

# INVESTIGATOR

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# eia

## EIA at 40 - revisit 10 of the top investigations from our archives

Illegal climate-wrecking refrigerant gases still being smuggled into Europe

We name those investing in traditional medicines made with endangered wildlife

Illegal fish bladder trade could sound the death knell for the last 10 vaquita porpoises

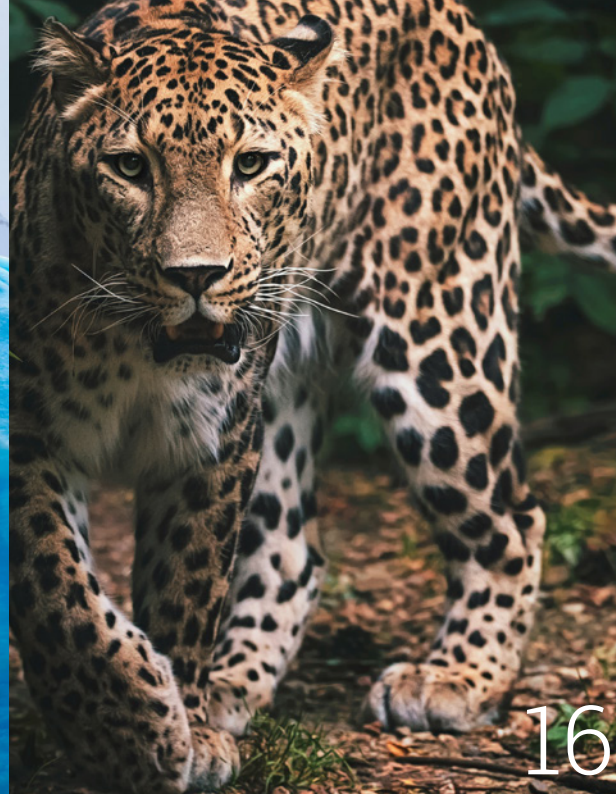




4



14



16



18



20

## CONTENTS

10 top investigations	4
Climate	14
Wildlife	16
Ocean	18
Forests	20
Securing Criminal Justice	22

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## INTRODUCTION



Over the past four decades, EIA has carried out countless globe-spanning field investigations into different forms of environmental crime.

I joined EIA in the late 1990s as an investigator, often going undercover to expose the criminal syndicates profiting from the illegal destruction of our environment.

At EIA, the end point of an investigation is not just a report, but using our evidence to secure tangible change, such as the arrest and prosecution of major wildlife criminals or securing the policy changes needed to protect our planet.

Ahead of our 40th anniversary in September, I have chosen my personal top 10 cases where our investigations made a real impact (I could have chosen lots more).

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The report that led to the global ivory trade ban

## A SYSTEM OF EXTINCTION (1989)

This landmark EIA report played a major role in persuading parties to the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to ban international trade in elephant ivory.

It began with a meeting in a London pub between EIA founders Allan Thornton and Dave Currey with a ship's captain who had observed traditional dhows ferrying ivory tusks from Tanzania to the United Arab Emirates.

EIA investigators followed the trail to the UAE where they witnessed ivory tusks being cut into sections at a factory run by the Hong Kong-based Poon family. To get the evidence, EIA's cameraman persuaded a neighbouring factory to allow him to conceal himself in a box which was lifted on a forklift to allow him to film the carving.

We followed the evidence to Hong Kong and uncovered a huge operation using legal loopholes to make a fortune by supplying carved ivory products from elephants slaughtered in Tanzania to the



Far East. EIA's evidence was broadcast to the world, prompting the Tanzanian Government to make its successful proposal to ban international ivory trade and put the Poons out of business. ●

Top: the remains of a poached elephant  
Above: Covert filming of the ivory carving factory in Dubai

Exposing military-run illegal logging in Papua

## THE LAST FRONTIER (2005)

A major milestone in our campaign to tackle illegal logging, this report was the culmination of six years of investigations with our local partners.

In the remote forests of Indonesia's West Papua, we were invited by the Knasaimos people to trek to their ancestral forests to document illegal logging being controlled by a military office. The target was merbau trees, a reddish hardwood mainly used for flooring.

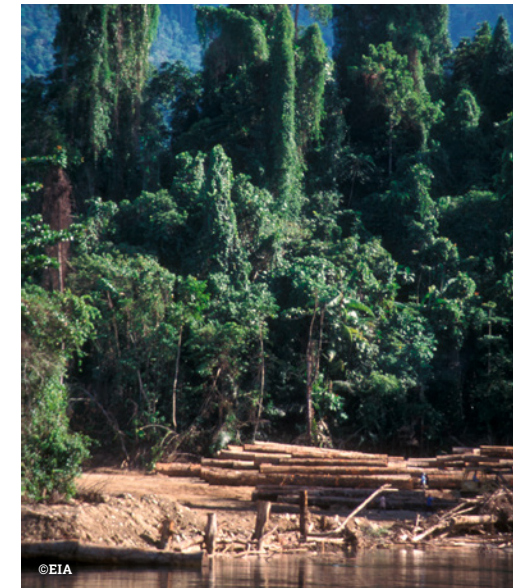
Our investigative team was able to penetrate a network of merbau smugglers spanning Jakarta, Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China. We gained access to factories near Shanghai processing logs into flooring and managed to film in the vast port of Zhangjiagang, where the timber arrived.

We released our findings at a press conference in Jakarta and the story caused a sensation, leading to the President launching an unprecedented enforcement operation in West Papua which resulted in arrests and seizures of merbau logs.

In the midst of the operation, we received a call from one of the Knasaimos people informing us that the military had gone

and the logging on their lands had ceased. ●

Below: An illegal logging operation in Papua  
Bottom: Shipping stolen timber from Indonesia





Faroe Islands whaling, the birth of EIA's first campaign

## FAROE ISLANDS PILOT WHALE HUNT CAMPAIGN (1984)

Emboldened by their investigation into Norway's minke whale hunt the previous year, in 1984 two of the trio who would go on to found EIA headed to the Faroe Islands to probe its pilot whales hunts.

At the time, what was then the world's largest whale hunt had received virtually no international attention.

Over the 400 year history of the hunts, an annual average of 880 pilot whales were killed, but in 1978 the slaughter began to rise dramatically and from 1980-83, an average of about 2,500 per year were killed.

We discovered that the brutal hunts could take place any time of the day or night, 365 days a year in any of the licenced whaling bays and they were regarded as 'sport, tradition and a way of

obtaining cheap food'.

The subsequent report – EIA's very first – concluded the hunts to be cruel, potentially unsustainable and no longer necessary for the survival of the islanders.

Although the hunts still continue, our revelations paved the way for a significant reduction in the number of whales killed and changes to regulations which eliminated the worst of the cruelty. ●

Above: Pilot whale hunting in the Faroe Islands

Targeting the illegal trade in ozone-wrecking CFCs

## CHILLING FACTS ABOUT A BURNING ISSUE (1997)

EIA's first investigative report into illegal trade in ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) shone a spotlight on a new form of environmental crime.

Under the UN Montreal Protocol of 1987, different blocs had to phase out production and consumption of CFCs, chemicals widely used in refrigeration

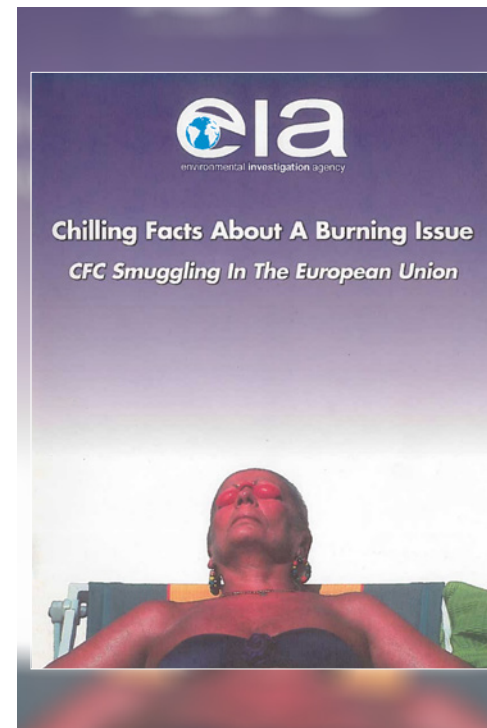
and air-conditioning.

But while the major markets of Europe and the US began to phase out, big producers such as China faced no curbs, creating the conditions for a lucrative black market.

EIA set out to reveal the mechanics of CFC smuggling, setting up a fake company to engage with suppliers in China and brokers in Europe, finding a burgeoning and blatant illegal trade in CFCs exploiting loopholes in the Protocol such as allowing trade in recycled CFCs.

One Chinese supplier bragged how he falsely labelled new CFCs as 'recycled' to evade controls, telling us: "This is our secret. Please do not leak it out."

Unsurprisingly, we did, including it in a report and short film which received widespread media coverage. We took our findings to a meeting of the Montreal Protocol and successfully lobbied for stronger licensing systems for CFCs. ●



## An alarming rise in illegal big cat skin trade **THE TIGER SKIN TRAIL (2004)**

In October 2003, customs officers in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) intercepted a record haul of 31 tiger skins and 581 leopard skins being trucked towards the capital Lhasa.

Intelligence gathered by EIA's Asian big cats team showed a surge in tiger and leopard skin seizures and revealed the existence of cross-border networks smuggling poached skins from India and Nepal into TAR and China.

Our detailed field investigations revealed the existence of well-organised syndicates trafficking tiger and leopard skins and we urged better enforcement cooperation between the countries involved to combat this growing menace to the last remaining wild tigers.

Our findings were released as delegates from more than 160 countries gathered in

Bangkok for a meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the global agreement regulating trade in endangered animals and plants, sounding the alarm that illegal trade in tiger skins had surged to alarming levels over the previous five years.

The meeting directed the CITES Secretariat to pursue the matter to examine the illicit trade in Asian big cat skins with a view to improving the exchange of enforcement information and coordinating investigations. ●

Below: Tiger and leopard skins offered for sale to EIA investigators in, respectively, Nepal and Tibet



## Stealing Myanmar's teak to make cash from chaos

### **ORGANISED CHAOS (2015)**

Our first investigative report into forest crimes in Myanmar targeted the rampant overland smuggling of valuable timber species to neighbouring China.

Working with local NGO partners, EIA uncovered a complex network of smuggling routes oiled by bribery and corruption. We tracked consignments of valuable Burmese teak logs into China's Yunnan Province and on to factories in southern Guangdong Province which were churning out wooden flooring.

Through our extensive field investigations, EIA revealed the activities of a shadowy syndicate called BDYA which was making a fortune through controlling one of the main smuggling routes. Members of the syndicate were subsequently arrested by Chinese authorities.

The report also marked the beginning of our campaign to halt the international trade in Burmese teak, widely used as decking for superyachts.



Information gathered by EIA has led to a series of seizures in Europe and, since the 2021 military coup, we have successfully campaigned for trade sanctions on Burmese teak in Europe and the US. ●

Top: Stolen timber being transported in Myanmar  
Above: Myanmar timber being inspected in a logyard in China

## The bloody toll of Iceland's rogue fin whaling **SLAYED IN ICELAND (2014)**

Iceland's controversial annual fin whale hunt revolves around Kristján Loftsson, a multi-millionaire and the Executive Director of Hvalur hf.

Our investigations in 2014, alongside partners, revealed that in his bid to create a viable market for fin whale products in Japan, he had used the resources of another company for which he served as Chair of the Board – Icelandic fishing giant HB Grandi.

The report exposed the scale of the hunt and overseas trade, as well as the financial and logistical links between the whalers and some of Iceland's largest companies, urging governments and corporations to act to ensure they are not supporting Hvalur's whaling activities.

At the time, Iceland's fin whale meat exports to date were worth an estimated \$50 million and clearly undermined both the International Whaling Commission's 1986 moratorium and the ban on international commercial trade in fin whale products imposed by CITES.

Our investigations found that since 2006, Hvalur had slaughtered more than 500 fin whales – the second largest creature on the planet – purely to cash in on a limited demand in Japan. ●

Top, right: A fin whale being butchered in Iceland  
Right: Processing the fin whale meat for export



## Tackling a new trade in climate-harming gases

### **EUROPE'S MOST CHILLING CRIME (2021)**

Fourteen years after *Chilling Facts About a Burning Issue* was launched, the illegal trade in ozone-depleting substances had greatly reduced, but EIA had started delving into a new crime type – the illegal trade in hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), cooling chemicals introduced as replacements for CFCs which were benign to the ozone layer but also powerful greenhouse gases.

The European Union had recognised the threat posed and introduced its F-gas Regulation, designed to gradually phase out HFCs by introducing a quota system to reduce supply – but this led to price rises which began attracting smugglers out to make a quick profit.

Through analysis of trade data, EIA was able to identify discrepancies which were indicative of illegal trade.

We started plotting some of the main smuggling routes and this led to an investigation in Romania, which was acting as transit hub for non-quota HFCs, usually made in China, entering the EU.

We released our findings, which led to positive engagement with EU law-makers. ●

Above: Illegal shipments of HFCs

Neutralising a key global hub for illegal ivory trade

## THE SHUIDONG CONNECTION (2017)

Three years of investigations into the mass slaughter of elephants in Tanzania and neighbouring Mozambique began in Zanzibar port, Tanzania, the exit point for a series of seized ivory consignments.



In 2014, our team engaged with the local Chinese community and discovered a network of traffickers from the town of Shuidong in southern China were behind many of the shipments.

In the Mozambique port town of Pemba to gather more information, they met three Chinese with strong Shuidong accents who claimed to be seafood traders, but we were convinced they were involved in ivory smuggling.

At a follow-up meeting in Shuidong, they admitted being in Pemba to oversee shipment of three tonnes of ivory tusks,



claiming 80 per cent of ivory tusks entering China came via Shuidong. In a nerve-wracking nighttime operation, investigators travelled to a remote location outside Shuidong to view tusks smuggled from Pemba.

Soon after we released our findings, we received a call from China Customs asking for more information, which led to the arrest and jailing of the Shuidong trio – and an end to Shuidong’s pivotal role in ivory trafficking. ●

Above, left: The Shuidong ivory traders  
Above: Viewing the poached ivory

An illegal wildlife trade supermarket for Chinese tourists

## SIN CITY (2015)

In 2015, EIA’s Asian big cats team exposed how a casino development in northern Laos had become a nucleus of criminality, including the open sale of illegal wildlife products such as tiger parts.

While investigating the trafficking of both captive-bred and wild tigers in the Mekong region, we heard of a lawless area in northern Laos, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, run by a Hong Kong-based company called Kings Romans Group.

An EIA team travelled to the area and discovered that it felt more like China, with the zone running on Beijing time and all transactions in Chinese currency. Opposite the casino was a large pen containing captive-bred tigers and along the main street were shops and restaurants offering illegal wildlife products to the mostly Chinese gamblers and tourists

We released our findings in the aptly named report *Sin City*, prompting a token raid by the Lao authorities – but more importantly, the US Government



placed sanctions on Zhao Wei, the owner of Kings Romans Group, for heading a transnational crime group. ●

Top: Kings Romans casino in Laos  
Above: A captive in the facility



## Illegal climate-wrecking refrigerant gases still being smuggled into Europe

Five years after EIA first exposed the European illegal trade in hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) climate gases, our new investigation has revealed significant levels of trafficking persist despite the worsening climate emergency.

Commonly used in refrigeration and air-conditioning, HFCs are being phased down under the European Union's F-gas Regulation.

But organised criminals attracted by high profits are taking advantage of weak law enforcement to meet the demand left by the transition from the harmful gases.

And our new evidence suggests that black market traders and traffickers are becoming more sophisticated, adapting their tactics to evade detection.

In 2021, our report *Europe's Most*

*Chilling Crime* highlighted Romania as a key entry point for illegal HFCs arriving in the EU. The latest investigation, *More Chilling Than Ever – Tackling Europe's ongoing illegal trade in HFC climate super pollutants*, uncovered evidence of traders primarily sourcing HFCs from Turkiye and China to import illegally into the EU.

Trafficked from Bulgaria and other countries on the edge of the bloc, the chemicals are smuggled to destinations such as Greece, Germany, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain.



The new investigation showed how traders are becoming smarter at dodging detection, employing tactics such as avoiding banned disposable cylinders and disguising HFCs as unregulated refrigerant alternatives.

EIA Senior Climate Campaigner Fin Walravens warned that the illegal HFC trade not only exacerbates climate change but has also been linked to significant tax evasion.

She added: "As 2024 signals another reduction in legal HFC supply to EU markets, demand for illegal HFCs persists. There is an urgent need for coordinated, proactive enforcement efforts across the EU to combat HFC climate crime."

*More Chilling Than Ever* calls on the European Commission and EU Member States to prioritise implementation of compliance-related measures under the new F-Gas Regulation and to step up enforcement.



### CLIMATE NEWS IN BRIEF

- In September, EIA threw its weight into an international campaign to secure a global Fossil Fuel Treaty. The Fossil Fuel-Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative was launched in 2019 to end new and phase out existing fossil fuel production, while simultaneously advocating a just transition for all countries.
- Members of the European Parliament in April adopted the EU Methane Regulation, the first ever EU legislation to target this super-pollutant in the energy sector. Methane ranks as the second most important greenhouse gas, 82 times more potent than carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) over a 20-year period and responsible for about a third of the warming experienced today.

Opposite page: The Guardia Civil conducts a raid  
Above, left: a trader in illegal HFCs



## We name those investing in traditional medicines made with endangered wildlife

EIA investigators have uncovered the use of threatened leopards and pangolins in at least 88 traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) products

Manufactured by 72 Chinese companies and licensed by the National Medical Products Administration of China, some of the treatments identified also contain tiger and rhino, in contravention of recommendations made by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The facts are contained in the major October report *Investing in Extinction – How the global financial sector profits from traditional medicine firms using threatened species*.

We also identified 62 banks and financial institutions – many of them Fortune 500 companies and household names – based in Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan, Switzerland, the UK and USA which have invested in three publicly listed Chinese pharmaceutical groups manufacturing nine of the products stated to contain leopard and/or pangolin.

They include AXA SA, BlackRock Inc, BNP Paribas SA, Citigroup Inc, Deutsche Bank, HSBC, Legal & General, the Royal Bank of Canada and UBS AG.

Many of the investors are signatories

to the Principles for Responsible Investment or are members of the International Corporate Governance Network, which has publicly expressed concerns about biodiversity loss and species extinctions.

And seven are members of The Royal Foundation's United for Wildlife Financial Taskforce, which was launched in 2018 to enroll the private sector in tackling the trafficking of wildlife.

EIA Legal & Policy Specialist Avinash Basker said: "The use of highly threatened animals such as leopards, pangolins, rhino and tigers in traditional medicine products disregards agreements made by the international community to protect these species.

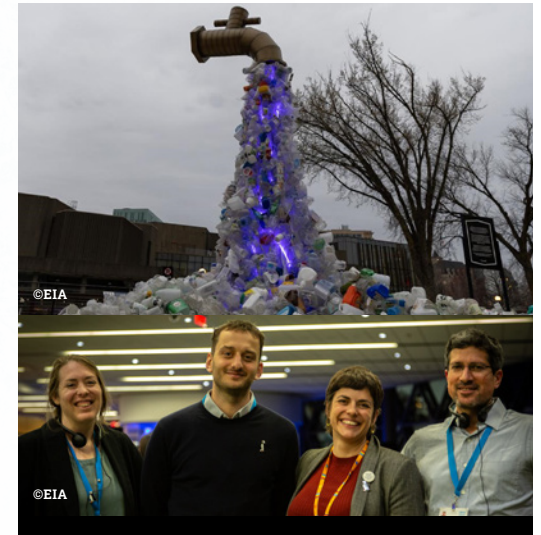
"This is use on an effectively industrial scale which can only push these species ever-closer to extinction, simultaneously sending mixed messages to consumers, fueling demand for their parts and derivatives and tainting the global reputation of TCM."

Right: A traditional Chinese medicine product containing leopard and pangolin



### WILDLIFE NEWS IN BRIEF

- In September, we were pleased to learn that Asian illegal wildlife trade kingpin Teo Boon Ching, pictured above, had been sentenced to 18 months in prison by a court in New York for large-scale trafficking of rhinoceros horns. The full scope of his criminal activities was exposed five years ago by EIA, which supplied a substantial amount of intelligence on his modus operandi and activities to US enforcement agents.
- In February, Angola was formally sanctioned for failing to make progress in tackling the illegal trade in elephant ivory since 2020. The Standing Committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) recommended all commercial trade in CITES-listed species with Angola be suspended until further notice.



## Illegal fish bladder trade could sound the death knell for the last 10 vaquita porpoises

A thriving online illegal trade in the swim bladders of endangered totoaba fish is helping to drive the vaquita porpoise to the brink of extinction.

Vaquita are the most endangered marine mammal on the planet and exist only in a small area of Mexico's Gulf of California. It is estimated as few as 10 remain, with the population devastated in the past decade due to being caught in illegal gillnets set to capture totoabas.

Totoaba swim bladders – known as maws – are in high demand in China and, increasingly, in other Asian countries as a symbol of wealth and for their purported, but unproven, medicinal value.

In February, our report *On Borrowed Time – The ongoing illegal totoaba trade driving the critically endangered vaquita to extinction* warned that the illegal maw trade now appears to be strong and flourishing on social media.

The report revealed that the market in China for dried totoaba maws on popular social media channels remains active and has increased significantly on WeChat. In 2023, the activity and quantities of totoaba maws advertised on WeChat and, by extension, in China exceeded those of previous years,

indicating that wildlife traffickers have resumed business as usual since the COVID-19 pandemic.

EIA Senior Ocean Campaigner Sarah Dolman said: "Our investigation suggests a thriving and opportunistic network of traders and consumers willing to participate in the illegal trading of totoaba maws.

"Despite this, enforcement action, as measured by the number of seizures of totoaba maws recorded in EIA's Global Environmental Crime Tracker, declined significantly in 2023.

"Only urgent, strategic and collaborative efforts to end the illegal totoaba maw trade will give the critically endangered vaquita a chance to survive and recover."

Opposite page: Dried totoaba maw filmed undercover in Mexico

Above: various totoaba maw products found online

### OCEAN NEWS IN BRIEF

- As this issue of *Investigator* went to press, our Ocean campaigners were heading out to Canada for the fourth – and penultimate – round of negotiations in pursuit of a Global Plastics Treaty. When the third round of talks ended in November, we were left concerned that the influence of the global petrochemicals industry and plastic-producing countries was frustrating meaningful progress.
- In the wake of a drive hunt in the Faroe Islands in September which saw the slaughter of 42 more pilot whales, we and several partner NGOs released a new report challenging claims that annual Faroese drive hunts are humane, sustainable and an integral part of local culture.

Above: The EIA Ocean team at the treaty talks in Canada

## Nothing to celebrate here – palm oil industry watchdog’s 20 years of failure

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the main voluntary certification scheme for palm oil, celebrated its 20th anniversary in April

The industry watchdog is supposed to assure consumers that any product containing palm oil which bears its stamp of approval is free from environmental or social violations.

These include forests not being cleared, workers not being abused and indigenous peoples’ lands not being taken over – problems which nevertheless continue to occur.

In the UK, all the major supermarkets use the RSPO to ensure the palm oil that they sell is sustainable.

But 20 years on from when it started, the RSPO is still failing to ensure the palm oil it certifies is actually sustainable and adheres to the standards consumers would expect, such as being free from forced labour or not endangering the habitats of threatened species such as orangutans through deforestation.

In the meantime, the EU has adopted a new law – the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) – which will come into effect at the end of 2024 and for which EIA has long campaigned.

This Regulation requires companies

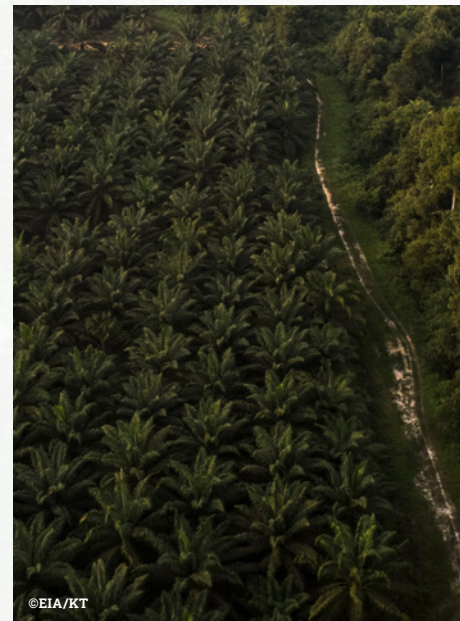
placing palm oil and other forest-risk commodities on the EU market to ensure they have not been produced illegally or caused deforestation post-2020.

The new EUDR makes it very clear that certification schemes such as the RSPO may help companies with their risk assessment, but companies are still ultimately responsible for undertaking due diligence and for any breaches that take place.

They are not allowed to just rely on certification schemes for compliance – which is just as well, given the RSPO’s track record.

The watchdog’s biggest failures include:

- biggest forest destroyer in Indonesia becomes RSPO-certified
- companies with forced labour remain RSPO-certified
- RSPO found to have failed to ensure its rules are adhered to
- study found no difference between RSPO-certified and non-certified plantations
- indigenous peoples’ complaints constantly unresolved by the RSPO.



Top: Clearing land by burning  
Above: A palm oil plantation in Kalamantan



### FORESTS NEWS IN BRIEF

- In April, EIA and more than 170 NGOs jointly wrote to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to express their utmost support for the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), which will come into effect in December, and to urge her to hold the line against efforts by some industry figures and EU Member States representatives to undermine the law.
- In January, we marked the third anniversary of the Myanmar military seizing power with a special podcast discussing the ongoing impacts of the coup and efforts to stop the junta from cashing in on the country’s natural commodities, especially teak which is much sought after for luxury boatbuilding. You can listen to all of our podcasts via our website at [eia-international.org/podcast/](http://eia-international.org/podcast/).



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## Africa workshop unites key players to better tackle illegal wildlife trade

EIA campaigners were in Nigeria in February to facilitate a high-level international workshop to bolster efforts to tackle illegal wildlife trade by sharing resources and ideas.

The four-day event – *Strengthening International Cooperation to Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking in West and Central Africa* – took place in the capital Abuja.

It was attended by more than two dozen experts and representatives from government, law enforcement and NGOs hailing from Cameroon, Nigeria and the Republic of the Congo.

The workshop, supported through grants from the UK's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund and the US Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law

Enforcement Affairs, concluded with a five-point action plan for participants to take away and enact with the aim of significantly boosting cooperation between the three countries.

The plan covered intelligence-sharing and comprehensively investigating illegal wildlife trade beyond seizures of contraband to identify and disrupt the high-level transnational criminals profiting from this multi-million dollar industry.

Above: Participants on the first day of the Abuja workshop



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**“If it wasn't for EIA  
the world would be  
a darker place”.**

**Mary, EIA supporter.**

**Support our campaigns against wildlife trade  
and for the protection of biodiversity**

For a future where humanity respects, protects and  
celebrates the natural world for the benefit of all.

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