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CHAPTER 9

Wildlife trafficking in Malaysia: Current challenges and interventions

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Abstract: Malaysia remains a critical source, transit and demand country for species trafficked across Asia and beyond. To address this, TRAFFIC employs a multi-pronged trade monitoring approach to build an evidence base that informs enforcement and policy. Through systematic seizure analysis, court monitoring, and online trade surveys, TRAFFIC identifies emerging trends, trafficking routes, and factors that facilitate trafficking. Recent findings highlight several pressing issues. Cross-border wildlife smuggling by air to India reflects sophisticated transnational networks. A surge in gibbon trafficking underscores the international demand for primates as pets. Meanwhile, shark and ray products continue to be openly traded online, and tiger parts persist in illicit markets. Together, these cases illustrate the scale and diversity of wildlife crime in Malaysia today. These data-driven insights help shape interventions and strengthen national responses. TRAFFIC's interventions target both supply and demand dimensions. The team delivers training and capacity-building for the transport sector, including airlines and postal and courier services, to detect and disrupt illegal shipments. In collaboration with government agencies and other partners, TRAFFIC supports law enforcement officers and prosecutors to strengthen investigations and secure convictions. Complementing enforcement, behaviour change initiatives within the Traditional Chinese Medicine community aim to reduce demand for products derived from threatened species. Multi-stakeholder partnerships bridge the private and public sectors, promoting shared responsibility in curbing illegal trade.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia plays multiple roles in the global illegal wildlife trade: it is a source for wildlife taken locally, a transit point for shipments moving between other regions, and a consumer market for wildlife, whether for their parts and products in traditional medicines, or as exotic pets (TRAFFIC 2020). This section illustrates some of the most pertinent challenges posed by the illegal wildlife trade to Malaysia today, and showcases a range of interventions undertaken to tackle the problem. It is recognised that unregulated sourcing and poaching are important issues, and others are doing important work with local communities and site-based monitoring. This section instead focuses on the trade chain further downstream.

An unpublished analysis of data from TRAFFIC of seizures that occurred in Malaysia or involved Malaysia as a location on the trade routefrom January 2016 to December 2025 found at least 2,042 seizure incidents (TRAFFIC, unpublished data). These included approximately 150,000 live trafficked animals (individuals), 1.3 million live illegal fishery catches and about 205 tonnes of animal parts/products, 972 tonnes of illegal fishery catches alongside around 148,000 whole plants or parts, and about 6,845 tonnes of plant parts/products. Seizures occurred across both Peninsular and East Malaysia, with hotspots where smuggling attempts were intercepted focused around transport hubs like airports and sea port, and land borders (Figure 1). For seizures implicating Malaysia occurring outside the country, most occurred in neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, but also included countries in South

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Asia and East Asia, and as far as Europe and Africa (Figure 2). The top seized taxa included live songbirds, primates, tortoises and freshwater turtles; pangolin scales and bodies; marine turtle eggs; elephant ivory; and tiger bodies and body parts (TRAFFIC, unpublished data). The sheer numbers illustrate the scale, diversity and transnational nature of wildlife trafficking involving Malaysia. It should be noted that seizure data represent an unknown proportion of total trafficking, and also reflect enforcement effort and reporting.

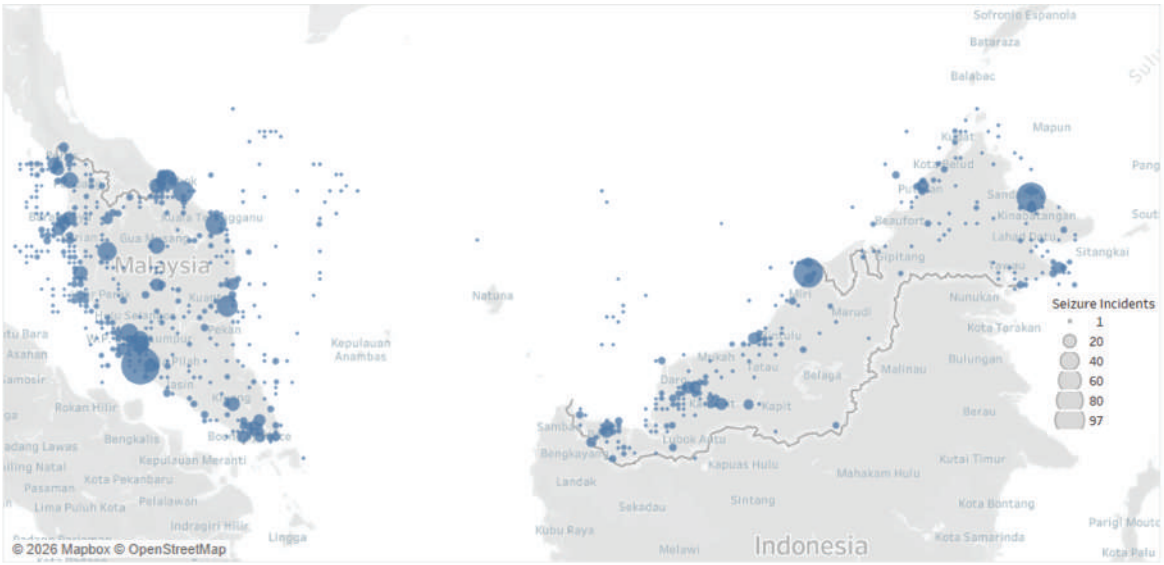

Figure 1. Location of 1,750 seizures that occurred in Malaysia (2016 – 2025). Source: TRAFFIC, unpublished data.

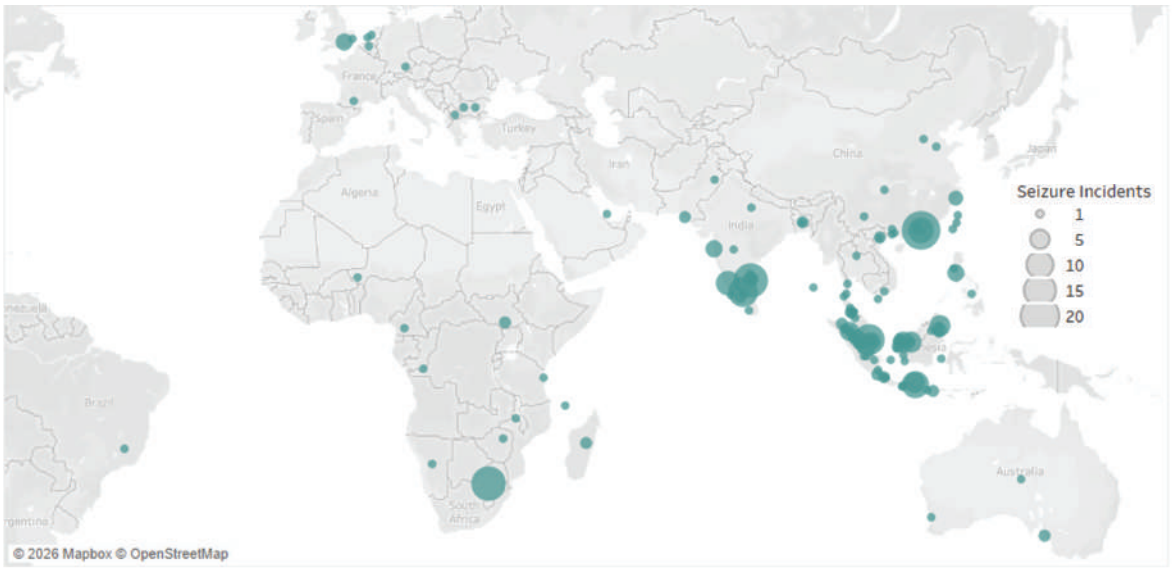

Figure 2. Location of 386 seizures that occurred outside Malaysia but involved Malaysia along the reported smuggling route (2016 – 2025). Source: TRAFFIC, unpublished data.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Transnational organised crime networks and exploitation of the transport sector

Many wildlife smuggling networks involve transnational organised crime with multiple actors and strategies to evade detection, from the point of source to destination markets. As an example, smuggling cases between the emerging Malaysia-India route demonstrate how traffickers exploit commercial air travel routes to move live wildlife. Taxa such as freshwater turtles and tortoises, which can command high prices in the exotic pet trade, are regularly smuggled live from South Asia to Malaysia via these routes (Stoner 2018). In July 2024, Malaysian law enforcement agencies uncovered a smuggling ring referred to as the "Ninja Turtle Gang" and involved hundreds of tortoises and turtles smuggled from South Asia to meet lucrative demand in Malaysia and other countries in the region (Malay Mail 2024; The Star 2024).

In recent years, there has been a concerning surge in cases of primate smuggling, especially gibbons, from Malaysia to India; an analysis of gibbon seizures across South and Southeast Asia showed that detected trafficking reached an all-time high in 2025 (TRAFFIC 2025b). In one incident, two people flew from Malaysia to India with nine gibbons hidden in checked-in luggage; all but one were later found dead at a hotel in Mumbai, where Indian authorities nabbed the two suspects (Krishnasamy 2025; TRAFFIC 2025b).

These Malaysia–India examples sit within a broader pattern of wildlife trafficking facilitated by the aviation sector. At least 35 air-linked smuggling incidents were connected to Malaysia in 2025 alone, involving more than 22,000 individual animals, framing Malaysia's strong air connectivity as both an economic asset and a trafficking vulnerability (TRAFFIC 2026c).

Online wildlife trade: fast, large, and anonymous

Online trade is a growing enforcement challenge because of its rapidly-expanding markets and anonymous nature. The rising use of mail and courier services in the illegal wildlife trade is also closely linked to the expansion of online purchasing and growing parcel volumes, which increase opportunities to ship wildlife through routine delivery systems (TRAFFIC 2022). The large number of listings can overwhelm law enforcement as well. Only few cases reach arrest or prosecution, especially if listings and accounts can be removed quickly, or if evidence is hard to attribute to identifiable suspects with jurisdictionally usable evidence (UNODC 2024). Moreover, those offering or advertising wildlife for sale may not necessarily have the animals in their possession, making it even more challenging for authorities to conduct a successful bust.

Since around 2013 – 2014, a rising trend emerged where traders were documented using social media platforms in Malaysia to sell to local consumers (Krishnasamy and Stoner 2016). Just half an hour's daily monitoring over five months by TRAFFIC researchers of 14 Facebook Groups in Peninsular Malaysia found more than 300 live wild animals for sale as pets, ranging from sun bears and gibbons, to otters and even binturong. More than 60% of the 80 species recorded during the monitoring were native to Malaysia, indicating a demand for local wildlife as pets. Almost half of the species recorded were totally protected from hunting or trade and illegal to keep or sell under the country's Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 (Stoner and Krishnasamy 2016). This problem continues, with the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN) reporting 654 cases involving illegal online sale of wildlife between 2020 and 2023 through various social media platforms (Morhan 2024). Between 2016 – 2025, at least over 4,700 individual animals were confiscated from at least 58 cases that reportedly involved social media (TRAFFIC, unpublished data).

Even marine species are not spared. An October–December 2022 online survey recorded more than 5 million kilograms of shark and ray products and parts sold across major e-commerce platforms including Facebook, Shopee, Lazada and business sites (Sidik *et al.* 2025). A vast majority of these were meat and bodies, indicating that the market for sharks and rays in Malaysia goes well beyond fins. Most concerningly, both threatened and CITES-listed species were recorded. In a separate study, an 11-day survey of sea cucumber and fish maw trade in Malaysia recorded almost 1500 kg of sea cucumber offered for sale, similarly including threatened and CITES-listed species (Ong and Chin 2022).

Traceability challenges

As illegally-sourced wildlife can be mixed into legal supply chains either deliberately or unknowingly, law enforcement face challenges in determining the provenance—and therefore legality—of traded wildlife. While captive breeding can potentially replace some of the pressure from wild populations, it unfortunately also presents a loophole where unscrupulous traders can launder wild-caught individuals as captive-bred ones to evade regulatory controls. Traceability along the supply chain is therefore required, where for instance individual animals are tagged with microchips or closed rings.

Traceability challenges are especially acute for processed commodities where the species identity and origin cannot be confirmed visually, most notably for commodities sourced from fisheries and the forestry industry. Origin information for online shark and ray sales posts was largely missing: only 18% of shark posts and 31% of ray posts included origin information (Sidik *et al*. 2025). Traceability, and therefore the ability to verify legality and sustainability, is essential; tools such as SharkTrace and rapid DNA tests have thus been recommended to strengthen oversight and to verify where and how shark and ray products were sourced from (Sidik *et al.* 2025). Similar traceability tools have been suggested to improve regulation of the sea cucumber and fish maw trade, noting that high trade volumes and the presence of protected and threatened species create compliance risks even where some trade is legal (Ong and Chin 2022).

INTERVENTIONS GLOBAL, LOCAL, AND ALONG THE TRADE CHAIN

Ensuring effective law enforcement

Malaysia's legal response addresses both international and domestic trade. Malaysia acceded to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1977 (CITES, n.d.). CITES is the main instrument regulating international wildlife trade globally. Species that are threatened by trade may be proposed by Parties for addition to CITES Appendix I (prohibiting all commercial international trade) or Appendix II (international trade requires permits). In 2022, Malaysia and Singapore successfully led two proposals to list the white-rumped shama on CITES Appendix II (CITES 2022a) and uplist the straw-headed bulbul from Appendix II to I (CITES 2022b). Both species face declining populations from demand for the caged bird trade; white-rumped shamas were especially being smuggled from Malaysia to neighbouring countries for bird singing competitions (Leupen *et al.* 2018; CITES 2022a). For the white-rumped shama, the Appendix II listing means that international trade requires export permits, allowing for better monitoring and protection.

Demonstrating proactive compliance with CITES, Malaysia has improved control over saiga antelope horn stockpiles by implementing inventory management, auditing, and enforcement oversight in line with CITES Decisions – the first country to do so for this species. This is crucial as Malaysia is a major consumer of these horns in use for traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and the species is protected under CITES Appendix II.

Authorities conducted stockpile assessments, enhanced documentation and record-keeping systems, and increased monitoring of licensed premises handling saiga antelope horns. Efforts also included tighter regulation of domestic trade, awareness-raising among TCM stakeholders, and closer inter-agency coordination to prevent leakage of illegal saiga antelope products into legal markets (CITES 2025).

Looking at national level legislation, the *International Trade in Endangered Species Act 2008* (Act 686) was enacted to implement CITES. Domestic protection and offence provisions for wildlife in Peninsular Malaysia and the Federal Territory of Labuan are set out in the *Wildlife Conservation (Amendment) Act 2022* and likewise the *Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997* for Sabah and the *Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1998* for Sarawak. A key recent intervention is stronger deterrence through heavier penalties. The *Wildlife Conservation (Amendment) Act 2022* now includes stronger provisions compared to the previous 2010 law with, among others, strengthened penalties for serious wildlife offences. Now, there are maximum penalties of up to RM1 million, and up to 15 years' imprisonment for certain offences involving totally protected wildlife.

Enforcement measures are most effective when they result in convictions and penalties that deter future offenders. NGOs such as Justice for Wildlife Malaysia and TRAFFIC have been working with law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judiciary to organise training, which cover aspects from investigation processes, to crime scene and evidence handling, to running mock trials (JWM 2023; TRAFFIC 2024a). The establishment of Malaysia's National Wildlife Forensic Laboratory supports enforcement and prosecutions through forensic DNA testing and related analyses (Government of Malaysia 2021).

Recent cases indicate Malaysia can achieve high-impact prosecutorial outcomes in some instances. In February 2026, a Malaysian court issued landmark penalties totaling almost RM129 million and more than 70 years total jail time to three Vietnamese nationals convicted of illegally keeping over 1000 parts of wildlife from many protected and highly threatened species, including tigers, bears, pangolins, and others (Bernama 2026; TRAFFIC 2026b).

Another significant milestone is Malaysia's first rhino horn trafficking conviction. In October 2025, two men were convicted for illegal possession of multiple white rhino horn pieces and one black rhino horn piece without special permits and were sentenced to six months' jail (TRAFFIC 2025a). This demonstrates the possibility of follow-through from seizure to conviction for high-value, internationally trafficked products, consistent with the increasing emphasis on the importance of treating wildlife trafficking as a serious crime and strengthening criminal justice responses. While the conviction was welcomed, the low jail term for a serious offence emphasises the need to continue advocating for better understanding by the judiciary on the seriousness of wildlife crime, and the illicit profits that could have been gained from it.

Engaging the private sector to improve detection

Interventions at various points along the trafficking and transportation chain exploited by wildlife traffickers aim to raise the probability of detection in the systems traffickers rely on. The postal and courier sector is one such example. A TRAFFIC analysis found over 4,700 wildlife individuals, parts, and products seized via post and courier incidents implicating Malaysia from 2016 to 2025 (TRAFFIC, unpublished data). Recognising a need and an opportunity, TRAFFIC worked with Pos Malaysia to institutionalise training and tools to improve detection and interdiction by staff across Malaysia (TRAFFIC 2022). By the end of the project, Pos Malaysia data indicated that wildlife parcel detection rose over tenfold at the international mail hub, reflecting the value of a sustained partnership model that links awareness, tools, and escalation pathways for suspicious parcels (TRAFFIC 2023).

To address the surge in wildlife trafficking incidents implicating Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the "*Eyes at KUL*" initiative was developed with Malaysia Airports to strengthen frontline staff awareness (TRAFFIC 2026c). This is a continuation of years of engagement with airport and airline stakeholders that started as part of a global initiative bringing together transport and logistics companies, government agencies, development groups, law enforcement, conservation organisations, academia, and donors to disrupt wildlife trafficking activities (TRAFFIC 2026a).

Other vectors also need to be drawn into the fold. Online platforms are a crucial intervention point because they facilitate trader access to buyers. Financial-sector intervention ("following the money") can help identify broader criminal networks and disrupt profits by submitting Suspicious Transaction Reports and targeting financial flows and money laundering linked to wildlife (Financial Action Task Force 2020). Global efforts to engage both sectors are ongoing (WWF 2024; United for Wildlife 2026), and Malaysia-specific activities have been initiated.

Reducing the use and demand for protected wildlife

Demand-side and industry engagement can reduce incentives for illegal supply, particularly where wildlife ingredients are culturally embedded. In Malaysia, steps towards this were made with the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) sector through the "*Ren Xin*" (Kind Heart) initiative, developed with Malaysian TCM industry associations to address the use of protected and threatened species by them (TRAFFIC 2024b). In addition to raising awareness about risks to the industry from the illegal wildlife trade, the initiative specifically targeted the industry's knowledge needs. A one-stop resource handbook was developed that includes relevant legislation, protection statuses of commonly used wildlife ingredients, and clinical trial studies showcasing alternative formulations that do not contain protected wildlife (Tsen *et al.* 2023). Recognising the gravity of the issue, stakeholders themselves have emphasised the role of shifting toward legal and sustainable alternatives, and reducing legal risk for practitioners and traders (Bernama 2025).

Bringing stakeholders together to find shared solutions

Illegal wildlife trade is difficult to control when agencies and sectors act in isolation, especially where responsibilities span multiple government agencies and private sectors. In September 2024, the "*UNITE: Combatting Wildlife Trafficking at Malaysian Borders*" roundtable was an example of a forum for both enforcers and the private sector to discuss strategies to collectively tackle trafficking across air, land, and sea entry and exit points (TRAFFIC 2024c). Public-private approaches are also crucial; a TCM conference connected key stakeholders in the industry with government health and wildlife regulators, fostering direct dialogue and greater clarity within the industry about compliance (TRAFFIC 2024b).

CONCLUSION

The illegal wildlife trade in Malaysia is large, complex, and covers a broad range of species and commodity types. Transnational organised networks exploit existing systems to advertise, transport and sell illegal wildlife. This problem therefore requires multi-faceted approaches. Successful interventions require deterrence and detection: stronger legal penalties, improved prosecution outcomes, and targeted partnerships with vectors such as postal/courier services and airports. Future effectiveness will likely depend on sustaining these measures while strengthening traceability and regulating online sales, deepening cooperation from the tech and finance sectors, and maintaining multi-stakeholder coordination so that intelligence, evidence, and action can move quickly across agencies and sectors. Working to shift demand away from illegal wildlife will also serve to remove an ultimate driver.

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