

World Environment Day 2016: Go Wild for Life

Efforts to counter illicit wild life trade -- including stronger policies, awareness campaigns and investments in community conservation and law enforcement - have scored some great successes. However, many species remain at risk and it will take a dedicated and sustained effort to turn the tide, writes **Md Touhidul Alam Khan**

WORLD Environment Day (WED) is the United Nations' most important event to encourage worldwide awareness and actions for the protection of our environment. Since it began in 1974, it has grown to become a global event celebrated in over 100 countries. It has grown over the years to become a broad, global platform for public outreach.

In 1962, writer Rachel Carson published a famous book called *Silent Spring*. It showed how chemical pesticides were harming birds. It was the first detailed account of how human actions were hurting the environment. Over the years, many more books and newspaper reports made the issues of saving our planet well-known. On June 05, 1972, world leaders got together to think seriously about our planet's future for the first time. Leaders of 113 countries met in the Stockholm Conference, and agreed upon a plan to reverse some of the damages. It was the first time that issues like CFCs and global warming were discussed.

After the Conference, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was set up. It coordinates activities of all UN member states.

One of its best achievements was the Montreal Protocol, which banned CFCs to help stop ozone depletion. Now, the UNEP is funding environmental protection activities in many countries, and is helping countries draw up a treaty to stop global warming. The anniversary of the Stockholm Conference is celebrated as World Environment Day every year. Each year, there is a special theme. The first ever theme was 'Only One Planet'.

Each WED is observed around a theme that focuses attention on a particularly pressing environmental concern. WED 2016 is themed on the illegal trade in wildlife under the slogan "Go Wild for Life". The booming illegal trade in wildlife products is eroding the earth's precious biodiversity, robbing us of our natural heritage and driving many wild species to the brink of extinction. The killing and smuggling is also fuelling organised crime, and feeding corruption and insecurity across the globe.

Wildlife crime endangers elephants, rhinos, tigers, gorillas, sea turtles -- among many other wild species. In 2011, a subspecies of Javan rhino went extinct in Vietnam, while the last western black rhinos

vanished from Cameroon the same year. Great apes have disappeared from Gambia, Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo. Lesser-known victims include helmeted hornbills and pangolins as well as wild orchids and timbers like rosewood - flowers and timber are also considered wildlife.

Efforts to counter the illicit trade - including stronger policies, awareness campaigns and investments in community conservation and law enforcement - have scored some great successes. However, many species remain at risk and it will take a dedicated and sustained effort by each and every one of us to turn the tide.

This year's theme for WED "Go Wild for Life" encourages us to protect all species under threat. This can be about animals or plants that are threatened within our local area as well as at the national or global level - local extinctions will eventually add up to a global extinction.

Every WED has a different global host country, where the official celebrations take place. WED highlights the environmental challenges facing that country, and supports the effort to address them. This year's host is Angola. Officials there are trying to

safeguard elephant herds, conserve the biodiversity-rich wildlife, and protect the environment as they continue to rebuild their nation after more than a quarter-century of civil war.

"Angola is delighted to host World Environment Day, which will focus on an issue close to our hearts," said Angolan Environment Minister Maria de Fatima Jardim, adding "the illegal wildlife trade, particularly the trade in ivory and rhino horn, is a major problem across our continent. By hosting this day of celebration and awareness-raising, we aim to send a clear message that such practices will soon be eradicated." Angola takes great pride in its environmental assets including pristine coastline as well as forests and grasslands comparable to those that draw many tourists to neighbouring Namibia and Zambia.

The country's wildlife includes lions, great apes and giant sable antelope, an endangered species found only in Angola and listed as critically endangered by the International Union of Conservation of Nature. The government of Angola recently launched a string of initiatives to enhance conservation and stiffen law

enforcement. To demonstrate its commitment to curb elephant poaching, Angola last year submitted a National Ivory Action Plan as part of its membership of CITES, the UNEP-hosted international convention designed to prevent trade in wild animals and plants from threatening their survival. The plan includes stiff penalties for poaching and ivory trafficking and stronger policing, including more training for wildlife rangers and the posting of a wildlife crime unit to the international airport in the capital, Luanda. In March, officials presented a draft law banning the sale of ivory, a move that would end the open sale of ivory artefacts at Luanda's bustling Benfica market. Angola also is discussing the establishment of several vast trans-frontier conservation areas, including one that would include the wildlife-rich Okavango delta in Botswana, and another that incorporates Namibia's wild Skeleton Coast.

Angola is embracing this ambitious agenda as well as the high-profile role of hosting the WED -- even as it continues to rebuild after a long and damaging civil war that only ended in 2002. The country can look to other African countries, especially

safari destinations, and the growing revenues they earn from ecotourism to appreciate the value of safeguarding the environment and protecting iconic species from illegal poaching and trafficking.

In Bangladesh, it is a matter of great concern that our Sundarbans is being ruined rather methodically. The hunters are killing tigers for their skin, teeth, bones and fat and selling those to foreign countries. India and China are the buyers. Tigers are being killed by shooting, trapping or poisoning. As per UNDP survey, in 2006, there were 442 Royal Bengal Tigers in the Sundarbans. Since 2000, tigers killed more than 193 people, while 29 tigers got killed and a few others were found dead in the forest, according to official records of the forest department. The government should take pragmatic steps to make their habitat secure and thus protect the tigers and other animals; otherwise, we will lose the valuable species, and the Sundarbans' reputation, for good.

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