

'Terror being waged on wildlife', leaders warn

National and conservation leaders say the annihilation of nature is a dangerous 'blight on humanity', ahead of major summit

• **Dominic Jermey: This corrupt, illegal war on wildlife makes losers of us all**

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A black rhino bull killed by poachers in Hluhluwe Imfolozi game reserve, South Africa. The photo won the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2017 Grand title award. Photograph: Brent Stirton/Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2017

Humanity is waging a war of terror on wildlife across the globe, according to the head of a world-leading research institute who was previously a counter-terrorism expert for the UK government.

Dominic Jermey, director general of the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), also spent years in Afghanistan supporting the fight against terror, until leaving his post of UK ambassador in 2017. "Coming to ZSL, I have a front-row seat on a different kind of war: the war on wildlife," he said in an article for the *Guardian*. "[It is] a war with catastrophic impacts on people and animals."

"While war and terror atrocities make daily headlines, the horrors being waged on wildlife slide under the radar," said Jermey, ahead of a [global summit on tackling the illegal wildlife trade](#) in London in October.

Other leaders are urging rapid action, with Gabon's president, Ali Bongo, calling the crisis "a blight on humanity" and UK environment secretary Michael Gove saying the "massive global problem" needs the same scale of international response being taken to fight climate change.

Illegal hunting and the destruction of wild habitat has resulted in the start of what many scientists consider the [sixth mass extinction of life](#) to occur in the Earth's four-billion-year history. Over [80% of all mammals](#) and half of plants are thought to have been lost since the rise of human civilisation.



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Wildlife crime harms both people and animals, said Jermey: "The annihilation of wildlife by organised criminal gangs is violent, bloody, corrupt and insidious. It robs communities of their resources, their independence, their opportunities and their dignity. And we are all losers as the creatures with which we share this planet are pillaged to extinction." One hundred million sharks are killed every year, [mostly for their fins](#), and [20,000 African elephants](#) for their ivory, he said.

Losses have been greatest in recent decades, Jermey said, with a [58% decline in wildlife since 1970](#): "That's like losing the entire [human] population of Asia from the world." The London gathering of leaders is a critical opportunity, he said: "This is our moment for action."

The UK government is hosting the summit, which will be the biggest yet, and aims to ramp up action against wildlife traffickers and build momentum towards a critical meeting of world nations at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2020.

Gove said: “It is a massive global problem. The world, collectively, has taken action to set ambitious goals to deal with climate change, and I think we need to show a similar level of ambition when it comes to making sure we safeguard wildlife and biodiversity. It will be difficult to explain to our children and grandchildren if we don’t take action.”

Among the projects being supported by the UK are training for customs officers to tackle the trade in pangolins, the world’s most trafficked animals, creating forest-friendly cocoa plantations in Liberia and [protecting Sumatran tiger habitat](#) in Indonesia.



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An Indonesian forest ranger from the Leuser Conservation displaying animal traps set by poachers to capture wildlife including rhinoceros, elephants, tigers and bears. Photograph: Chaideer Mahyuddin/AFP/Getty Images

A [major UN-backed report in March](#) found that human destruction of nature is rapidly eroding the world’s capacity to provide food, water and security to billions of people and poses risks on the same scale as global warming.

Bongo, who will be among the heads of state attending the summit, said: “The illegal trafficking of wildlife is a blight on humanity. This trade – estimated to be worth some £17bn pounds per year – is big business, run by ruthless networks. My country, Gabon, is on the frontline of the battle to end this trade.”



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He said the [Elephant Protection Initiative](#) in Africa had grown from five nations in 2014 to 18 now and was not only focused on anti-poaching, but also developing sustainable livelihoods for those living alongside wildlife: “We need to convince farmers who live alongside elephants, and whose crops are often damaged by them that these animals can be creators, not just destroyers, of economic wealth.”

Zac Goldsmith MP, appointed as UK government champion for the summit, said: “It matters in and of itself when you lose iconic species, when you see whole ecosystems being annihilated, but it matters in a very direct way to humans as well. If you wipe out ecosystems, you plunge people into awful poverty.”

“We have seen great initiatives but are going backwards not forwards, which is the depressing reality,” he said. “This is why this conference is so important.”

Tony Juniper, executive director at WWF-UK said: “The destruction of nature and disappearance of our wildlife is one of the greatest threats facing the human race. And it’s not just about the extinction of rhinos or tigers on the other side of the world. It’s about the disappearing birds, butterflies and other animals on our own doorsteps.”

Gove said action was needed in the UK: “There is much more we need to do. In my lifetime we have seen a [retreat of wildlife in the UK](#). That is why

we are taking steps in our new agriculture bill and our 25-year environment plan to reverse that.”