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Embassies and Elephants

North Korea's Involvement in the
Illegal Wildlife Trade

Matthew Redhead and Sasha Erskine



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Executive Summary

- The North Korean government has a long history of involvement in illicit activities to generate foreign currency, which it uses to fund the regime elite and its weapons proliferation programmes, currently subject to UN sanctions.
- Most research into these illicit activities has focused on volume crimes such as drug smuggling, counterfeiting and, latterly, cybercrime.
- In comparison, North Korea's involvement in aspects of the illegal wildlife trade (IWT) has been recognised, but not accorded similar levels of scholarly attention. This paper reviews the evidence on the regime's engagement in the IWT.
- North Korea and the IWT are both notoriously difficult subjects for research, and in combination even more so. This paper's findings cannot therefore be treated as comprehensive or definitive. However, a review of the available material indicates ongoing, if limited, official North Korean involvement in:
 - Diplomatic smuggling of ivory and rhino horn from Africa, which are probably mostly sold for a profit in China, with small amounts reaching North Korea.
 - Production of traditional Asian medicine (TAM) goods that claim the presence of endangered animal parts, such as tiger bone. These products have been sold to tourists from China or smuggled out of the country for wider retail.
- Broader North Korean state practice suggests that most, if not all, the funds generated will go into state coffers. But the revenues are highly unlikely to be of the same magnitude as those generated by criminal enterprises such as drug smuggling and cybercrime.
- North Korean IWT-linked activities should not be ignored: reporting suggests a persistent pattern of behaviour and, although severely constrained during the coronavirus pandemic, one that could increase again in the future.
- Nonetheless, these activities represent a relatively small aspect of the challenge posed by the regime, as well as a small proportion of the IWT. Any recommendations therefore need to be proportionate, and to recognise the practical realities of implementation, including potential opposition on the UN Security Council (UNSC) from Russia and China.

This paper proposes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: If politically feasible, the UNSC should restate the need for member states to implement existing resolutions on:

- Diplomatic passenger luggage checks.
- Information-sharing with the relevant UN Panel of Experts (PoE) tasked with monitoring North Korean sanctions implementation.
- The repatriation of all North Korean nationals, except diplomatic staff and those on student visas.

Recommendation 2: The Conference of Parties of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) should extend prohibitions against the *export* of traditional medicines made for domestic use to include the prevention of uncertified *imports*.

Recommendation 3: The World Customs Organization, Interpol and other international intergovernmental organisations with competence in the IWT interdiction should reduce barriers to operational intelligence collection of North Korean IWT activities and share relevant material with the PoE.

Recommendation 4: Regional intergovernmental bodies in Africa and Southeast Asia should use existing law enforcement information-sharing mechanisms to pool data on IWT smuggling cases related to North Korea and encourage national interdiction efforts and improved national reporting to the PoE.

Recommendation 5: Financial Action Task Force-style regional bodies in Africa and Southeast Asia should create typology reports and training packages on North Korean IWT activities and potential approaches to detection.

Introduction

RESearchers of Pyongyang's money-making activities often describe its behaviour as similar to that of a 'mafia' or 'criminal state', using illicit methods across the world to generate funds to support the regime and its activities.¹ Drugs production and smuggling, the counterfeiting of cigarettes, dollars and pharmaceuticals and the smuggling of gold and gems² have loomed large over the last two decades, with cyber-criminality now an additional and growing concern.³

Although alleged North Korean state involvement in the illegal wildlife trade (IWT) has been highlighted by several scholars, such mentions are commonly brief, even in long reports on North Korean illicit activities.⁴ Only two reports dedicated to any aspect of the issue have been produced, both by the South African journalist and researcher Julian Rademeyer, focusing on the smuggling of ivory and rhino horn.⁵ However, as Rademeyer's work shows, there is real evidence of the past involvement of North Korea's diplomats, and recent media reports suggest that they might continue to be implicated. One unconfirmed media report suggests, for example, that in

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1. Paul Rexton Kan, Bruce E Bechtol and Robert M Collins, *Criminal Sovereignty: Understanding North Korea's Illicit International Activities*, Monograph 349 (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2010); Peng Wang and Stephen Blancke, 'Mafia State: The Evolving Threat of North Korean Narcotics Trafficking', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 159, No. 5, 2014), pp. 52–59.
 2. Bruce E Bechtol Jr, 'North Korean Illicit Activities and Sanctions: A National Security Dilemma', *Cornell International Law Journal* (Vol. 51, No. 1, 2017), pp. 57–99; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Illicit: North Korea's Evolving Operations to Earn Hard Currency* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2014), <<https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/SCG-FINAL-FINAL.pdf>>, accessed 11 March 2022.
 3. David Carlisle and Kayla Izenman, 'Closing the Crypto Gap: Guidance for Countering North Korean Cryptocurrency Activity in Southeast Asia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2019); Geoff White, *The Lazarus Heist – From Hollywood to High Finance: Inside North Korea's Global Cyber War* (London: Penguin Business Books, 2022).
 4. For example, in Sheena Chestnut Greitens's comprehensive review of North Korean illicit activities, only one page (p. 32) out of 113 refers to the IWT; see Chestnut Greitens, *Illicit*.
 5. Julian Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders: Crime, Conservation and Criminal Networks on the Illicit Rhino Horn Trade', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, July 2016, <<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/global-initiative-beyond-borders-part2-july-2016-1.pdf>>, accessed 12 March 2022; Julian Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit: North Korea's Criminal Activities in Africa', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, September 2017, <<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/TGIATOC-Diplomats-and-Deceit-DPRK-Report-1868-web.pdf>>, accessed 6 March 2022.

2019 Dutch authorities apprehended a North Korean diplomat travelling from South Africa with undefined 'tusks' in his luggage.⁶

Reasonable research grounds exist, therefore, to look at the evidence again. These are supported, in addition, by policy imperatives. The regime's capacity to generate illicit funds remains a major concern for the international community because of the risk that these might be used to support North Korea's WMD programme, subject to a growing range of UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions since October 2006.⁷ Furthermore, the IWT is assessed by UN agencies and other international bodies to be a significant form of environmental crime, even though it is now dwarfed in scale by other such crimes.⁸ Although the legal trade in wildlife is regulated under the certification regime of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) of 1973, North Korea is not a signatory, and is not therefore bound by its obligations.⁹

In response to the research gap and policy concerns on North Korea's activities in the IWT, this paper evaluates the available evidence on the character, scale and scope of its involvement. Due to the relatively short five-month timescale for conducting this research (February–June 2022), it has been necessary to rely primarily on secondary material and interviews, which are described in the Methodology section below. Overall, the findings largely confirm and slightly extend Rademeyer's work, bringing in other potential aspects of North Korean involvement that go beyond diplomatic smuggling. On the available evidence, it appears likely that North Korean officials, and by extension the North Korean regime, have had low-level but ongoing involvement in the IWT in two areas for four decades:

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6. Omphile Ndlovu, 'More North Korean Diplomats Found Smuggling Animal Parts from Africa', *News Diggers*, 21 September 2019, <<https://diggers.news/local/2019/09/21/more-north-korean-diplomats-caught-smuggling-animal-parts-from-africa/>>, accessed 1 June 2022.
 7. UNSCR 1718, adopted on 14 October 2006, S/RES/1718. For current sanctions, see Security Council Report, 'UN Documents for DPRK (North Korea): Security Council Resolutions', <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/page/1?ctype=D>, accessed 20 June 2022.
 8. Christian Nellemann et al., *The Rise of Environmental Crime: A Growing Threat to Natural Resources, Peace, Development and Security* (Nairobi: UNEP-INTERPOL Rapid Response Assessment, United Nations Environment Programme and RHIPTO Rapid Response–Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, 2016), pp. 7, 20, <<https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/7662>>, accessed 18 October 2022.
 9. CITES, 'Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora', 1973, <<https://cites.org/eng/disc/text.php>>, accessed 13 March 2022. CITES has three appendices listing plants and animals subject to varying levels of controls. Appendix 1 lists the most endangered species, such as elephants and several types of rhinos.

1. **Ivory and rhino-horn smuggling.** North Korean diplomats in Africa have been smuggling and selling these animal parts, largely to generate foreign currency, since the 1980s. The practice has been extensively documented by Rademeyer,¹⁰ and since the publication of his reports in 2016 and 2017, a couple of additional but as yet unverified cases have also emerged.
2. **Making traditional Asian medicine (TAM) products.** North Korean state bodies have also manufactured medicinal products claiming to contain animal parts from endangered species, most prominently tiger-bone wine,¹¹ which have been sold to tourists, and clandestinely exported. The source of the animal parts used in the product is unknown, and it is possible that they come from natively farmed animals or that the products are counterfeit.¹²

The stream of revenue generated by these activities is likely to be relatively small. Annual revenues from smuggling have probably never gone beyond the hundreds of thousands of US dollars, while TAM products will have been difficult to export from North Korea and will have faced strong competition from businesses in other Asian countries. Taken together, they are unlikely therefore to have generated funds comparable to other North Korean illicit activities, especially cybercrime, which is probably bringing in many hundreds of millions of US dollars annually.¹³

Both streams of activity are, moreover, likely to have fallen into abeyance during the pandemic; North Korea itself has been inaccessible to visitors since January 2020, and in internal lockdown since May 2022.¹⁴ However, in light of its past patterns, North Korean involvement in IWT activities has the strong potential to revive when these restrictions ease. Even though available rewards are relatively modest, the regime needs funds, and the IWT offers a permissive environment in which to generate them.

The paper covers these issues in five chapters. An introduction, with a methodology section, is followed by Chapter I, which covers the background on North Korea's licit and illicit methods for generating foreign currency and the IWT and its potential attractions to North Korea. Chapters II and III consider North Korea's role in smuggling and TAM manufacturing in more detail. The paper closes with a conclusion that includes five recommendations.

10. Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders'; Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit'.

11. Kristin Nowell, CAT and IUCN SSC Cat Specialist Group, 'Implementation of CITES Decision 17.228: Review of Implementation of Resolution Conf. 12.5 (Rev. COP17) on *Conservation of and Trade in Tigers and Other Appendix I Asian Big Cats*', CITES Standing Committee Paper, SC70 Doc. 51, Annex 4, 2018, p. 19, <<https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/70/E-SC70-51-A4.pdf>>, accessed 11 March 2022.

12. Author online interview with NGO-based IWT expert in Southeast Asia, 6 April 2022.

13. Chainalysis, 'The 2022 Crypto Crime Report', February 2022, p. 113, <<https://go.chainalysis.com/rs/503-FAP-074/images/Crypto-Crime-Report-2022.pdf>>, accessed 1 June 2022.

14. Frances Mao, 'North Korea: "First" Covid Cases Prompt First National Lockdown', *BBC News*, 12 May 2022.

Methodology

Collecting meaningful material for this paper has been challenging, with limited options for primary research in the key regions of sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast and East Asia due to the short length of the project and limited resources available for travel. Researching North Korea is challenging under any circumstances, moreover; the regime is notoriously secretive, and has spent decades perfecting clandestine methods to avoid attention.¹⁵ The IWT is a similarly difficult area, with practitioner and research understanding based on occasional police disruptions, customs seizures under CITES, and investigations by wildlife NGOs.¹⁶

Research for this paper has thus focused on secondary sources accessed using Google, academic databases (JSTOR and EBSCO) and an adverse media tool (VIDERIS, provided by Blackdot Solutions¹⁷). Keyword searches on North Korean illicit funding activities and state involvement in the IWT have covered English-language material from 1990 onwards, drawn from international organisations, government departments and agencies, think tanks, NGOs, academia and the media. The lead researcher, Matthew Redhead, conducted 22 semi-structured and anonymous interviews via video conference with researchers and practitioners working on North Korea and the IWT in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Interviewees were informed that information supplied in the discussion would be used to inform this work unless they specified it could not be used, and that their identities and organisations would be protected. In some cases, due to the relatively small pool of interviewees, identities have had to be more heavily anonymised, especially regarding location. The interviews sought to identify specific case examples of North Korean involvement in the IWT, as well as wider contextual material on the IWT and North Korean illicit activities, depending on the expertise of the interviewee. Although interviews did not yield information on individual cases beyond those reported in the media, they did provide a set of largely consistent expert assessments from both fields, creating a useful context against which to assess the significance of known North Korean activities.

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15. Daniel Wertz, 'Cutting Through the Fog: The Methodology of Researching North Korea', in Yonho Kim (ed.), 'Researching North Korea: Source, Methods, and Pitfalls', NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series, George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies, 2021, pp. 3–8, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/8/416/files/2017/09/GW_KoreanStudies_Papers_03.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2022.
 16. Rebecca W Y Wong, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade in China: Understanding the Distribution Networks* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 67–82; author interview with NGO-based IWT investigator in UK, 15 February 2022; author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT expert in UK, 31 March 2022.
 17. Black Dot Solutions, <<https://blackdotsolutions.com>>, accessed 20 June 2022.

I. Financing North Korea

SINCE ITS CREATION in 1948, North Korea has run an insular and idiosyncratic form of communist dictatorship under the leadership of the Kim dynasty, led by Kim Jong-un since December 2011. In what is still a significantly agricultural command economy,¹⁸ North Korea has faced the challenge of sourcing foreign currency to buy items overseas that the domestic economy has been unable to produce, with the most important demands being the needs of the Kim dynasty and the country's military, most significantly its WMD and ballistic missile programmes.¹⁹ Programmes for generating foreign currency are believed to be coordinated through two 'nodes' in the North Korean bureaucracy, known as Offices 38 and 39, which oversee an international network of front-company bank accounts and financial intermediaries that send, hold and receive funds destined for North Korea.²⁰

Licit Activities

Prior to the advent of UN sanctions, the regime made significant amounts of foreign currency through the export of commodities, chiefly to China.²¹ The North Korean regime also sold weapons to sympathetic countries in the developing world, including sub-Saharan Africa, as well as running leadership training courses, construction schemes, restaurants, medical centres and much else besides, commonly staffing projects with North Korean nationals, who then sent the vast majority of their earnings as remittances to the North Korean state.²² However, most of these more conventional economic activities have now been closed off by UNSC action, at least in theory; in December 2017, for example, the UNSC required all North Korean workers

18. Vincent Koen and Jinwoan Beom, 'North Korea: The Last Transition Economy?', OECD Economics Department Working Papers No. 1607, November 2020, p. 6, <<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/82dee315-en>>, accessed 23 March 2022.

19. Author interview with researcher into North Korea in the US, 21 March 2022; author interview with former US government official in the US, 31 March 2022.

20. North Korea Leadership Watch, 'Third Floor', <<https://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/kji-2/third-floor/>>, accessed 20 June 2022; Tom Burgis, 'North Korea: The Secrets of Office 39', *Financial Times*, 24 June 2015.

21. Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, 'Engaging North Korea: The Efficacy of Sanctions and Inducements', in Etel Solingen (ed.), *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 241–43.

22. Darya Dolzikova and Anagha Joshi, 'The Southern Stratagem: North Korean Proliferation Financing in Southern and Eastern Africa', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2020), pp. 17–32.

to return home within two years,²³ although there continues to be evidence of North Koreans working overseas.²⁴

Illicit Activities

The North Korean regime has also used crime, both to source illicit items and to generate funds. One of the most consistent methods has been smuggling, including of precious metals, minerals, currency, and illegal items, as well as animal parts, largely by North Korean diplomats.²⁵ However, probably the most profitable of its illicit activities between the 1970s and 2010s were the production and sale of narcotics, and the counterfeiting of US currency, cigarettes and pharmaceuticals, often in collaboration with organised crime networks.²⁶ Credible estimates of revenue are hard to find, although a US Congressional Research Service report from 2008 quoted figures of drug sales revenue ranging from \$20 to \$500 million, and \$15 to \$20 million from counterfeit currency.²⁷ Since the mid-2000s, however, North Korea appears to have reduced its direct involvement in wholesale illicit markets, especially of illegal narcotics.²⁸

In contrast, one area that has grown in importance over the last decade has been North Korean cybercrime, with teams of state-sponsored hackers launching ransomware attacks and digital robberies.²⁹ One of the most notable attacks was the attempted theft in February 2016 of nearly \$1 billion from Bangladesh Bank, undertaken by the North Korean state-sponsored hackers known as the Lazarus Group.³⁰ Cryptocurrency thefts are also a rich area of endeavour for North

23. UN Security Council Resolution 2397, 22 December 2017, S/RES/2397, para. 8.

24. UNSC, 'Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1874', 28 August 2020, S/2020/840, para. 122, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_840.pdf>, accessed 22 September 2022.

25. Sheena Chestnut, 'Illicit Activity and Proliferation: North Korean Smuggling Networks', *International Security* (Vol. 32, No. 1, Summer 2007), pp. 80–111, <<https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/greitens/files/Chestnut%20-%20Illicit%20Activity%20and%20Proliferation%20-%20North%20Korean%20Smuggling%20Networks.pdf>>, accessed 11 March 2022.

26. Bechtol, 'North Korean Illicit Activities and Sanctions', pp. 57–99; Chestnut Greitens, *Illicit*, pp. 15–31; author interview with researcher into North Korea in the US, 21 March 2022; author interview with former US government official in the US, 31 March 2022.

27. Liana Sun Wyler and Dick K Nanto, 'North Korean Crime-for-Profit Activities', CRS Report for Congress, RL33885, updated 25 August 2008, pp. 3–4, <<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33885.pdf>>, accessed 23 March 2022.

28. US Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 'International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume I: Drug and Chemical Control', March 2017, p. 143, <<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2017-INCSR-Vol.-I.pdf>>, accessed 1 June 2022.

29. Author interview with former US government official in the US, 31 March 2022.

30. Geoff White, 'The Lazarus Heist: How North Korea Almost Pulled Off a Billion-Dollar Hack', *BBC News*, 21 June 2021.

Korea, with analytics firm Chainalysis reporting that North Korea had stolen digital assets worth nearly \$400 million in 2021.³¹

Financial Potential of the IWT

For a country such as North Korea, with a need to generate hard currency, few scruples around criminality, and no obligations under CITES, the IWT has significant revenue potential, as well as numerous openings through which to become involved.

Human exploitation of wildlife and plants for use as pets, status symbols, gifts, clothes or decorations, or as ingredients in food or TAM, has a long history,³² and has probably grown massively in recent years, enabled by economic globalisation and technological connectivity.³³ To protect the sustainability of species in high demand, many governments have created domestic legislation to protect both indigenous and foreign species and, at an international level, 182 countries and the EU have signed CITES, which regulates the international trade.³⁴ CITES categorises more than 37,000 species in its three Appendices, allowing different levels and types of trade depending on the vulnerability of the species.³⁵

Much of the demand for wildlife is managed within the bounds of legal and regulatory constraints; one conservative academic estimate using UN import figures from 2010 suggests a value of the legal wildlife trade of around €86 billion (currently around the same value in US dollars).³⁶ Nonetheless, the global IWT has also boomed over recent years, supported by the same economic and technological drivers, as well as criminal desire for profit.³⁷ According to an estimate by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and INTERPOL, the IWT causes a global annual loss of resources of between \$7 billion and \$23 billion per year,³⁸ while the

31. Chainalysis, 'The 2022 Crypto Crime Report', p. 113.

32. Daan P van Uhm, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade: Inside the World of Poachers, Smugglers and Traders* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), pp. 11–13.

33. Author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in South Africa, 1 April 2022.

34. In the US, for example, see the US Fish and Wildlife Service, 'Laws, Agreements, and Treaties', <<https://www.fws.gov/library/categories/laws>>, accessed 22 September 2022; CITES, 'What is CITES?', <<https://cites.org/eng/disc/what.php>>, accessed 22 September 2022.

35. CITES, Appendices I, II and III valid from 22 June 2022, <<https://cites.org/eng/app/appendices.php>>, accessed 11 November 2022.

36. Van Uhm, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade*, p. 90.

37. Author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022; author interview with law enforcement official in the Netherlands, 24 March 2022; author interview with serious and organised crime researcher in Austria, 26 April 2022.

38. Nellemann et al., 'The Rise of Environmental Crime', pp. 7, 20.

Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the international standard-setter on fighting financial crime, has recently described it as a 'major transnational organised crime'.³⁹

Although academic and policy knowledge of the character of the IWT is patchy and this is still a relatively immature area in comparison to other areas of criminality,⁴⁰ what is known suggests a phenomenon that is global and complex, affecting every continent, poor and rich countries alike.⁴¹ For each type of wildlife traded, there are multiple pipelines, originating with poachers, collectors and intermediaries in primary source countries in South and Central America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, moving through smuggling routes operated via air, sea and land, on to processing, distribution and retail networks in the major end markets of East Asia, Europe and North America.⁴² It is a highly fluid industry with numerous players, from transnational organised crime groups to individual poachers, all seeking to make a profit.⁴³

In addition, risks for criminals appear to be relatively low, which is certainly potentially attractive to bad actors. Many of the poorer source countries with rich biospheres also suffer from weaker law enforcement and border defences, permissive attitudes towards the IWT, and high levels of corruption.⁴⁴ In relation to North Korea, moreover, many source countries are also relatively friendly, or at least nominally so, maintaining diplomatic relationships and long-term commercial and political ties.⁴⁵ Figure 1 shows that North Korea has maintained diplomatic relations in key regions that are vital hubs for the IWT, especially for some of the most profitable of illicit goods,

39. FATF, 'Money Laundering and the Illegal Wildlife Trade', p. 5.

40. Van Uhm, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade*, pp. 64–69; author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022.

41. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Combating Wildlife and Forest Crime, 'Wildlife Crime: Key Actors, Organisational Structures and Business Models', <https://www.unodc.org/documents/Wildlife/Business_Models.pdf>, accessed 22 September 2022; author interview with IWT expert in the UK, on 30 March 2022.

42. Van Uhm, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade*, pp. 26–27, 56–63; author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022.

43. Van Uhm, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade*, pp. 56–63; author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022; author interview with law enforcement official in the Netherlands, 24 March 2022; author interview with serious and organised crime researcher in Austria, 26 April 2022.

44. Author interview with NGO-based IWT investigator in UK, 15 February 2022; author interviews with former law enforcement officer and serious and organised crime specialist in West Africa, 11 April 2022.

45. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, 'North Korea's Activities in Southeast Asia and the Implications for the Region', Brookings, 29 November 2017, <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/north-koreas-activities-in-southeast-asia-and-the-implications-for-the-region/>>, accessed 15 March 2022; Dolzikova and Joshi, 'The Southern Stratagem', pp. 60–62; author interview with NGO researcher into North Korea in the US, 6 April 2022; author interviews with former law enforcement officer and serious and organised crime specialist in West Africa, 11 April 2022.

including ivory, rhino horn (typically sourced from Africa) and tiger bone (typically from South and Southeast Asia).⁴⁶

Figure 1: North Korean Embassies and IWT Overlaps

● The presence of North Korean diplomatic offices ○ Key source areas for Illegal Wildlife Trade based on author interviews



Source: North Korea in the World, 'DPRK Embassies Worldwide', <<https://www.northkoreaintheworld.org/diplomatic/dprk-embassies-worldwide>>, accessed 16 March 2022.

46. On profitability, see Jeremy Haken, 'Transnational Crime in the Developing World', Global Financial Integrity, February 2011, p. 12, <https://www.gfintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/gfi_transnational_crime_high-res.pdf>, accessed 10 April 2022; on sources of animal products, see UNODC, *World Wildlife Crime Report: Trafficking in Protected Species* (New York, NY: United Nations, 2020), pp. 47, 79–80, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/2020/World_Wildlife_Report_2020_9July.pdf>, accessed 16 March 2022.

II. North Korean Smuggling

THE CHARACTER OF the IWT suggests a rich matrix of potential risk (or opportunity) with regard to North Korean illicit activity. However, at present there are only two areas where evidence of involvement has clearly emerged. The most notable stream of reporting indicates smuggling by diplomats of elephant ivory and rhino horn from sub-Saharan Africa, on which Rademeyer produced two seminal reports in 2016 and 2017.⁴⁷ This chapter aims to provide additional evidence where possible, and to analyse and assess key themes around North Korean smuggling.

Case Numbers

In his 2016 report, Rademeyer identified 16 reports of smuggling from 1986 to 2016; 15 involving North Korean nationals apprehended by authorities, and a further case drawing on testimony from a defector.⁴⁸ In his 2017 report, he added a further two cases, as well as detailed defector testimony from Park Ji-wan, a former North Korean official who claimed to have supported the activities of diplomatic smugglers in China in the 2000s and 2010s.⁴⁹ Three further media reports are identified below, although in the latter two cases it has not been possible to corroborate these with other media or official sources:

- In January 1992, diplomat Pak Su-yong, then officially resident in Zambia, was expelled from Zimbabwe for possession of rhino horn, the same offence for which he had previously been expelled from Zimbabwe in 1990. Reporting indicated that a further North Korean diplomat, Han Dae-song, was also due to be expelled in 1992.⁵⁰
- In December 2018, a local media source reported that Kim Chung-su, a North Korean diplomat based in Harare, Zimbabwe, was suspected of involvement in local poaching activities. He had been deported from South Africa in October 2016, following an attempt to smuggle ivory bangles on a flight from Ethiopia to China.⁵¹
- In 2019, Dutch customs authorities were alleged to have caught Kim Hyon-chol, a North Korean diplomat, travelling from South Africa with what were described as ‘tusks’.

47. Rademeyer, ‘Beyond Borders’ and ‘Diplomats and Deceit’.

48. Rademeyer, ‘Beyond Borders’, pp. 32–37.

49. Rademeyer, ‘Diplomats and Deceit’, pp. 11–12, 15–17.

50. *UPI News*, ‘North Korean Diplomats Caught Smuggling Rhino Horn’, 8 January 1992, <<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1992/01/08/North-Korean-diplomats-caught-smuggling-rhino-horn/1952694846800/>>, accessed 10 April 2022; the 1990 case involving Pak was included in Rademeyer’s list, but although the 1992 instance was also mentioned in passing, it was not treated as a separate case, see Rademeyer, ‘Beyond Borders’, p. 33.

51. *Bulawayo 24 News*, ‘Dodgy North Korean Envoy Still Holed up in Harare’, 2 December 2018, <<https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-national-byo-150896.html>>, accessed 15 May 2022.

Details in the report were limited, but Kim was reported to have left South Africa permanently. Other diplomats were also reported to be under investigation by South African authorities.⁵²

There are thus now 20 specific media-reported cases (as distinct from defector testimony) of individual North Korean diplomats' involvement in wildlife smuggling, over a period of 38 years.⁵³ Six are from the 1980s, eight from the 1990s, and six from the 2010s. There are no reported cases from the 2000s or the 2020s.

Although these quantities are small given the number of years covered, they do suggest a consistent pattern, with some exceptions in the 2000s and recent years. The absence of cases from the 2000s could suggest a hiatus in activity, or improved tradecraft and poor detection, and although this question is difficult to evaluate, Park Ji-wan's claims suggest that IWT smuggling did take place in this period.⁵⁴ The more recent scarcity almost certainly reflects the impact of the pandemic on international travel and access to North Korea, with diplomats and other North Korean nationals unable to return home.⁵⁵

In interviews, some IWT experts suggested that these figures probably underestimated North Korean activity, largely on the grounds that some smuggling runs had probably gone undetected; however, the level of underestimation is hard to assess with any confidence.⁵⁶ Interviewed by Rademeyer, Park Ji-wan said that in his time in China, diplomats based in African embassies made smuggling runs two to three times a year,⁵⁷ and if this is correct, there were likely many runs that were not interdicted. However, the claim cannot be verified, owing to lack of corroboration by other defector testimony or other sources.

52. Ndlovu, 'More North Korean Diplomats Found Smuggling Animal Parts from Africa'.

53. See, for example, *UPI News*, 'North Korean Diplomats Caught Smuggling Rhino Horn'; Rachel Nuwer, 'North Korean Diplomats Accused of Smuggling Ivory and Rhino Horn', *National Geographic*, 16 October 2017; for Rademeyer's material on specific cases, see Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32–37 and Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', pp. 11–12.

54. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', pp. 15–17.

55. Author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Korea, 31 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Africa, 8 April 2022.

56. Author interview with former military officer in US, 21 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in South Africa, 1 April 2022; author interview with journalist in South Africa, 8 April 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in Central Africa, 26 April 2022; author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022.

57. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

Patterns of Activity

If the scale of smuggling is difficult to assess, there is slightly more detail on what might be described as the smugglers' 'tradecraft'. The available media reports do not provide comprehensive data on smugglers' methods, but a number of features are evident:⁵⁸

- **Key perpetrators:** The main perpetrators have mostly been diplomats, largely of the second or third rank.⁵⁹ Some appear to have been repeat smugglers. Pak Su-yong and Kim Chung-su, both mentioned above, were linked to two cases.⁶⁰ Defector Park Ji-wan reports that around 2010, certain individuals played key smuggling roles in Africa, identifying: Park Chol-jun of the North Korean embassy in South Africa; a trade representative in Zimbabwe; the military attaché in Ethiopia; and the second secretary in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁶¹ Park Chol-jun was arrested in Mozambique with 4.5 kg of rhino horn in May 2015, and expelled from South Africa.⁶²
- **Possible mules:** There is one indication that unwitting individuals not on diplomatic passports might have been used as mules. A North Korean interpreter based in Zambia was stopped in December 1997 at Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta Airport smuggling rhino horn. He reported that he had been asked to carry the luggage by a diplomat, Rim Ho, who himself had been caught with ivory in his luggage in November 1997.⁶³
- **Diplomatic bases:** The diplomatic bases for smugglers most commonly mentioned in the 1980s and 1990s were Zimbabwe and Zambia. In the 2010s, this switched to South Africa and Zimbabwe.⁶⁴ According to experts interviewed for this project, Harare was the epicentre of North Korean activity in southern Africa until its embassy was downgraded to a trade mission in 1998, with key illicit activities then switching to the embassy in Pretoria.⁶⁵ However, recent reporting suggests that Kim Chung-su, mentioned above in

58. The assessments in this section are based on an analysis of cases in Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', Appendix, pp. 32–37.

59. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32–37; Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 17.

60. For Pak Su-yong, see *UPI News*, 'North Korean Diplomats Caught Smuggling Rhino Horn'; Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', p. 33; for Kim Chung-su, see Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', pp. 11–12 and *Bulawayo 24 News*, 'Dodgy North Korean Envoy Still Holed up in Harare'.

61. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

62. *News 24*, 'North Korean Diplomat Expelled from SA for Rhino Horn Trafficking', 23 December 2015, <<https://www.news24.com/News24/exclusive-north-korean-diplomat-expelled-from-sa-for-rhino-horn-trafficking-20151223>>, accessed 10 May 2022.

63. Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', p. 33.

64. For the 1980s and 1990s, see *ibid.*, pp. 32–33; for the 2010s, see *ibid.*, p. 37; for 2016, see *ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

65. Author interview with former military officer in US, 21 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in South Africa, 1 April 2022; author interview with journalist in South Africa, 8 April 2022.

regard to the smuggling of ivory bangles in October 2016, remains in place in Harare, with alleged links to local poaching activities continuing to receive media attention.⁶⁶

- **Sourcing:** Diplomats have sourced ivory and rhino horn from across southern Africa, including the key base countries mentioned above, and Mozambique.⁶⁷ Park Ji-wan also mentions Angola, Congo (it is not clear whether this is the DRC, or Republic of the Congo) and Ethiopia.⁶⁸ Reports do not commonly indicate from whom these parts were sourced, but the few that do suggest a range of methods, from accessing dealers, to using local Korean contacts and, in one instance from 1988, organising a poaching team directly.⁶⁹
- **Logistics:** There is limited evidence about how diplomats have moved items in country, but in the case of Park Chol-jun in May 2015, rhino horn was transported across country in Mozambique in a car with diplomatic plates.⁷⁰ For international travel, commercial passenger airlines have been the clear preference.⁷¹ Some reporting suggests that smugglers have used the diplomatic bag in the past,⁷² but despite its obvious attractions – under the Vienna Convention,⁷³ it may not be opened – there are several reports of smuggled animal parts being placed in personal hold and cabin luggage too.⁷⁴ Several reports from the 1980s and 1990s indicate volumes of around half a tonne being smuggled in multiple suitcases.⁷⁵ Reporting from the past decade, however, suggests lower weights: in October 2012, for example, Kim Jong-guk was caught by Mozambican customs with 130 pieces of carved ivory in his hand luggage.⁷⁶ According to Park Ji-wan, smugglers typically travel with single suitcases containing cut or carved ivory, weighing between 7 and 10 kg.⁷⁷ Although the authors are not aware of any media reports of rhino horn being found in air passengers' cases, with its smaller size and higher value, rhino horn is much easier (and more profitable) to move in personal luggage than ivory.⁷⁸

66. *Bulawayo 24 News*, 'Mnangagwa Expels North Koreans Under UN Pressure', 5 March 2019; author interview with journalist in South Africa on 8 April 2022.

67. See Rademeyer 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32, 37; Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 12.

68. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

69. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', p. 32.

70. *News 24*, 'North Korean Diplomat Expelled from SA for Rhino Horn Trafficking'. Rademeyer names Park Chol-jun as Pak Chol-jun in his two reports, Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders' and 'Diplomats and Deceit'.

71. Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32–37.

72. Analytical Center of Excellence on Trafficking (ACET), 'Illicit Wildlife Trade in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Trajectory and How to Stop it', 2019, p. 6, <https://conserwewildcats.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/03/ACET-Report-No.1-Final_English1.pdf>, accessed 23 March 2022.

73. Vienna Convention on Diplomatic and Consular Relations, 18 April 1961, Article 27, <https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf>, accessed 20 April 2022.

74. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32–35.

75. *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 34.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 35; also, *All Africa*, 'North Korean Caught Smuggling Ivory', 12 October 2012, <<https://allafrica.com/stories/201210121341.html>>, accessed 10 May 2022.

77. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

78. Author interview with journalist in South Africa, 8 April 2022.

- **Destinations:** In some early cases, Yemen⁷⁹ and North Korea⁸⁰ were mentioned as the smugglers' destinations, but China has also featured.⁸¹ It is possible that China has simply been a stop-off point on the way back to North Korea, as only two airlines – the North Korean national carrier, Air Koryo, and Air China – fly directly to Pyongyang, and most people travelling into North Korea do so via China.⁸² Unsurprisingly, therefore, those caught smuggling were not on direct flights, and were often detected in key airport transit points in Africa (Kenya, Cameroon and Nigeria),⁸³ Europe (France, Russia and the Netherlands),⁸⁴ and/or the Middle East (the UAE).⁸⁵

The Ends of Smuggling

The appearance of China as at least a temporary destination for North Korean diplomats has probable relevance for how some smuggled ivory and rhino horn is exploited. According to a report from the Analytical Center of Excellence on Trafficking, China-based buyers have been 'dominating the market' for wildlife products, including ivory and rhino horn, for several decades.⁸⁶ This makes the country an attractive destination for those seeking to sell items, and the report cites investigations from the 1990s that found North Korean diplomats bringing smuggled rhino horn for inspection and sale in Guangzhou.⁸⁷ The testimony of Park Ji-wan suggests that Beijing has been a destination for smuggling diplomats seeking to sell rhino horn and ivory for cash more recently, in the 2010s.⁸⁸ Interviews with experts based in Southeast Asia suggest that North Korean diplomats continue to exploit Chinese markets, selling rhino horn and ivory to contacts in both organised crime and legitimate businesses.⁸⁹

It is difficult to assess what proportion of smuggled ivory and rhino horn is sold outside North Korea, and what is destined for the home market. Several experts interviewed thought it likely that the majority was sold, due to the desire for hard currency and the apparent absence of a

79. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', p. 32.

80. See *ibid.*

81. See *ibid.*, pp. 32, 34; Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', pp. 11–12.

82. Koryo Group, 'Pyongyang Airport, Pyongyang Sunan International Airport', North Korea Travel Guide, <<https://koryogroup.com/travel-guide/pyongyang-airport-north-korea-travel-guide-f98cfdb4-ab0f-419c-90a3-93b18280a76b>>, accessed 19 September 2022; author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Korea, 31 March 2022.

83. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32–34.

84. See *ibid.*, pp. 32, 34; Ndlovu, 'More North Korean Diplomats Caught Smuggling Animal Parts from Africa'.

85. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', p. 34.

86. ACET, 'Illicit Wildlife Trade in Southeast Asia', p. 5.

87. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

88. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

89. Author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT expert in Southeast Asia, 6 April 2022.

large ivory and rhino-horn market within North Korea.⁹⁰ In his testimony, Park Ji-wan suggests that the vast majority of smuggled rhino horn is sold, estimating that only around 1% goes to North Korea.⁹¹

How ivory and rhino horn smuggled into North Korea is used is difficult to ascertain, but the likeliest candidates are gift-giving and TAM. The giving of gifts has long been an integral element of the Kim dynasty's approach to consolidating power, and is a practice copied across the regime.⁹² Junior diplomats will, for example, give valuable items to their superiors to curry favour, and ivory has significant status in the country.⁹³ Alongside these practices, rhino-horn powder has a reputation as a treatment for illnesses in Asian countries,⁹⁴ and Park Ji-wan indicates that it is viewed as such by members of the regime elite.⁹⁵ The use of rhino horn as a medicine by the North Korean elite was also noted by another defector interviewed by Rademeyer, a biophysicist named Kim Hyung-su who is quoted as saying that rhino horn was viewed among this group as a potential cure for cancer.⁹⁶

Profits

It is extremely difficult to estimate the profit made through this trade, especially as the amounts smuggled are unknown and the prices of both ivory and rhino horn have varied widely over the past 20 years.⁹⁷ For ivory, profits are unlikely to have been dramatic at any point. According to Park Ji-wan, a typical consignment of 7–10 kg of ivory would only make around a \$10,000 profit in 2010.⁹⁸ Assuming two to three smuggling runs a year – as noted before, a speculative assumption – this would suggest a profit generated by one smuggler of \$30,000 a year.

90. Author interviews with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT expert in Southeast Asia, 6 April; author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022.

91. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

92. Ken E Gause, *House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics under Kim Jong-un* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2015), pp. 185–90, <https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Gause_NKHOC_FINAL.pdf>, accessed 25 March 2022; author interview with researcher into North Korea in the US, 21 March 2022; author interview with former US government official in the US, 31 March 2022.

93. Author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Korea, 31 March 2022.

94. Richard Ellis, *Tiger Bone and Rhino Horn: The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005), pp. 132–33.

95. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', pp. 16–17.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

97. See UNODC, 'World Wildlife Crime Report 2020', p. 14.

98. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 16.

In contrast, rhino horn has historically been more profitable. According to Park, a consignment of rhino horn – volume unspecified – could make a \$35,000 per kg profit at sale in China.⁹⁹ If similar volumes to those Park cites for ivory were smuggled, profits could have been in the range of \$245,000–350,000 from a single run. However, several of those interviewed for this project were sceptical that large profits would now be attainable, and in particular since the dramatic drops in price over the past decade.¹⁰⁰ According to figures from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in 2020, the end-of-chain price of rhino horn had fallen from \$65,000–100,000 per kg in 2014–2016, to \$16,000–\$24,300 in 2019.¹⁰¹

Beneficiaries

There is no direct evidence to identify the primary financial beneficiaries of smuggling and trading in animal parts by North Korean diplomats. Judging by the pattern of other North Korean overseas activities, however, it seems likely that the primary beneficiary is the North Korean state; as with other North Koreans operating overseas, diplomats are required to return a majority of the profits from any activity to Pyongyang as ‘loyalty money’, sent via the country’s clandestine financial network.¹⁰² According to a US government estimate, these payments are around 70–90% of funds earned.¹⁰³ The remainder of the funds are at the disposal of the diplomats themselves, to support embassy work and personal needs; since 1975, North Korea has required its embassies to ‘self-finance’ their work.¹⁰⁴ With even ambassadorial salaries reported to be between only \$900 and \$1,100 a month,¹⁰⁵ diplomats have been eager to find ways to generate supplementary income, and it is likely that some have done ‘side deals’ in criminal trades such as the IWT to generate funds for personal and professional use.¹⁰⁶

99. *Ibid.*

100. Author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in South Africa, 1 April 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in Central Africa, 26 April 2022; author interview with serious and organised crime researcher in Austria, 26 April 2022.

101. UNODC, ‘World Wildlife Crime Report 2020’, pp. 14–15, 118.

102. Rademeyer, ‘Diplomats and Deceit’, p. 17; author interview with researcher into North Korea in the US, 21 March 2022; author interview with former US government official in the US, 31 March 2022.

103. US Department of the Treasury, US Department of State and US Department of Homeland Security, ‘Risks for Businesses with Supply-Chain Links to North Korea’, North Korea Sanctions and Enforcement Action Advisory, 23 July 2018, p. 1, <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/dprk_supplychain_advisory_07232018.pdf>, accessed 10 March 2022.

104. Chestnut, *Illicit Activity and Proliferation*, p. 85.

105. Choe Sang-hun, ‘North Korea’s Nuclear Hopes Have Surged, Defector Says’, *New York Times*, 27 December 2016.

106. Author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with journalist in Nigeria, 28 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Korea, 31 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Africa, 8 April 2022.

That North Korea benefits from criminal acts by its officials does not necessarily indicate that these are state directed, of course. However, regime claims that expelled diplomats have been punished for illegality have not been evidenced, and other indicators, including defector testimony¹⁰⁷ and reappointment of diplomats expelled from smuggling,¹⁰⁸ suggest a more permissive attitude. Indeed, even if some punishment does occur, being caught in the act of smuggling animal parts does not appear to be a career-ending event under the North Korean regime. Han Tae-song, then second secretary at the embassy in Harare, was caught smuggling rhino horn out of Zimbabwe in 1986 yet was later promoted to become the country's ambassador to Italy in 2007, and Switzerland in 2017.¹⁰⁹

Assessing Smuggling

Evidence of North Korean officials' involvement in the smuggling of wildlife parts has emerged sporadically for more than 30 years. It has been centred primarily on southern Africa, but the testimony of defector Park Ji-wan suggests that smugglers have operated out of both East and West-Central Africa too. Although some experts interviewed speculated about the involvement of North Korean overseas workers and Chinese proxies,¹¹⁰ others expressed scepticism that smuggling would be conducted without the protection of diplomatic immunity.¹¹¹ Based on the known patterns of smuggling activity, the latter seems more likely. Either way, although there has almost certainly been more smuggling than detected, profits made in the last decade have probably been relatively modest. Moreover, it seems likely that North Korean ivory and rhino-horn smuggling are a small proportion of the IWT as a whole, with North Korea also not the only example of diplomatic involvement in the trade, as several other countries' representatives feature in recorded cases.¹¹²

While North Korean IWT smuggling appears to be a relatively small problem, it is clear that it has occurred. Will it continue post-pandemic? Given that the North Korean regime and its officials need to make hard currency, and the IWT has provided one such opportunity in the past, it seems unlikely to stop without further deterrence. This might come from African governments, driven by both the need to align with UNSC expectations and irritation with North Korean illicit activities on their territory. Indeed, expert interviews suggest that the South

107. Chestnut Greitens, *Illicit*, p. 17.

108. *Bulawayo 24 News*, 'Mnangagwa Expels North Koreans Under UN Pressure'.

109. Hamish Macdonald, 'Despite His Murky Past, Switzerland Accepts New North Korean Ambassador', *NK News*, 3 February 2017, <<https://www.nknews.org/2017/02/despite-his-murky-past-switzerland-accepts-new-north-korean-ambassador/>>, accessed 18 September 2022; Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', p. 3.

110. Author interview with researcher into North Korea in the US, 6 April 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in Central Africa, 26 April 2022.

111. Author interview with former military officer in the US, 22 March 2022; author interview with former US government official in US, 31 March 2022.

112. See Rademeyer, 'Beyond Borders', pp. 32–37, for cases involving Chinese, US, Zambian, Congolese, Vietnamese and Indonesian diplomats, as well as North Koreans.

African government, for one, is increasingly embarrassed by these activities.¹¹³ However, past patterns suggest that this is unlikely to be sufficient to dissuade the North Koreans. The closure by the Zimbabwean government of the North Korean embassy in Harare in 1998 was probably partly linked to IWT smuggling,¹¹⁴ yet media reports suggest that diplomats based in the trade mission have continued to be involved in the practice.¹¹⁵ Overall, the probability of North Korean diplomats desisting from IWT activities voluntarily in the future looks low.

113. Author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in South Africa, 1 April 2022; author interview with journalist in South Africa, 8 April 2022.

114. *Ibid.*

115. *Bulawayo 24 News*, 'Dodgy North Korean Envoy Still Holed up in Harare'; *Bulawayo 24 News*, 'Mnangagwa Expels North Koreans Under UN Pressure'.

III. North Korea as an IWT Producer

AS WELL AS smuggling, North Korea has also been a producer of TAM goods that claim to use animal parts, including those of endangered species. The international legal status of these goods is complex: cross-border trade in TAM, even using elements from the highly endangered species listed under its Appendix 1, is not entirely prohibited under CITES, if appropriate import and export permits are in place, although those produced for domestic consumption should not be exported.¹¹⁶ However, there remain areas of ambiguity, with the current relevant CITES resolution focusing on preventing unpermitted exports rather than stopping imports.

As noted above, some smuggled rhino horn finds its way back to North Korea for gift-giving and medicinal purposes.¹¹⁷ But although there is elite domestic use of rhino-horn items, it seems that these might also have been used to generate foreign currency through their inclusion in TAM products for wider sale, including outside North Korea.¹¹⁸

Further reporting suggests that North Korea also produces consumables claiming to be made from deer and arthropods, bear bile and big cats.¹¹⁹ Among the goods produced, one of the most heavily promoted is tiger-bone wine, which is erroneously claimed to have high medicinal value and has long been a popular drink for social and other occasions across East and Southeast Asia.¹²⁰

116. CITES Resolution Conf. 10. 19 (Rev. CoP14), 'Traditional Medicines'.

117. Rademeyer, 'Diplomats and Deceit', pp. 16–17.

118. Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), 'China and Laos Wildlife Traffickers Exploiting Coronavirus Fears to Peddle Illegal Wildlife', 7 February 2020, <<https://eia-international.org/news/china-and-laos-wildlife-traffickers-exploiting-coronavirus-fears-to-peddle-illegal-wildlife-fake-cures/>>, accessed 11 April 2022; author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT expert in Southeast Asia, 6 April 2022.

119. James Armstrong, 'Kim Jong-un's Christmas Drinks to Include Booze from Tiger and Bear Bones, Giant Centipedes and Deer Placenta', *The Mirror*, 8 December 2016; Daniel Willcox, Nguyen D T Minh and Lalita Gomez, *An Assessment of Trade in Bear Bile and Gall Bladder in Viet Nam* (Petaling Jaya: TRAFFIC Report, 2016), <<https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/2342/vn-bears-report.pdf>>, accessed 23 March 2022; Kristin Nowell, 'Implementation of CITES Decision 17.228', pp. 19–20; author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022.

120. *The Independent*, 'Pyongyang Profits from Tiger Bone Wine', 8 May 1995; Armstrong, 'Kim Jong-un's Christmas Drinks to Include Booze from Tiger and Bear Bones, Giant Centipedes and Deer Placenta';

Sourcing Animal Parts

Apart from what is known about rhino-horn smuggling, there is limited evidence on how North Korea sources other animal parts to make these products. It is possible that they are smuggled into the country with the help of organised crime from North Korea's near neighbours, as East, South and Southeast Asian countries have native populations of big cats, bears and other relevant fauna,¹²¹ although no such cases have been identified. In fact, the limited case evidence available suggests Chinese criminals involved in the IWT have accessed these animal parts *from* North Korea, rather than the other way around. In three cases from May and July 2010 recorded by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), an NGO, Chinese authorities caught smugglers seeking to buy tiger, bear, lion and other wildlife parts in North Korea.¹²²

It is thus possible that the animals used to make IWT products are indigenous to North Korea; historically the country has been home to both tigers and bears, but available assessments suggest that their numbers are low.¹²³ If North Korean animals are being used, therefore, they have probably been farmed, possibly at Pyongyang Zoo, according to the packaging described by one credible media source from the 1990s,¹²⁴ or at the university medical school, according to a social media source quoted in a more recent report for CITES.¹²⁵ In one strand of unverified reporting, a blogger called Anonymousse who claimed to have visited northern China near the North Korean border said they had found North Korean tiger-bone wine being sold widely in China in shops, restaurants and online, some of which the blogger claims was manufactured at 'Pyongyang Medical University'.¹²⁶

author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT expert in Southeast Asia, 6 April 2022; UNODC, 'World Wildlife Crime Report 2020', p. 15; Van Uhm, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade*, pp. 231–32; author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022; author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022.

121. Author interview with academic researcher into IWT in UK, 30 March 2022; author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022.

122. See EIA Global Environmental Crime Tracker, <<https://eia-international.org/global-environmental-crime-tracker/>>, accessed 20 June 2022.

123. Judy A Mills and Peter Jackson, *Killed for a Cure: A Review of the Worldwide Trade in Tiger Bone*, Traffic Network Report (Cambridge: TRAFFIC International, 1994), pp. 2–3, <<https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/9563/killed-for-a-cure.pdf>>, accessed 12 May 2022.

124. *The Independent*, 'Pyongyang Profits from Tiger Bone Wine'.

125. Nowell, 'Implementation of CITES Decision 17.228', p. 20.

126. Anonymousse, 'North Korean Tiger Bone Wine in China and Chinese Tiger Bone Wine in America: Illicit Trade of Products Made With Endangered Tigers', Medium, 29 August 2020, <<https://anonymousse1.medium.com/north-korean-tiger-bone-wine-in-china-and-chinese-tiger-bone-wine-in-america-d811dcdcaf9e>>, accessed 20 September 2022.

However, without proper testing of the products, it is difficult to know whether they do contain any tiger bone, and a further option is that there are in fact no animal parts in the products.¹²⁷ North Korea is not above counterfeiting products (as noted above with regard to cigarettes, currency and pharmaceuticals), and in the July 2010 case recorded by the EIA, the Chinese smugglers returned the alleged tiger bone they had sourced from North Korea because they did not believe it to be the genuine article.¹²⁸

Production and Markets

If national institutions such as Pyongyang Zoo and the university are involved – still far from certain – the creation of these products is likely to be a state-managed industry, as will be the system of distribution and sales.¹²⁹ The low incomes of the vast majority of North Koreans suggest that these probably expensive items are well out of the reach of ordinary citizens,¹³⁰ and the primary form of retail appears to be tourist sales; in May and June 2019, Chinese customs reported that they had interdicted 107 bottles of tiger-bone wine from Chinese tourists returning from North Korea.¹³¹ Although some of this may be for personal use, other reporting suggests that some individuals travel to China specifically to buy tiger-bone wine to supply to relatives for resale in China.¹³²

In addition, experts assess that animal products have probably been clandestinely exported wholesale, smuggled over the Chinese border.¹³³ In 2009 and May 2010, for example, two cases came to light in China's Dandong province; in the first, customs officers seized bottles of tiger-bone wine and boxes of bear gall, and in the second, officials found a consignment of animal bones intended for sale as medicinal products in Heilongjiang, China's most northerly province.¹³⁴ An independent report presented to the CITES Standing Committee in 2018 stated that North Korean-produced tiger-bone wine could be found in locations around China and

127. Author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT researcher in Central Africa, 26 April 2022.

128. EIA, 'Global Environmental Crime Tracker'.

129. Author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022; author interview with NGO-based IWT expert in Southeast Asia, 6 April 2022.

130. Author interview with researcher into North Korea in the US, 21 March 2022; author interview with former military officer in the US, 21 March 2022; author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022; author interview with journalist in South Korea, 31 March 2022.

131. EIA, 'China Proven Wrong Over its CITES Denial of Tiger Bone Wine Trade from North Korea', 6 June 2019, <<https://eia-international.org/news/china-proven-wrong-over-its-cites-denial-of-tiger-bone-wine-trade-from-north-korea/>>, accessed 10 March 2022.

132. Kristin Nowell, 'Implementation of CITES Decision 17.228', p. 20.

133. Author interview with former military officer in US, 21 March 2022; author interview with former law enforcement officer in Singapore, 23 March 2022; author interview with journalist in West Africa, 28 March 2022.

134. EIA, 'Global Environmental Crime Tracker'.

Laos.¹³⁵ Items have been sold online, too; a February 2020 report by the EIA found Chinese and Laotian retailers using WeChat, a Chinese social media app, to advertise and sell North Korean rhino-based products, purportedly to treat Covid-19.¹³⁶

Profits

As with smuggling, assessing North Korea's revenue and profits from these activities is extremely difficult. Certainly, there is a significant opportunity for profit; the production of TAM products is a major legal businesses in several East Asian countries, especially China, and there is a substantial black market for items claiming to contain animal parts from endangered species.¹³⁷ In the case of illicit tiger-bone wine, depending on age and provenance, bottles can retail for anywhere from tens to hundreds of US dollars; according to a 2015 estimate, prices ranged from \$80 for a three-year-old bottle to \$290 for an eight-year-old one.¹³⁸ Examples cited by the blogger mentioned above, however, appear to show North Korean tiger-bone wine retailing online in China in 2020 for 159 and 179 yuan, currently equivalent to between \$20 and \$30.¹³⁹

Given the hard-to-verify nature and large range of potential prices, it is possible to conjure up anything from modest to substantial revenues from tiger-bone wine sales. If every Chinese tourist to North Korea bought a single bottle (assuming around 95,000 tourists a year, based on pre-Covid-19 pandemic figures¹⁴⁰), this would amount to revenues anywhere between \$7.6 million and \$27.6 million, using the 2015 retail price figures. But it seems highly unlikely that North Korea would be seeking to promote vintage versions of the wine to Chinese tourists, or that a significant proportion of those tourists would risk buying products – especially ones at a high price – that could easily be confiscated at the border. On balance, therefore, revenues from such sales are likely to be low, and profits limited, given the additional costs of manufacturing and distribution. For clandestine wholesale exports, moreover, there would be likely added costs that come with smuggling, such as transport and camouflage of goods, payments to traffickers and other intermediaries, and possible payoffs to customs officials, and even if successfully exported, the products then face the prospect of competition from similar goods domestically produced, both legal and illegal.

135. Nowell, 'Implementation of CITES Decision 17.228', pp. 19–20.

136. EIA, 'China and Laos Wildlife Traffickers Exploiting Coronavirus Fears to Peddle Illegal Wildlife'.

137. Michael Standaert, "'This Makes Chinese Medicine Look Bad': TCM Supporters Condemn Illegal Wildlife Trade', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2020.

138. Lauren Rothman, 'China Can't Get Enough of Black Market Tiger Bone Wine', *Vice News*, 4 January 2015, <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/78d35d/china-cant-get-enough-of-black-market-tiger-bone-wine>>, accessed 22 September 2022; for older figures, see Lucy Shaw, 'China Allowing Sale of Tiger Bone Wine', *Drinks Business*, 27 February 2013, <<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2013/02/china-allowing-sale-of-tiger-bone-wine/>>, accessed 26 October 2022.

139. Anonymouse, 'North Korean Tiger Bone Wine in China and Chinese Tiger Bone Wine in America'.

140. *Korea Herald*, 'North Korea's Income from Tourism Half of that from Gaeseong Complex', 1 November 2015, <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20151101000053>>, accessed 2 June 2022.

Assessing Production

The manufacture of TAM products has thus likely generated an ongoing but minor stream of income for the North Korean state over several decades, and almost certainly not at the kind of scale seen in other countries in the region, China in particular. As with smuggling, North Korean involvement in TAM production and sale faced a major setback during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to dependence on an open North Korea–China border to sell to tourists and export goods. Nonetheless, once restrictions ease, this trade, like smuggling, seems likely to revive. The one obstacle that might stand in its way would be the Chinese government – its customs officials did indeed conduct some border seizures in 2019.¹⁴¹ However, China maintains a complex position on such issues, having re-legalised the use of domestically manufactured tiger bone and rhino horn for medicinal purposes in October 2018.¹⁴² It has, moreover, consistently denied that such North Korean products have been imported,¹⁴³ making the trade a more difficult problem to tackle openly.

141. EIA, 'China Proven Wrong Over its CITES Denial of Tiger Bone Wine Trade from North Korea'.

142. Dina Fine Maron, 'China Legalizes Rhino Horn and Tiger Bone for Medicinal Purposes', *National Geographic*, 29 October 2018.

143. EIA, 'China Proven Wrong Over its CITES Denial of Tiger Bone Wine Trade from North Korea'.

Conclusion

THIS PAPER HAS reviewed the evidence on the question of North Korea's involvement in the IWT, mapping the trade's scale, scope and character, and weighing its potential significance as an income stream for the regime. Research has been limited by the difficulties faced when looking at any matter relating to North Korea, and findings therefore remain partial and provisional. That said, however, it is apparent that there are consistent threads of activity, with North Korean involvement in the smuggling and sale of ivory and rhino horn from Africa, and in the production of TAM products for sale and export in Asia. Neither seems likely to have produced large streams of income for the state comparable to other licit and illicit activities, but evidence of both has recurred over several decades, suggesting that there is a realistic likelihood they will continue without further checks.

Crafting an appropriate policy response is a challenge: North Korean involvement in the IWT remains a genuine problem, but probably a small one, both as an aspect of North Korea's wider illicit activities, and within the IWT as a whole. Many practitioners seeking to mitigate bad actors in both fields will therefore see it – reasonably – as a low priority. In addition, any potential action faces several potential political blockages. North Korea is not a signatory to CITES, and is unlikely to be amenable to dissuasion, so the responsibility to deter Pyongyang falls on the international community, and those governments in whose jurisdictions North Korean IWT activities take place. At the UNSC, influential non-Western states such as China and Russia have latterly taken a less activist approach towards tackling recalcitrant North Korean behaviour, and in June 2022 both took the unprecedented decision to veto a new resolution on North Korea's nuclear programme.¹⁴⁴ In the case of countries touched by North Korean activities, moreover, especially several in sub-Saharan Africa, historical links with the regime and an ongoing residual sympathy for its perceived struggles continue to dilute the will to act.¹⁴⁵

In view of this, it would be disproportionate and unrealistic to propose major new measures. The most appropriate approach will be to work within existing agreements and structures as much as possible, and to seek support within contexts less likely to face political attrition, especially at regional level.

144. Edith M Lederer, 'China and Russia Defend North Korea Vetoes in First at UN', *Associated Press*, 9 June 2022.

145. Dolzikova and Joshi, 'The Southern Stratagem', pp. 60–61.

This paper proposes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The UNSC should encourage – where politically feasible – the effective implementation of relevant existing UNSC resolutions on North Korea, including:

- Personal luggage checks on North Korean diplomats and their families by customs authorities on their primary travel routes between Africa and East Asia. As UNSCR 2321 notes, this is feasible, as this luggage is defined as ‘cargo’,¹⁴⁶ and as such is not subject to the protections afforded the diplomatic bag under Article 27 of the Vienna Convention of 1961.¹⁴⁷ States also already have a right to check diplomats’ personal luggage under Article 36 of the Vienna Convention, where there is reason to believe that import or export laws are being contravened,¹⁴⁸ an instance clearly covered by IWT smuggling. To avoid the risk of displacement – in other words, other North Korean nationals being used to traffick goods – any restatement of a need for checks should ideally also include all North Korean nationals, including those travelling on official government or other types of North Korean passport.¹⁴⁹ However, as noted above, the current likelihood of the UNSC issuing a new resolution covering these additional areas is slim.
- Information sharing about relevant port stops with the UN Panel of Experts (PoE) by UN member states in their annual returns. These should then be published in the PoE’s regular reports, listing North Korean diplomats and other nationals involved in IWT smuggling. The quantity and quality of member-state reporting has varied, however, and expectations should be restrained about significant improvements.¹⁵⁰
- The repatriation of all North Korean nationals, excluding diplomats and those on student visas, as required by UNSCR 2397.¹⁵¹ Alongside personal luggage checks, the repatriation of most North Korean nationals would massively undermine the regime’s capacity to undertake any criminal or proliferation activity. However, although the resolution set a deadline of December 2019, some North Koreans failed to return or be returned by

146. UNSCR 2270, 2 March 2016, S/RES/2270 (2016), para. 18; UNSCR 2321, 30 November 2016, S/RES/2321 (2016), para. 13.

147. Vienna Convention on Diplomatic and Consular Relations, 18 April 1961, Article 27.

148. *Ibid.*, Article 36, para. 2.

149. There are four types of North Korean passport: diplomatic passports; ‘service’ passports for government officials; official passports for citizens travelling or working abroad on official duties; and ordinary passports provided under special permission from the government. See UNSC, ‘Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1874 (2009)’, 11 June 2013, S/2013/337, footnote 37, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_337.pdf>, accessed 21 September 2022.

150. UNSC, ‘Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1874’, 8 September 2021, S/2021/777, Summary, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_777_E.pdf>, accessed 22 September 2022.

151. UNSCR 2397, 22 December 2017, S/RES/2397, para. 8.

then.¹⁵² The Covid-19 pandemic has created further barriers to implementation, with travel restrictions and North Korea's border closures preventing nationals from returning home. The eventual end of the pandemic will in theory allow this requirement to be met, but whether this goal can be achieved remains uncertain, given, for example, the current reported interest of Russia, a permanent member of the UNSC, in the potential use of North Korean labour.¹⁵³

Recommendation 2: Beyond the UN but remaining at a global level, there are other institutional avenues that could be explored to highlight the issue of North Korean IWT activities and seek ways to tighten states' applications of relevant international obligations.

- The Conference of Parties of CITES has rigorous requirements in place for issuing permits for the export and import of protected species, especially under Appendix 1. As a non-CITES signatory, however, North Korea has not agreed to operate within this framework, indicating that there is no feasible mechanism for holding the country to account for its unregulated exports. This means that the onus is on CITES signatories who are potential import markets for North Korean products to tackle the trade. But, as noted above, ambiguities remain, as the relevant CITES resolution on traditional medicines specifically prohibits the export, not the import, of items manufactured for domestic use.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, to encourage better implementation of provisions designed to prevent the smuggling and import of TAM products from North Korea into China and beyond, this resolution should be amended to clarify the need to prevent uncertified *imports* and their onward sale and distribution, as well as exports.

Recommendation 3: Intergovernmental organisations such as INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization (WCO) play an important role in sharing information and best practice, and provide operational support to national agencies' actions in the fight against the IWT.¹⁵⁵ However, their collection of intelligence on North Korean activities in the area is potentially hampered by the state's lack of membership in such international organisations; for example, an interview request made to the WCO's Asia-Pacific Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILO) network was rejected on the grounds that North Korea was not a member of the WCO, and therefore the RILO did not collate data on its trade.¹⁵⁶ Any barriers to the collection of material

152. UNSC, 'Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1874', S/2020/840, para. 122.

153. Justin McCurry, 'North Korean Labour Could Be Sent to Rebuild the Donbas, Says Russian Ambassador', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2022.

154. CITES Resolution Conf. 10. 19 (Rev. CoP14), 'Traditional Medicines'.

155. For example, see CITES and ICCWC, 'Wildlife Trafficking: Organized Crime Hit Hard by Joint INTERPOL–WCO Global Enforcement Operation', 10 July 2019, <https://cites.org/eng/news/wildlife-trafficking-organized-crime-hit-hard-by-joint-interpol-wco-global-enforcement-operation_10072019>, accessed 22 September 2022.

156. Author email correspondence with Asia-Pacific Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILO), 24 March 2022. For RILO scope, see World Customs Organization, 'Regional Intelligence Liaison

on North Korean IWT activities within such organisations should therefore be addressed and rectified, and intelligence on North Korean customs stops and seizures should be collated and shared with the UN PoE.

Recommendation 4: Alongside global efforts, there are also opportunities for regional intergovernmental groups in affected regions, in particular sub-Saharan Africa and parts of East and Southeast Asia, to play a role in collecting intelligence and raising awareness.

- Economic and political development communities in IWT-affected areas need to use existing information- and expertise-sharing structures to pool operational intelligence on North Korean IWT activities. Appropriate frameworks for sharing might include in Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Enforcement Network, and in Africa, the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation¹⁵⁷ and the West African Police Chiefs' Committee,¹⁵⁸ associated with the Southern African Development Community and the Economic Community of West African States, respectively. Collated information could be used to improve agencies' understanding of North Korean tradecraft, improve returns to the PoE and, where possible, support interdiction efforts to prevent and deter further North Korean IWT smuggling.

Recommendation 5: FATF-style regional bodies in affected areas also have a potential role to play in improving intelligence collection and awareness of North Korean IWT activities. In particular, the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group, the Central Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group, the West Africa Money Laundering Group, and the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering should collate operational and open-source intelligence on North Korean activities in the IWT. Where appropriate, this should be shared with the PoE, but should in any case be used more broadly to create typology reports and training packages for national law enforcement and customs agencies in affected jurisdictions. While this could be done fruitfully at group level, inter-group collaboration across the African and Asian bodies will lead to a more comprehensive view.

Offices', <<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/enforcement-and-compliance/activities-and-programmes/intelligence-and-risk-management-programme/rilo.aspx>>, accessed 22 September 2022.

157. Southern African Development Community, 'Police (SARPCCO)', <<https://www.sadc.int/pillars/police-sarpcco>>, accessed 21 September 2022.

158. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), 'ECOWAS Security Ministers to Work with Nigeria and Other Member States to Tackle Regional Security Challenges', 17 May 2019, <<https://ecowas.int/?p=33719>>, accessed 21 September 2022.

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