

Among other things today we're going to talk about how organized crime groups are using legal seafood operations as a cover for an illegal activity, and how China is increasingly becoming a driving force in these crimes in the country.

With me today are three panelists to get into that. First up we're going to have Vanda Felbab-Brown. She's a senior fellow at the Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, and director of the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors at the Brookings Institution. She's joining us from the UK today. And she's the author of the report that's being launched this week in connection with this event. The report is now on the Brookings.edu website if you want to check it out.

Adrian Reuter, a senior advisor on illegal wildlife trade for Latin American and the Caribbean from the Wildlife Conservation Society, is joining us from Mexico City.

And Valeria Towns, a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico is joining us from San Felipe. So, we're lucky to have people from near and far talking with us today.

Just a little bit of housekeeping. We have 90 minutes today, so roughly the first hour will be a discussion amongst our experts, then we'll address questions that came in both before today's event as well as those that might strike you all today as you're listening to the panelists. Feel free to follow along on Twitter or submit questions there at #NonstateArmedActors. Again, that's #NonstateArmedActors. Or you can email Events@Brookings.edu.

I think we should open up today, we're going to have a little overview from Vanda about the report since I'm sure that not that many of you have read it yet since it just

posted yesterday on the website. Vanda's going to briefly walk us through the main findings of her report, and then we'll dive in to talk about it.

And with that, Vanda, take it away.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, Dina, and thank you Adrian and Valeria for joining us, as well as to the audience.

So, the report on China and Mexico wildlife trafficking is part of a Brookings project on China's role in variety of illegal economies, including drugs, human trafficking. And is the first in a series of reports on China and wildlife trafficking and the evolution of that elicit economy, as well as enforcement in the last three, four years. So more of those reports will come out later in the summer about both on enforcement of wildlife trafficking issues within China and with respect to other regions.

But the reason that we decided to start with the China-Mexico wildlife trafficking report and the wildlife aspect of the work and of the project is because it is the one that is least known. And increasingly poses significant threats to biodiversity in Mexico for a variety of reasons. One being that not that many people are actually looking, studying that issue.

The other being that law enforcement regarding environmental regulations in Mexico struggles with many issues. It tends to be deeply underfunded, lacks resources, lacks personnel, often lacks mandate. This has been the case in Mexico for a long amount of time, but it's also become compounded during the administration of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador that's further reduced budgets significantly.

And a third element why it's significant to think about wildlife trafficking in Mexico and the connections to China is because of the role of organized crime groups. So there is a lot of debate and conversation in the conservation field about the intersections between drug cartels and bribes of other illegal economies of poaching and wildlife trafficking.

And sometimes, quite often in fact, those connections are tenuous and

perhaps can be overstated. While in the Mexican case they are in fact very real and becoming significantly enlarged as we are speaking because criminal groups in Mexico are so extraordinarily potent and are increasingly muscling their way in a variety of not just illegal economies, but also legal economies, including legal fisheries.

So in the report I examine the different forms of poaching and illegal harvesting that takes place in Mexico and is supplied to China. We have to acknowledge that Mexico is hardly, that China is hardly the only destination for animals and plants that are illegally harvested in Mexico. The United States has long been a very significant destination for those products, as are markets in Central America. And there is a robust market for illegal harvested plants and animals within Mexico itself that doesn't cross the border.

But as we will hear from Adrian and Valeria, when China enters a new space in terms of sourcing of natural resources, we often see significant expansion of harvesting and very quickly reach devastating and often unsustainable levels.

And this isn't the case of Mexico happening very much in a variety of marine species, sea cucumber and abalone being some prominent examples, as well as shark, the finning of which is prohibited in Mexico but shark fins from Mexico are heading to China. It's happening in reptiles, including very rare turtles that are being harvested in Mexico and illegally sent to China. It's happening in different species, hardwood such as Rosewood from the southern part of the countries.

And increasingly a very significant development because of the connection between Chinese traders and Chinese destination markets and Mexican drug trafficking groups, wildlife commodities are being used as payment for precursor for narcotic drugs, such as fentanyl precursors and methamphetamine precursors. And this is really serious and really dangerous.

The reason why criminal groups do so is because they are seeking to avoid anti-money laundering controls in the U.S. and Mexican system. And in China traders often seek to evade capital controls in China that would limit on how much money Chinese

citizens can take out of the country on any year, which is the equivalent of $50,000.

So instead of paying for precursor chemicals for fentanyl and methamphetamine in dollars, pesos, or rambini, the way that cartels are getting around that is starting to pay in wildlife. And the total size of wildlife trafficking in Mexico is hard to estimate but it's very likely that we are looking at tens of millions of dollars per year, which you might be surprised to know is probably about of what criminal groups also owe for precursor chemicals.

That doesn't mean that wildlife barter will displace all other forms of money laundering and payment and other trade-based money laundering and value transfer along various illicit economies, but because it's being used to pay for precursors, that generates significant temptation on the part of criminal groups in Mexico to be sourcing wider and wider array of marine and terrestrial species of plants and animals to pay for precursors. And that's in the context of very poor environmental protection, very poor government resourcing for the enforcement of wildlife laws, we can really see devastating consequences very rapidly in Mexico.

Let me leave it there for the opening, and look forward very much to a conversation with Valeria and Adrian and you, Dina, as well as our audience.

MS. MARON: Thank you so much, Vanda, that was a really great overview, and interesting. I just wanted to point out as well that the methodology for your report is really interesting since Vanda interviewed 73 people, right, current and former officials, environmental group, fishers, and others to all the different layers in Mexico, China, the U.S. and elsewhere, to get this kind of information. And she talked about how the cartels have moved into controlling large companies, they have fishing fleets to process the high value species like scallops and lobsters, but also, and I think this is interesting for a lay person audiences as well, that the cartels are forcing restaurants, including those that cater international tourists, to buy their fish exclusively. So really just touching a lot of different areas there.

Just diving in, Valeria, I was wondering, can you comment also on the broader context of wildlife crime in Mexico? Who's driving most of this demand on the ground in Mexico, and what species are people looking for?

MS. TOWNS: Yeah. Well thank you very much. Hi everybody. Thank you, Vanda, for inviting me to be part of this panel. I'm happy to share with you, Adrian and Dina.

As Vanda said, it is important to mention that there is a wide domestic consumption of wildlife in Mexico. We actually traditionally sort of own Macaws and parrots in our houses, and it's really common to find people wearing boots and belts and stuff made out of reptile, different reptile skins and many other different species of wildlife. So there is an important domestic consumption, even wildlife pets, you know. It is common in Mexican communities that people find when they are hunting or something a type of any species and they take it home and then sometimes they don't even know what to do with them.

When I was working in the rain forest there were people having white peccaries and moneys. And so it's really common in Mexico to have interaction, especially in the communities that live near wildlife areas, it is pretty common to have wildlife as mascots. But also there are, as Vanda mentioned, important markets in Mexico City, for example, in Medical and Sonora, and some other cities in San Portia and some spots even in the highways where you get to buy wildlife, mainly parrots for example. And so it was like really common to have, in our culture, to have a grandmother who has a parrot that has been living with her for 17 years or so. And well of course a lot of them are illegal.

And there is also this other market use for witchcraft and santeria and all of this other like magical practices where wildlife is important, similar probably to what happens in China with traditional Chinese medicine.

MS. MARON: Is most of this demand local or is it the U.S. or is it international?

MS. TOWNS: Well most of these I am I'm talking about is local. And then there is the other like trade or international demand. Part of it goes to the U.S., as Vanda

mentioned, mainly birds and reptiles like for collectionists, sometimes even butterflies and other species that are threatened and that are very important for collectionists to have in their collections.

And of course there is also these Chinese trade that includes, but it's not only directed to totoaba. Totoaba has been very important, very highlighted. But we saw during the 2016, 2019 to 2017 or so, how many rain forests in areas in Chiapas were depleted of Rosewood. Like we got to see trucks and trucks of Rosewood going out of the ejidos, going out of the communities and going to the Chinese market, and nobody talked about it. It was like we all knew it was happening but we didn't know how to manage the situation. And there was like, I can say that 90 percent of the Rosewood present in those areas is gone. And there is a clear demand of that Rosewood from the Calakmul area too. And we still don't really know what's happening behind those networks of wildlife and demand that is going to China.

We also have all of these scarlet Macaw traffic. We don't really know where it's going to, where are the routes that it's taking. But we are pretty sure and we see on the field that every year at least 80 percent of the population is poached. So, yes, there are some other like markets and demands that we don't really understand, but we know are happening.

MS. MARON: Thank you, Valeria, that's so interesting and striking, good context. Adrian, can you walk us through how that compares to what's happening in Latin America more broadly, it's a good snapshot of Mexico. Thanks.

MR. REUTER: Sure. Sure. And before doing that I would just like to add to what Valeria said, which I think it's, I completely agree with, is that in Mexico over the past 10 to 20 years that has also been an increase in the interest of keeping some exotic pets that are smaller, easier to keep than the traditional pets. Consequently, we have seen an increase in the trade of reptiles, amphibians, even insects, insects that you find in markets, in pet stores, etcetera.

And we didn't just to see that so often, like 20, 30 years ago, but now it has been increasing. And partly due to more people living in smaller spaces, in big cities, and without the capacity of keeping larger pets or traditional pets.

And the other point I wanted to make is that, yes, timber is certainly a very big issue that is happening in Mexico where not that much attention is being paid to. And that we are also getting timber from neighboring countries and funneled through Mexico for international markets.

So Mexico must be considered not only a source and transit country, but also a very important consumer country. Mexico is very important, there is a lot of consumption of wildlife products coming from other parts of the world, both legally and illegally. For example reptile skins, Mexico is probably one of the two major manufactures of reptile skin products in the world, that are then exported with luxury brands elsewhere. So we do get a lot of reptile skins from all over. And that obviously is legal trade, is accompanied by a significant component of illegal trade as well. So that just to add to what Valeria said.

And thank you very much for invitation. Sorry, and hello to everybody. I should have started with that, and then Vanda for that great introduction to the report, which I really invite everybody to read, it's super interesting.

And I think the report describes in great detail the aspects of what illegal trading wildlife from Mexico to China is and the huge challenges that exist in order to tackle it. Many of which are shared to a certain degree with other countries in the region.

And the reason why I believe it is important to also mention a few of the broader complex issues, as you say, Dina, and we must recognize that over the past 10 to 20 years commerce with the Asian countries has increased significantly in Latin America.

I believe that over the past few years it has increased in rate of approximately 20 percent per year. And it has reached from, one example, in 2000 there were only two bilateral free trade agreements between Asian and South American countries.

In 2013 there were 22. So that shows more or less the trend and what is taking place.

The country accounting for the greatest share of trade with Latin America is China. And there has been a large increase in bilateral trade rising from approximately maybe $12 billion in 2000 to roughly $295 billion in 2014. And corresponding growth in China's foreign direct investment and Chinese-led infrastructure products, particularly in the Amazon Basin.

So however this has been accompanied with a rise in transpacific organized crime, including trafficking in persons, drugs, weapons, counterfeit goods, and money laundering. And much of the attention from the environment sector paid to the growing Asia and America relationship has concerned mostly in the direct environmental impacts of Asian investments.

Yet there are indications of transpacific trafficking of wildlife is rapidly growing as well. And that some supply chains involved in professional organized crime networks are targeting several high valued factors, as has been clearly described in this Mexico/China example, such as the totoaba, shark fins, and others, abalone, etcetera.

In totoaba, fresh water turtles, abalone, these are for example have been mentioned and are good examples of that in the case of Mexico, but more extensively in Latin America, several species are also threatened by illegal trade, driven by these Asian countries. Including large (inaudible) such as jaguars. You might have heard a lot about the jaguar parts trafficking in the past couple of years. Parrots, primates, or frogs, species for which the illegal trade is emerging as the primary threat to their survival.

That said, a few analysists have gathered information on trans and transpacific trafficking of wildlife. Yet indications are that it is a rapidly growing problem and that some supply chains involve professional organized crime networks, as mentioned in this report. And thus this report is very, very significant and very important. Because one of the very few pieces of reading material that describes what is taking place in this particularly section of Mexico which exacerbates the role and of course often enough narcos and

organized crime groups.

The last point I wanted to make at this stage is immigration. There has been also an increase of Asian immigrants to Latin American countries in the past decades. The rate varies, but according to an inter-American development bank and OECB report, between 2015 and 2019 roughly 59 to 68,000 Asian people migrated to Latin American countries per year.

So this might not sound like a lot, but if you think that all these people come to a new country, to a new region, with their traditions, with their ways, with their preferences, they are going to look for things that can cover those needs and preferences in this new part of the world. So they look for alternatives to what they were able to access in their country of origin.

And all of a sudden you might have a few thousand people in one country that are interested in consuming, I don't know, eels or sea cucumbers or all the things that were not in the map of Latin American countries in the past because we were not interested or culturally we didn't use those resources. And all of a sudden there's a huge demand that can really pose a threat to the survival of the populations of that particular species. And even the legal frameworks might not be ready for that. And in order to change that it might take years for legal reforms to take place in order to control that trade. And that opens a huge window of opportunity for illegal trade or even legal or kind of in the dark zone trade, kind of in the gray area, that might occur and might be really, really significant for threatened, rare species that might only be known in a small part which are endemic or a couple hundred individuals might be known to science. And that might be depleted completely and extinct in a few years.

So I think that is also an important component that should be considered in the map. And of course we need a better understanding of the whole dynamics in order to really put strategic actions into action and well informed decisions by decision makers that can make the difference and convinces them to invest in necessary resources to tackle this

problem which is multi-faceted and that requires a lot of effort from all the different sectors, from enforcement, actors, to the NGO community, to the civil society. And that requires not only to tackle the illegal trade through enforcement actions but also to change behavior of those people consuming natural resources. Sorry if I extended too much.

MS. MARON: Adrian, that was great. Thank you. I think that's really valuable to make people understand that this is a broader regional problem and looking at those big questions.

I think one of the things that struck me in Vanda's report was the individual stories of some people talking about the intimidation and how difficult it is working in the environmental space, but also how difficult it is to say no to the cartel at all.

One story described a man whose son was kidnapped, tried to force him to process the cartel's seafood, and of course he couldn't say no. And in reporting on these issues I hear about how this isn't of course limited to wildlife crime or seafood space, that the cartels are increasingly in the extortion business in so many sectors, and unless you pay them they burn down your store or they burn down your crops, they make it impossible to say no.

But one of the things I would really love to hear from you and Valeria and from Vanda talking about how difficult it is working in the environmental space in Mexico. I know more than 80 environmental defenders were killed from 2012 to 2019 in Mexico. And I think in 2020 the number was 30. And I'd just love to hear about how you cope and how you can get anything done against that sort of backdrop, and also what sort of levers can be pushed to try to make that work more feasible.

Maybe, Valeria, you start.

MS. TOWNS: Yeah, well thank you. Honestly, working in Mexico, working in the communities, not just because of the Narco, beyond the Narco, but lately because of the organized crime, coping with so many different businesses in Mexico. Working in environments in the field in Mexico is risky. And we all know it. Like when you are working

and making environmental work in Mexico you know part of it is going to be risking your life most of the time, you know, especially in some areas like what happens with the turtles in Tamaulipas (phonetic). There is a bunch of people working with the turtles in Tamaulipas, and they are risking their lives on a daily basis in order to save the turtles. And you sort of learn to cope with it, and it's crazy how we have normalized it, you know, how we are learning to live with it and then how we get some informants that might tell us you can go out today, you rather not go out today because it's going to be busy or so people start telling you what you can do, what you cannot do.

I have a bunch of co-workers that are working in El Picante, that is this area north in Mexico, and they are working with bats in a cave. And it is a very important area for drug trafficking where there's, because it's a border with the U.S. And they are just, local people tell them like you cannot go working in the cave today because there's going to be, it's going to be a busy night. So they just know when not to try not to get in trouble.

Me, myself, I've been part of a couple of these incidents. Once we were freeing wolves in the mountains of Chihuahua, a very well-known area that separates two cartels, from the mountain cartel from the lowland cartel that it's called the La Linea cartel. And everybody knows you shouldn't come back at night and you shouldn't be driving at night. But anyways when you're working in the field, and we were like in this wolf range, gray wolf reintroduction program. And on our way back we were stopped by the municipals and then the cartels arrived and they kept us there for about almost an hour. Sometimes you believe this is the last thing you're going to do ever in your life.

And then you just like, as I told you, we get to normalize it. We get to tell these stories to each one another and it's like more and more of my friends who are working in environmental things are living these same situations, more and more people. I had a couple of friends that were working with white sharks in Sonora last year and they also got stopped by the Narco. And like these stories becoming more and more common, sadly.

And sort of you just learn how to deal with it. In 2020 New Year's Eve we

were fishing and then these riots happened in San Felipe and they burned three of our cars and almost burnt our sheep, burnt Nadine's receptor. So, yeah, this is happening all of the time. It's risky to live here in Mexico. But interestingly, some colleagues also report that there are some areas in Mexico that are rewilding because of the Narcos present because they have moved the local people outside of those areas and so there is no more poaching and they are sort of rewilding. That's something interesting, but it's difficult to actually have data on that because there is no presence, there is no way of making research on those areas.

And there is some other very, very brave stories as one Vanda mentioned in this paper. The people from El Manglito (phonetic) that have been surviving Narco threatening for a while and women that have been fighting against organized crimes within their communities to protect their children from getting or becoming part of these, I call Narco culture, that it's thriving more and more in my country.

MS. MARON: Wow. Thanks for sharing your experience, Valeria. I hadn't heard before about the rewilding areas because of the Narcos. That's really interesting and of course it makes sense you can't really get hard data on that.

Vanda and Adrian, are there any examples that strike you where people have been able to push back successfully or that there are approaches that work here?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well one just really needs to admire and be impressed by the courage of wildlife defenders, wildlife biologists like Valeria, like Adrian, working in enormously challenging places and in other parts of the world.

You know, sadly of course, not everyone will have the capacity to resist and will have the courage. What is happening in Mexico is profound expansion of the influence and role and domination of organized crime groups in very many aspects of life. Even in places where violence has declined, it has often declined because one criminal group was able to establish, at least for some amount of time, territorial control in order to prevent violence, what I call Narco Peace.

But the government response has been challenged and struggling. And during the Administration of President Andres Lopez Obrador, it has often centered on avoiding any kind of violence or force, confrontation with the criminal groups. I think often the criminal groups just work it out among themselves, or not work it out.

And so in, you know, Valeria mentioned how in her work in Chihuahua they were first stopped by the municipal police and later on the Narcos arrived. And it's just a small example of the thick connections between law enforcement actors, often at the municipal and state level politicians and the criminal groups. So resistance is very hard and very costly.

A part of the paper talks about the takeover of legal fisheries in Mexico by principally the Sinaloa cartel, (speaking Spanish). And the takeover is not merely about paying taxes and pesos to the cartels, but it's really about forcing communities of artisanal fishermen or retired fishing fleets and businesses to fish for a particular species that it was a quota to the cartels.

You mentioned, Dina, how the cartels are forcing restaurants to buy fish or buy products, seafood products, only from them. It's a pressure on processing plants to be processing fish that the cartels bring about. It's a whole system. And even forcing fishing boats to be buying fuel that the cartel have stolen, have syphoned off. So it's really total vertical integration of takeover of fisheries, legal and illegal in Mexico.

And this is just yet another economy. We have seen buyer iteration of such takeovers with avocado in the Michoacán (phonetic), it's driving into logging to a very large extent and depleting the water table up in the Michoacán. We've seen it with citrus, grain, other forms of economic activity.

So in the context where the state does not provide meaningful backup, where the state is not willing to use force and do so effectively to confront the criminal groups, where relations between politicians and criminal groups are thick and complex, and increasingly more and more, it is the criminal groups that dictate term to politicians.

In the mid-terms, in the electoral mid-terms in Mexico in June, we saw not just what had been the past and in prior years where the criminal groups would often determine who wins by providing money to political candidates, by forcing communities to vote for a particular candidate, but we have seen the criminal groups dictating who can run and who cannot run. And dictating means getting assassinated if you don't comply.

So resistance is costly and difficult if there is no backup from the state. And very frequently there is no meaningful backup and there is considerable fear among global communities and local businesses that law enforcement actors, government actors they might approach, are in fact going to be informants, are already in cahoots with the criminal groups.

So very challenging. But a dispiriting fixture and sort of all the more admiring those who have the courage and the wherewithal, even for some amount of time, to resist.

MR. REUTER: Yes, if I might add a couple of points. I think that the scenario that Vanda just described and related to her experiences, it's very challenging, it's super difficult to address, particularly because the lack of action by those key actors that should be put attention to this. So what can we do about this?

In some instances in different countries there have been a couple approaches that have been taken that might, that have made some positive results. One of them is trying to encourage the international pressure for the countries themselves to take action. Sometimes this helps, this reacts. And we've seen that also described in the paper through some actions taken by China in order to tackle the problems in traffickers and organized crime involved in that, and actually stopping like 60 people involved in that network.

So international pressure might help. Also the civil society plays a major role on making sure that the problems are known, that the problems are highlighted, that to show the government officials and the authorities that there is a problem, that people want

solutions. But that must be done very, very carefully because if not there can be retaliation by the criminal groups for those people who are actually open and explicit on these operations.

And thus we have in Mexico this very, very bad situation of not only the environment activist and people working on that being killed over the past few years, but also a lot of media people and reporters that, as you know, and recently that was kind of a highlight in the news because of the EU just mentioning that, that concern, to the Mexican government. And it is fact, not being a reporter, being a conservationist and environmentalist, even a biologist or researcher working the field in Mexico is high risk, really, really high risk. And not only by the criminal, the organized criminal groups, but the big ones, like the big cartels, but also because the unsafety in general in the country has recent developed that are just incredible.

So even if you want to go with your kids to ride the bicycle to, I don't know, to some protected area, you might run the risk of, you know, popping into some criminals with a gun and they will mug you, they will take your bicycle, your money, your phones, and hopefully that's it. So that's the type of scenario where we work, where we live. And in order to take actions you usually have to look at kind of things that might put the extra pressure from the outside for the authorities to take action.

So corruption is certainly one of the biggest issues that I can mention here. There's a lot of corruption of course. It is not exclusive to Mexico. We see that in many, many other Latin American countries, and it is well known, everybody knows that. So what actions can we take in order to tackle corruption?

There are like some suggestions and recommendations by different organizations how to do that but it must be done. And to do that that requires resources and willingness and the leaders to actually prioritize these things in the country. And that is something that we must try to push. And sometimes that push might come from the outside, as mentioned.

MS. MARON: You know, let's talk about the role of government here. I think that's maybe the elephant in the room. Maybe in the context of one example in particular. As you all know, the cartels previously had been linked to the trafficking of totoaba for a long time. And that demand came from China for swim bladders, otherwise known as Mau, and that's for traditional Chinese medicine. That of course has an impact on the vaquita, which of course you can dive into more.

But I'm wondering if you can talk about how Mexico is or isn't addressing that problem and what can be done about that. That's for anyone.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well I'll perhaps let Valeria talk about some of the on the ground issues. And one of the big things that I hope we can all reflect is the decision to legalize the export of the totoaba meat and what this would likely mean or not for the poaching of the totoaba for bladder.

But before, you know, when Valeria starts talking about the on the ground situation, the poaching of the totoaba in the Sea of Cortez. I would like to just make one broad comment. I mean it is interesting how the organized crime groups in Mexico entered the market, the totoaba market. And it's just one example of a pattern that has developed. And when Chinese wildlife traders or wildlife traffickers, they may operate legal businesses as well as illegal ones, become interested in heavily sourcing some product in a place like Mexico, that attracts the attention to the organized crimes. And so for example when there was the harvesting that was legal but became unregulated and unstainable of sea cucumber species off of Yucatan, this was originally taking place as the result of the desire of the Chinese traders to be sourcing sea cucumbers. Similarly the abalone and other sources that limited or sometimes depleted. And in fact the very significant pattern around the world is that when we see a species or genus, perhaps even a family being depleted in a place where Chinese traders are used to sourcing it, they move elsewhere.

So the totoaba became of interest in Mexico after other local species, particularly specific species in China, was essentially driven just about to extinction. And we

are seeing a big expansion of broker markets for totoaba, for the bladder, in other parts of the world.

But when the Mexican criminal groups see Chinese traders starting to organize a local market, these days that's a signal or an unmediated signal to the criminal groups to enter the market. So, you know, we spoke about the Rosewood and Valeria mentioned how Rosewood is depleted in Southern Mexico. At first that was taking place through direct interaction between Chinese traders and traffickers at local communities. These days the organized crime groups in Mexico have pushed out Chinese traders from direct interaction with the local community. And they interact with Chinese traders on the one hand, and they interact with local communities.

So almost all sourcing of wildlife products that get under way in Mexico now attract the attention and insertion of organized crime groups.

Valeria, over to you to what's happening with the totoaba.

MS. TOWNS: Thank you. Well this thing that Vanda mentions and how organized crime has taken the trade and how they are now ruling what happens in the area is super important because I'm right now in San Felipe actually. This is the beginning of the totoaba season and poaching has just started. And from my experience what I've seen in the past years of how this is changing, how this trade is moving.

Like locally there is a very thin line between legality and illegality, you know. All of the fisheries are fishers, they sometimes are fishing for totoaba, sometimes are catching shrimp, all of them with illegal fishing gear. So this is what is happening in the area. And enforcements have been --

MS. MARON: Valeria, can you just clarify for our listeners, is it ever legal to catch totoaba?

MS. TOWNS: No, not legal to catch totoaba. I mean all of the fishing in the area is being done with illegal fishing gear, including totoaba, that is very illegal. So I don't want to go very deep into these, just for you to understand the local context and the very thin

line for local people and fisheries between what is legal and what is illegal.

Of course they all know totoaba is illegal, but they are for themselves, they see themselves as fishers. And these two towns, two communities that are in the upper coast of California where the totoaba problem is rooted, they were built as totoaba fishing towns before when it was legal. So they come from a tradition of fishing totoaba long ago, 30 years ago or so. And then it became illegal, and then Chinese got interested into it as happening, something similar to what Adrian just told us, that the locals are just, Chinese are looking for alternatives to sources that they have depleted elsewhere. Seems like there was vision of Mau that was in China and they were using that fish and now they are taking totoaba as the most similar thing to the fish they had in China.

So well, yes. At the beginning all of these fishers were in direct interaction with the Chinese. And then lately the organized crime has taken the interaction with the Chinese, they are the ones that are buying the buche. Prices are different from what they were before, these $8,000 payment for a kilo of buche is not a reality anymore. Nevertheless they are still earning a lot of money for each kilo, 1,000, 2,000, sometimes $5,000, depending on the size of the buche.

And it is an interesting alternative for local people to pay their debts from one day to the other, or sometimes even buy a new car in one season. And this thin line, this Narco culture, it is becoming part of these people who are in the ocean, especially for young people going to the ocean armed and doing all this, is so attractive.

And then everybody's saying, talking about how agriculture can be an alternative livelihood, a total agriculture can be an alternative livelihood for local people. There is one farm here in San Felipe that has been really successful at raising totoabas in the agriculture model. But fishers are, at least now, there's a need of an important change in work that's going to take years. But at least now fishers are not interested in stop being fishers. They want to continue being fishers, they don't want to become agriculture. Agriculture might be a very interesting choice for young people.

I also believe that right now as it is permitted by CITES, only meat trade is allowed. Actually Earth Ocean Farms committed with CITES to destroy all of the swim bladders they get from their farmed totoaba. So there is like actually right now I don't see any direct link before farmed totoaba meat and stopping the real problem in here, that is the totoaba bladder market. Because there is no way right now at the (inaudible) that they are going to cope with it directly.

And besides the totoaba farm that has now been accepted is in Southern Mexico, in Southern Sea of Cortez in La Paz, pretty far from here. And I really think that right now neither communities, neither the authorities are ready for coping with just the meat market. And there is a high risk because there has been terrible enforcement of fisheries in Mexico, and Vanda has documented it very well, for the authorities to be ready to guarantee the traceability of the meat if it comes from local communities in the area.

MS. MARON: That's really interesting to hear your perspective. And for those of you that might be familiar, what Valeria was referring to of course was the decision a few weeks at ago at a global summit meeting of the treaty that regulates international wildlife trade, CITES, a convention on international trade and endangered species of wild fauna and flora. There was a decision, right, of an agriculture farm to raise totoaba was allowed to go forward with its operations and Mexico said they are going to destroy all the swim bladders, the trade will just be the meat, right? That was the new decision.

But Valeria's saying, if I understand you correctly, that you don't think that's going to help combat the illegal trade in Mau at all, this creation of a more legal trade, because it won't help the farmers in the area you're speaking of and the demand still exists, right?

Vanda or Adrian, do you have different perspectives on that, or you agree?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Oh I fully agree. The fact that the two markets that are created are really disconnected. Which is not to make the argument that the meat, the totoaba agriculture meat should not be allowed. The other dimension is not just meat from

totoaba that is allowed, it's only farm raised meat. It's not wild caught totoaba, and it's important so there is not further problem in tracing and laundering of products.

And incidentally, Mexico has its share of legal sourcing of wildlife, legal trade, working as a cover for illegally poached, harvested species. Grow Canella Farms in Mexico for example are one prominent example where skins from wild caught crocodilians or crocodiles and alligators are laundered.

The dimension that I would add to the fact that these two distinct issues of still illegal trade in boche with substantial demand in China.

MS. MARON: What is buche?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: The bladder, the Spanish import for bladder.

And the meat market I would add from the China dimension something that Adrian started speaking with. To be effective in suppressing poaching and wildlife trafficking one needs to recognize the needs of the communities and help them find legal livelihoods. That is often very difficult. Legal trade in wildlife can be one source, but it has to be well monitored and it's driven laundering. It has to take place within sustainable measures. Trade in ecotourism would be another dimension, but often is highly unreliable. It is easy having ecotourism in places with big iconic mammals that are easy to see in open savanna, but hard to deal with in places where the number of tourists is much smaller.

So, you know, helping fishers in Sea of Cortez, other communities in Mexico, find a farm as other markets is important and challenging.

And interdiction is another really important element. And building this to enforced law sadly that's deeply lacking in Mexico. But interdiction needs to be designed smartly so it's not just seizures. Because seizures that do not lead to the dismantling of trafficking networks can be outright counterproductive. Traffickers assume that they will lose 50 percent, one-third, to seizures and so they order more animals, more plants to be poached, so seizures can actually significantly compound the amount of illegal offtake unless they lead to dismantling networks.

And dismantling networks requires international cooperation. As does the last element, which is cracking down on illegal retail markets. Some of which are in the United States, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife and U.S. authorities have tried to act against smuggling from Mexico. They have shut off some retailers, although there is often dissatisfaction with the level of penalties people receive.

In China it's been much more sporadic. And by in large China maintains the attitude that wildlife trafficking from Mexico is a method for the Mexican government to resolve and it's not China's responsibility. And China has been very standoffish, has not been interested in any kind of standing systematic cooperation.

There is one exception and that is the totoaba. Where under a lot of international pressure, in particularly 2017, 2018 when China was focused on environmental policy also as a mechanism of improving bilateral relationship with the United States. It cracked down on the retail markets in China. Those raids suppressed visible sales of the Mau, of the bladder, right at the window store and drove it more underground, drove it online. Still a problem but nonetheless better than when anyone can just go and buy illegal product.

But since those raids in the late 2018, there has likely been quite a reduction in China's interest and actual efforts to suppress illegally their markets. But particularly for seafood products broadly. So not just from Mexico but from all around the world we see big spikes in the amount of seahorse heads, sharks and other marine commodities heading to China. It's a very hard market.

So it's really important both to design local, more significant law enforcement strategies and to give local communities a stake in enforcing those strategies by finding it economically, socially, and otherwise interesting and legitimate and desirable to be participating in environmental protection.

But it's equally important to add along the other dimensions of the chain, including shutting down illegal retail markets, and hence making an effort to encourage

China to take more responsible actions and to be more willing to cooperate, including with Mexico and other Latin American countries is really important.

MS. MARON: Valeria -- oh, sorry, Adrian in one second. I just want to touch back on one point you made, Valeria, to understand. So with the cartel replacement, with cartels directly interacting with the fishermen instead of the Chinese traders, is the demand up, or it's just a direct replacement of who you're dealing with?

MS. TOWNS: No, demand is basically the same. It's hard to have real data on it because obviously it's been illegal for a while. Local fishers say that demand dropped for a while, COVID might have affected a couple of years. So they were just like saving the bladders, I mean there is not much information on what's happening.

I think that the demand is like, it goes up and then it goes down, depending on the season and how the sales were. And then prices are changing. So there is like this dynamic things happening in the area, it's never the same. At the beginning of the season demand is higher then as the market starts to, like any other market, it behaves as any other market. So as the market starts to fill the demand is lower and prices are lower too.

But I think that the main difference with the crime, organized crime being an intermediary between the fishers and the Chinese brokers is that prices change and conditions also change. And organized crime cartels are bringing people from elsewhere to fish totoaba in this area. So it's not just local fishers that are working on it right now. But a lot of people coming from other places, so the number of fishers in the water looking for the totoaba has been incrementing significantly.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And not to preempt Adrian, there is one other important dimension with the role of the organized crime groups. That they are increasingly paying fishers in meth and perhaps even in fentanyl. And that's of course absolutely devastating for public health issues, particularly with fentanyl which is so dangerous, such a lethal substance, the chance of overdose is so easy, something that Mexico is not prepared for.

It also is turning local community members, not just into drug users, but also drug dealers. Because they need to sell the drugs that they are being paid in to generate income and cash for the family. So yet another very devastating dimension.

Adrian, please.

MR. REUTER: Yes, thank you. Yeah, I agree with that all that has been said. And a couple of points I want to highlight. One of them is what Valeria mentioned, that, you know, and also Vanda mentioned, is that providing alternatives for fisherman who are involved in this illegal trade might be an option.

But providing real alternatives. I mean if I'm a fisherman, that's what I know what to do. That has been my life, that is what I am good at. And sometimes there have been like these crazy ideas of okay, you used to be a fisherman, you should now start farming the land. No, because that's a sustainable alternative.

That's ridiculous. I mean of course that is never going to work because you are not going to change your activity in that way if that has been all your life. So changing the behavior, changing the activities or alternatives is a long-term investment and it has been seen as such. It might start with education and school with environment education, with more consciousness, developing all that along with enforcement actions and more immediate actions that might be needed in order to avoid one species from going extinct, which could be vaquita in this case due to the fishing of the totoaba.

So I think that strategies must be very carefully planned. And also we have the added problem of if these fisherman even accepted changing their activity or fishing in another way other species or stocks, then you have the cartels bringing external people to do that illegal activity as well. So we have that added problem.

Vanda mentioned that stopping the retail markets is the way that this has been addressed. We know that the country are capable of doing so. In the case of China they did it and they closed that. I've seen examples, I used to do some work on Hawksbill shell illegal trade in some countries, including the Dominican Republic where open trade

was just ridiculous. It was open, it was in 95 percent of all the shops, they were selling Hawksbill shell items, which was prohibited. And after some international pressure the country actually took action really well, and in just one year, from one year to the other there was a 98 percent decrease in open sale of Hawksbill shell items. And then these items, they were swapped for other items similar, necklaces and such, made out of coconut shell, which is completely sustainable.

So countries can do that if they want to. But at the same time there is like this perception that if it is not seen, it doesn't exist. So if you don't see that the sale is in the open, oh, we did our work and it's fine, and now let's move to another thing. But of course this trade continues in the dark. And that is why this international cooperation and the support of enforcement actors worldwide is needed in order to undertaken intelligence-based actions, to do investigations, and to use the tools that are being used for other types of organized crime, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, or gun trafficking, into wildlife trafficking. And unfortunately I think in many countries wildlife trafficking is not considered a serious crimes, sanctions are not even four years' worth of jail time, best case scenario. And so a lot of the tools that are being used by authorities to tackle all crimes cannot legally be used to tackle wildlife crime. For example foreign interventions and things like that, or even like, how you say, control deliveries in many countries, no.

So also even if authorities are willing to do so, even if they had the resources, which in Mexico they are very, very limited and they have become more and more limited with the budget cuts and personnel cuts dramatic that have happened over the past couple of years. Even if that was the case legally they are not able to use all the tools available to tackle crime. And that is something that is very serious, something that should be taken also in deep consideration of the actions that could be taken and where the countries could make a major change.

MS. MARON: Thank you for that. I see we're already past the 11:00 point and I want to get to some of the questions that are coming in, particularly about the role of

government in all this. And people are eager to hear about some ways that we can address some of these problems.

But one question about clarification came in and one about Valeria's points regarding the prevalence of illegal fishers in the Upper Gulf of California, specifically in the vaquita (phonetic) Refuge in the Zero Tolerance Area and the lack thereof in Mexico and acting against these illegal activities.

Is that something you want to comment on, Valeria?

MS. TOWNS: Yes, sure. Well enforcement has always been a thing in Mexico everywhere. Of course because as you know, we are a very corrupted country. I'm not proud of saying this but that is true. Actually I saw another question of someone saying like oh, why is it, it is crazy that Mexico is so close to the United States and there so many difference in their rule of law.

And definitely I get to see that is because enforcement and corruption is so different in both countries. And actually in Mexico we make fun of all of the people that live in the United States, that they won't skip a stop or do anything to get like bypass the law and, as soon as they cross the border back to Mexico they start like doing all these things that shouldn't be done or that are illegal, no? And that is something that happens, it's cultural too, unfortunately.

And the Upper Gulf is not the exception. I would actually say that here in the Upper Gulf of California we have a model of what happens all over the country in many different things like regarding biodiversity, regarding the Narco, regarding wildlife trade and the interaction of communities and the use of their natural resources.

So I would say that here in Mexico we haven't seen real enforcement for a while. There are pangas fishing in the Zero Tolerance area and outside of the Zero Tolerance area in seasonal places because it depends that the location of a fishery, of a product, depends on the season. So there is some times that there are no fishing skiffs or fishing boats in the Zero Tolerance Area. For the ones that do not know, there's a lot of

different areas inside of the Upper Gulf of California, and the most recently created one is the Zero Tolerance Area in 2020 where there is supposed not to be any activity, not even boats passing by. And this is the area where most of the vaquitas have been detected lately in the past couple of years. So that's why we call it, it is called the Zero Tolerance area, this is the area we want to maintain free of kill nets, free of any poaching or any kind of fishing.

Definitely there has been a lot of boats and fishing in the Zero Tolerance Area in the past couple of years. Navies are here, but Navies hands are a little bit tied because communities sometimes react in very, very aggressive ways. As I told you in 2020 New Year's Eve there was big riots and they burnt one of the Navy's boats. And people here are like defending their fishers and their interests and they get really made when the Navy or anyone else take the nets for them from the water. And it's so, this think line, it's so difficult for law to be enforced because then are you affecting fishers and local people, and then you are being aggressive towards human rights.

Navy is afraid of something like that, a big riot and killings to happen because all of the people are in the water are armed, they have guns with them. So the situation is not simple at all. I think that maybe sometimes do as best as possible. But they are obviously not in the conditions of actually enforcing the law and there is plenty, plenty of illegality all of the time and it's normalized, the illegalities, totally normalized in the community and in the area.

You can actually, you don't -- sorry, I just want to add this. Like poachers don't have to hide. You can actually go to this touristic area in San Felipe where all the restaurants are and you get to see the boats coming in and out of the water full of nets that are clearly totoaba poaching nets.

MS. MARON: Okay. Thanks for that. Vanda, in your report you talked about how monies for enforcement in the wildlife crime space have been largely zeroed out in Mexico and there's little appetite for acting in that space and as far as regulations or enforcement from the China side there hasn't been much action in that space either.

Though of course there were a few high profile seizures in Hong Kong in recent years where Mau has been discovered, you know, in the context of shipments of legal fisheries' stuff and they find totoaba as part of that. So it's a fairly depressing scenario, right, or it seems that way.

One of the questions that came in was, as we close another UN biodiversity conference today, what kind of pressure can be brought on China and Mexico to start and turn this around? What tools are available, what can be done to be responsible and ecological?

And another person asked, could even inviting some of the cartel leader to the table as well as regular fishermen be assistive in some way. What do you guys think?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well clearly encouraging China, and frankly encouraging Mexico, to mount better environmental enforcement and to try to enlarge and systematize cooperation would be very important.

In China in general in its approach to law enforcement, thanks to sea international law enforcement cooperation as a mechanism of expanding its influence. And it tends to be highly selective, self-interested, and limited impartial in when it engages in enforcement of illegal behavior by Chinese criminal groups or by Chinese trader abroad.

Yesterday we launched another report in this Brookings project on China's illegal economies that focuses on China and drugs, fentanyl and meth. And a large part of the report explores when and how China engages in international wide enforcement cooperation and the selectivity and the desire to use the cooperation for extension of influence and it denies when it doesn't get influence. When it doesn't for example see warming of a bilateral relationship, then it stops cooperating on law enforcement issues.

That said, China also very much likes to portray itself as a world policeman. It has for a long time being doing so in the drug space, tends to adopt often very restrictive and harsh policies toward drug users, as well as drug trafficking. Many of which are deeply controversial and very serious issues of human rights violations.

But under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has also more emphasized its role in at least some aspect of the environmental protection and the enforcement of environmental protection, as further reports from this project will delve into in great detail.

And so this self-presentation that is often quite at odds with China's actual behavior is nonetheless an important mechanism to generate international engagements, coalition of countries that care about particular issues such as environmental protection, do encourage China to take more robust actions, more systematic actions and do so on a sustained basis, not just as a piecemeal one-time operation.

But I would go back to also emphasizing that there is an equal need to prompt the government of Mexico to start caring about environmental protection. We have spoken several times about the devastating budget cuts to environmental agencies that have already been woefully under resourced and often have very limited mandates.

And so pressure or engagement emphasis in civil society by journalists, by other governments, also in Mexico, is also important.

MR. REUTER: If I might add here. I think there are like other official opportunities and those are through international agreements, binational, international agreements, that Mexico might have where this could be put on the table.

And just one example of where collaboration has happened, in this case Mexico and the U.S., which is a major player in this international trade that goes to China, for example with the totoaba, but also with other factors, with other parts of animals. And is that under the free trade agreement, under the environmental cooperation agreement, there is an North American Wildlife Enforcement Group between Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. They meet every year and it is trilateral meeting. And this group discusses things, how can we support each other, how can we act together, what are the priorities that are of interest of all of us are.

And I think those are really important spaces that could strengthen

collaboration. In the past, in the past Administrations I saw that firsthand how U.S. or Canada, they supported Mexico on the undertaking of certain analysis that were needed on capacity building and strengthening, providing equipment and training to enforcement officials. And unfortunately lately Mexico has not been that engaged in this forum, and I think that's a lost opportunity. And I think those could be good opportunities for this type of collaboration to really target actions strategically on a binational and trinational way in order to change how be the situation, and also to be able to provide a bit more regional pressure into countries that might also be very important, in this case China and the totoaba case and other species, as mentioned.

But other forces beside aside this also play an important role, no? CITES, as you know, this international convention to regulate trade in endangered species, has teeth. One of the very few conventions related to wildlife sources or to environment that has actually teeth and has real sanctions that can be posed to countries. And thus the countries usually take CITES quite serious, it's not just goodwill commitments, but these are if you commit to something you are supposed to comply with that. Or sanctions, economic sanctions, trade sanctions, could be taken. Mostly trade sanctions that have economic impacts that are set.

And I think that is one of the major plays and discussion spaces where pressure, international pressure can be put into those countries that are either source, transit, or destination countries on some species such as in this case totoaba, or others that might have some legal component of faith such as sea cucumbers or others, no?

We know that there were discussions on this totoaba issue in the last standing committee meeting of CITES. But there is a conference of the parties in November this year to take place in Panama, and I'm pretty sure this is going to be again on the discussion table. And that is where all the countries actually can be open, can be explicit, can express what they think on particular situations of both legal and illegality of endangered species. And in this case maybe the totoaba trade is prohibited, and it's obviously of

concern. But it is closer linked to an almost extinct species, which is the vaquita, which is of interest to everybody as well.

So I think this key, these four additions to national flora can play a major role on improving the situation, on putting that necessary pressure into governments to take action. And there's a willingness of support, no, the example mentioned of the North American Water Deportment Group, and cooperation from the U.S. And also we know that many regions and countries like the EU, the U.S., and others, they are providing, the UK, they are providing funds to undertake actions to tackle wildlife trafficking in Mexico.

And so I think there is the interest from many, many actors to take action and it's a matter of how can we funnel those interests, those resources, that potential support, to the right places and that the willingness exists in order to accept those opportunities and do the best with those, no. And I think that is one step, big step that needs to be still reinforced.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Dina, let me add one dimension here. Countering poaching and wildlife trafficking and becoming much smarter and better monitoring legal trade in wildlife is not just about altruism. It's not just about sort of abstract protection of animal species or plant species. It is about the basic preservation of the functionality of our planet on whose lives, on whose functionality, our lives, our economies depend.

We are now in the third year of COVID, a zoonotic disease that might have originated in either illegal wildlife traffic, illegal wildlife trade that has not been well monitored. And whether it's China, whether it's Mexico, whether it's the United States, whether it's other countries in Latin America, preserving habitats, limiting the destruction of natural habitats through either expanded laws that permit more destruction of tropical forests that we have sadly been witnessing, even during the COVID years, whether it's through wildlife trafficking is about avoiding other catastrophic zoonotic pandemics, an event that just in the first 25 weeks drove 250 million people into extreme poverty. And just in the first five weeks, we don't necessarily have the latest numbers, but just devastating event that

effected local economies, that destroyed lives of people, that killed more people than many regional wars combined would do so.

And often in Latin America, in Mexico, in other parts of Latin America, there is a sense that zoonotic diseases will only come from Asia and that there will be a time lag, that the next zoonotic disease will also originate somewhere in China or Southeast Asia and they will have time to prepare. But that doesn't have to be the case. There are plenty of zoonotic diseases that can emerge in the tropical areas of Latin America that are under tremendous pressure from logging, deforestation, as well as wildlife trafficking that's perhaps much larger in that region than people realize.

And so acting against poaching and wildlife trafficking is about preserving our own lives and our public health.

MS. MARON: Thanks for that. I'm just going to jump in for a minute since I've reported on this on the past. The teeth that Adrian speaks for CITES, the most drastic penalty in CITES arsenal, if you will, is refusing to recognize export paperwork for wildlife crime, including wildlife goods for a countries. You can prevent it from participating in the market for the tens of thousands of species managed by CITES. And so that of course would be a big economic lever. Whether or not that would be utilized in the case of the vaquita, well, maybe our panelists can speak to that, that's of course the most drastic thing could occur. And I feel that's pretty unlikely, but I'd love to hear your thoughts. And if you want to weigh in with any other final thoughts in our last five minutes. Thank you.

MS. TOWNS: Yeah. Well I would like to say that we have been threatened several times that Mexico is going to undergo really harsh sanctions because of the vaquita and the totoaba issue. Remember the last CITES that listed in every meeting but the last meeting the United States asked for these sanctions.

But I think that it's not that easy for CITES to over go the sanctions. They've never done it before. I hope that our country is not the first one. I really hope that we can do something before this happens.

And I just wanted to add that beyond enforcement and all of these very important things that need to happen, all the international pressure and everything, I really believe that beyond that there is also a lot of communitarian work that needs to be done. There is a social mesh that needs to be healed, there are governance processes that are really important to be worked on in order to repair this, especially talking about the totoaba, but in many other examples. There is a lot of social and communitarian work that needs to be done beyond enforcement.

It is very important to start working with alternative social tools and strategies to cope with this in a different level and not just from the top to the bottom, but also building alternatives from the bottom within the community.

MR. REUTER: Yeah, I completely agree, Valeria. I said I think this is a long-term investment and you have to start working on that with communities, with the societies, and with the new generations that are going to be the owners of whatever resources are left, and hopefully there are many resources left when they are users of these resources.

Because as Vanda said, we all depend on these natural resources for our livelihoods and for our life in general, no. And we need to take care of those and that is a message that doesn't seem to get through that easily even though it's very obvious.

And the other thing I want to mention is that, yeah, of course enforcement is not the solution, not the long-term solution, but enforcement needs to take place. Sanctions need to be effective, and usually it is perceived that, well, you know, this is a low-risk activity. Wildlife trafficking in general is a low-risk activity.

If you're a cop usually, you know, they seize the items, and you might pay a small fine and that's it. So that's part of business and the criminals just continue doing so.

A couple of interesting examples mentioned in the report set up in China for example, they seized, I don't know, 480,000 worth of totoaba bladders, and the sanction, the fine that was imposed was like 40,000 or 20,000 or something like that, you know, or 80,000.

So it was like 20 percent of the amount of what was seized. So obviously that is not a deterrent for criminals to continue their illegal activity. And the same happens in many other countries.

And usually when the enforcement action takes place, until a sanction is imposed it might take years. And of course that is not a deterrent, no. It may take years for anything to happen. And in most instances nothing happens.

But it needs to be efficient, it needs to be more immediate, even if the sanctions are not that harsh. But if there are sanctions and they are clearly linked to an illegal action that took place recently, that is going to be far more effective and send a better signal to everybody else of that if you do something wrong you are going to be sanctioned and it's not going to pass years before anything might or might not happen. So that is also something important.

And as said, you know, just try to get everybody to understand that this is our survival of our people, survival of our countries. This is the asset that we have and this is what the future generations will depend on. And we cannot look just at the short-term picture, and we need to think of it a little bit further in order to take action on this very important matter.

MS. MARON: Thank you. Valeria, any final 30 second thoughts before I close us?

MS. TOWNS: No, I just really want to thank you all. I want to thank our audience. I really want to congratulate Vanda because of this report. The writing I think is amazing, it is so clear, I really recommend everybody to take a look at it.

And on the rest of the series of report that she has been publishing on what regards wildlife crime, Mexico, and organized crime in China are related to it.

Thank you very much, everybody, Vanda.

MS. MARON: Thanks for joining us, everybody. And again, the report if you want it is at Brookings.edu. Take a look. And a shameless plug for myself, feel free to

read more of our wildlife crime coverage in National Geographic, the Wildlife Website for National Geographic.

Thanks everybody for joining us, I think this was great. Appreciate it.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2024