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VIEWPOINT

Ethical and mental health considerations for research into trade and trafficking of natural resources

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As part of a project on the trafficking of parrots and antiquities in Indonesia, we organized a conference titled "Ethics of online research into illicit trade of cultural and natural resources" in August 2021. Two of the major themes that came out of this conference were (1) the difference in ethical approval requirements for research into these sensitive topics and (2) the overall lack of mental health support for researchers focusing on these topics. In this short commentary, we will reflect on both themes, using our own experiences as examples.

Researching the trade and trafficking of natural resources is sensitive research, as it "potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it" (Lee, 1993, p. 4). Lee and Renzetti (1993, p. 6) classify research as likely to be threatening in four areas: "(a) where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience; (b) where the study is concerned with deviance or social control; (c) where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or (d) where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned." Arguably, researching the trade and trafficking of natural resources, such as wildlife crime, environmental crime, trafficking of natural commodities, unregulated and unreported fishing, factory farming, human–wildlife conflict, to name a few examples, involves all four areas of threat. Moreover, such research can be extremely emotionally taxing for both the researcher and research participants.

There is a huge disparity in how research into sensitive topics are approached in the respective disciplines of the authors: in criminology, ethical approval for any sensitive topic that involves using primary data collection methods (interviews, observation, etc.) needs to be sought before entering the field. The ethical approval process in social science disciplines across different academic contexts and countries leaves much to be desired. However, it offers the researcher an opportunity to think through potentially "risky", dangerous, harmful, and ethically compromising fieldwork situations, while reflecting on their own positionality and protection of themselves, research participants, and data. Moreover, they are required to fill out risk assessments and complete specialized training for hostile environments. A discussion of these processes is required in publications.

Within conservation and more broadly, biological sciences, these requirements are largely absent: no ethical approval process is required for observational research using animals, even when this concerns sensitive topics such as abuse, trafficking, poaching, and other harms. Publications rarely feature a discussion of researcher positionality and reflexivity or of the ethical considerations and

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implications of the research project. Conversely, complex ethical approval requirements are in place within these fields, but only when the research involves direct experimentation on a protected organism which may have the potential to cause harm. Gaining approval for these procedures is a long process involving several levels of approval at institutional, personal, and project level, and as such, it is very tightly regulated. With increasing use of qualitative research methods within the wildlife trafficking research field, coupled with the growing importance of human–wildlife interactions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this disparity in ethical regulations needs imminent addressing. Moreover, with the current emphasis on 'decoloniality', an ethical review process could ensure that parachute social science is avoided, and equity and sustainable collaboration between stakeholders are foregrounded in the research.

Researching wildlife trafficking usually aims at maximizing the effectiveness of countermeasures to ultimately benefit animal welfare and reduce animal–human conflict. To this end, the majority of researchers working in this field are passionate about the animals they are aiming to protect or conserve. Research within this field relies heavily upon the collection of market, seizure and other data, and as such, researchers routinely need to visit settings of harvested and trafficked animals in order to collect the required information. Despite the extensive background knowledge of researchers investigating the illegal wildlife trade, from personal experience, little prepares you for actually viewing the harm inflicted upon these targeted animals. Over time, desensitization from frequent exposure to these traumatic contexts can occur, which is then suppressed or avoided as it is "just part of the job".

When confronted with the harms and crimes involved in the trade and trafficking of natural resources, most researchers are unprepared for the mental toll this takes and are not supported to ensure their mental (and physical) well-being is safeguarded. For example, when we visited several wildlife markets around Asia this year, we were confronted with a large variety of encaged, confined, and captive animals of a diversity we had never seen in the wild. Most were ill and in clear suffering or distress, with many cages displaying deceased individuals. While this provided ideal data for our projects, we were left feeling physically ill (nauseous, headache) and psychologically traumatized. With the only available option to debrief and seek well-being support from colleagues and friends, we therefore pass on the mental burden of these harms and crimes without addressing the issue. This is an insufficient approach to take for the long-term well-being of researchers in this field of study.

Instead, researchers need thorough training and support before heading into the field to collects data: from addressing the impact on an individual's mental health during fieldwork to ongoing mental health support upon fieldwork completion. Green and environmental crimes and harms will continue, but little is done to address the ongoing mental burden that this places on those researching and seeking meaningful alternatives to this phenomena.

This fieldwork also raised more questions around the documenting and reporting of crimes and harms involving animals, and our responsibility and positionality in this context. For example, should we take photographic evidence of these harms and crimes? Should it be viewed by other researchers outside of the specified project? Should these data be published? How can we foreground the well-being of these sentient beings when no consent can be provided, and what other moral responsibilities do we have as researchers toward the animals? These considerations require a paradigm shift.

There is no standardized process to support researchers before, during, and after fieldwork with mental health. This is despite the constant reports of a mental health crisis within universities (e.g., Evans et al., 2018). Both university and public mental health support services are over capacity. How can we ensure that current and future researchers of much-needed research into the crimes and harms involving natural resources are better equipped, trained, and supported?

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