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Cameroon, the transit hub: How Chinese regional cross-border wildlife trafficking is fueling conflicts in Central Africa

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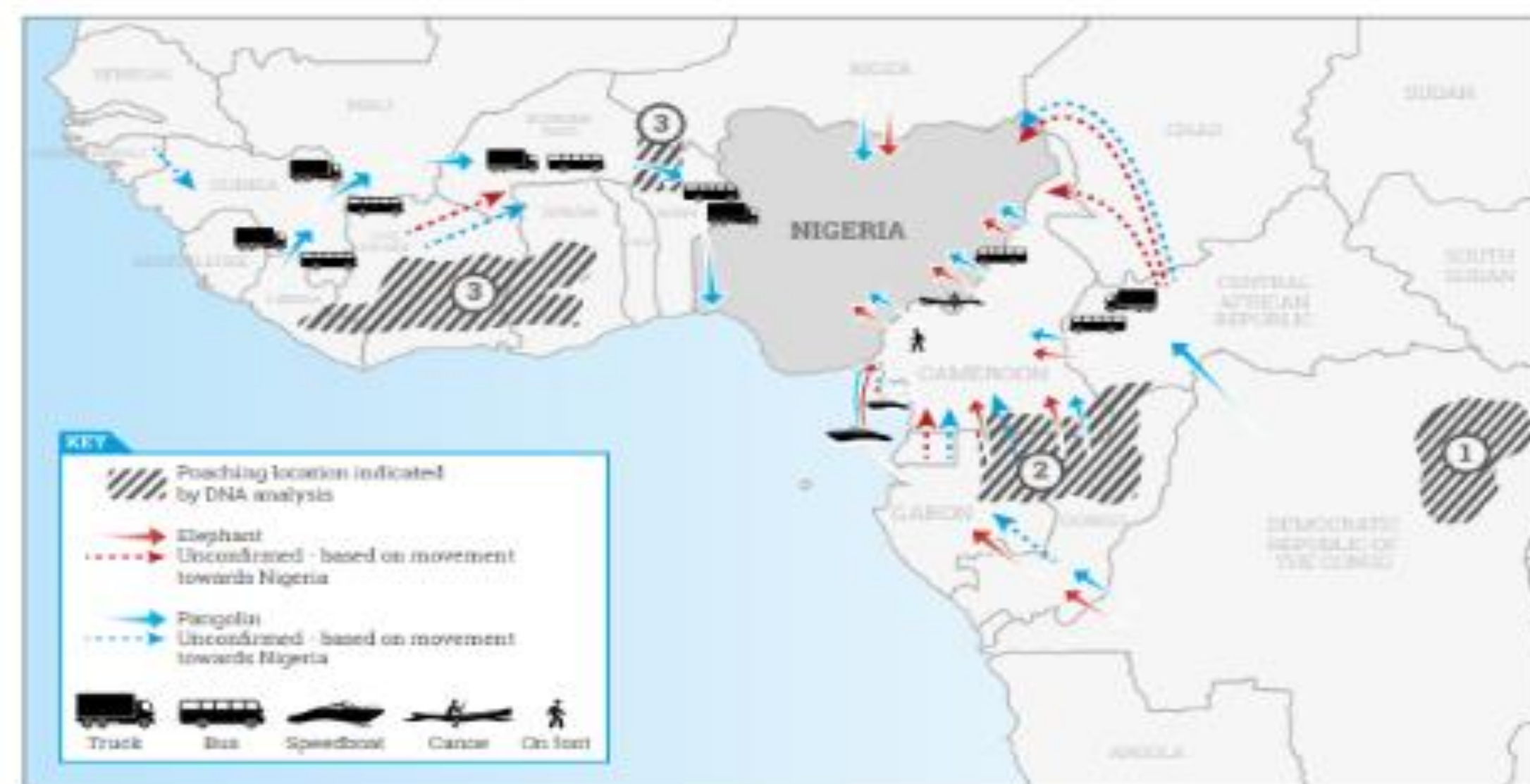
Abstract

This poster aims to present the regional status of wildlife trafficking in Central Africa and how the demand from China deepens wildlife trade and fuels conflicts. Findings from a research carried out by the author in 2022 address three key factors: the current regional status; the causal dynamics; and the wildlife trafficking to conflict effect in the Central African region.

Introduction

Considered to be one of the fastest growing illegal trades, the global wildlife crime trade value is estimated to be worth over \$8.3 billion annually (Cusack, 2020), turning global wildlife iconic species into commodities. A 2019 TRAFFIC report documented Ivory sold in Nigeria came from Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Gabon, with Cameroon playing a pivotal role in the smuggling networks (Christopher S, 2019), hidden in shipments of charcoal, stone, garlic, nuts, household equipment, and tree trunks, not only to supply the Chinese market but also the Philippine market (Moreau, A. and M. Wenger, 2016).

Figure 1. Map illustrating the sourcing routes and transit of ivory and pangolin scales smuggled towards Nigeria based on EIA's seizure database and investigations from 2018-2020



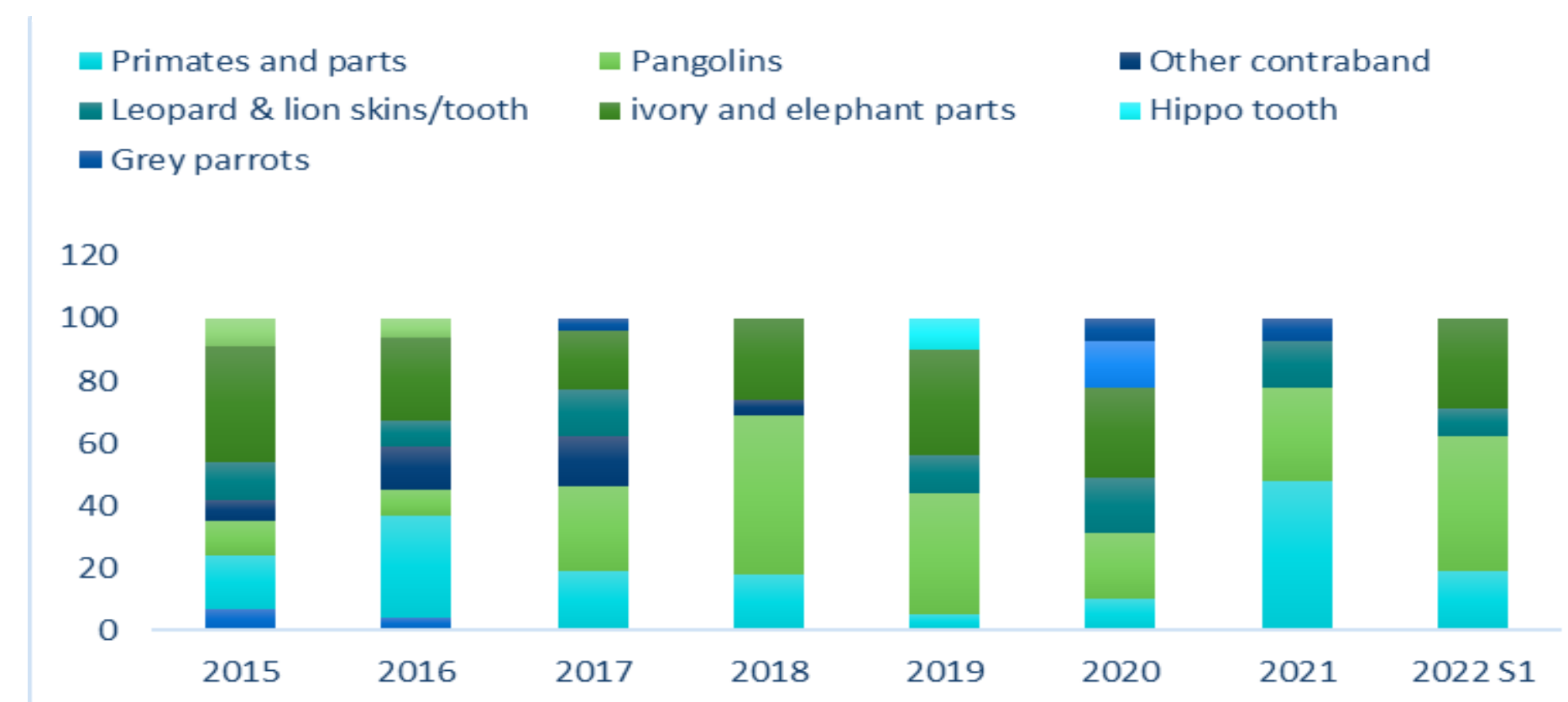
Wildlife-trafficking-financing-terrorism narratives have been mapped by several scholars, some supporting its existence and others associating them to a political decoy by states and a fund-raising agenda from NGOs (Duffy, 2022, Pennaz et al., 2018)), facilitated through publications of numerous media outlets such as the Guardian (Paula, 2015), making it a challenging conundrum for experts to address. Several governments, media outlets, the US Department of State, and some international organizations like the United Nations have directly linked wildlife trafficking in Central and West Africa to the maintenance of regional armed groups (Pennaz et al., 2018).

The methodology used in the research includes a literature review, focused interviews, and qualitative data analysis from the data collected.

Current status

Central African states are signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and Commission des Forêts d'Afrique Centrale (COMIFAC), however the levels of regulatory implementation differs. Principal destination countries include Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and China, which is the leading market. The most trafficked wildlife products include ivory, pangolin scales, and African grey parrots.

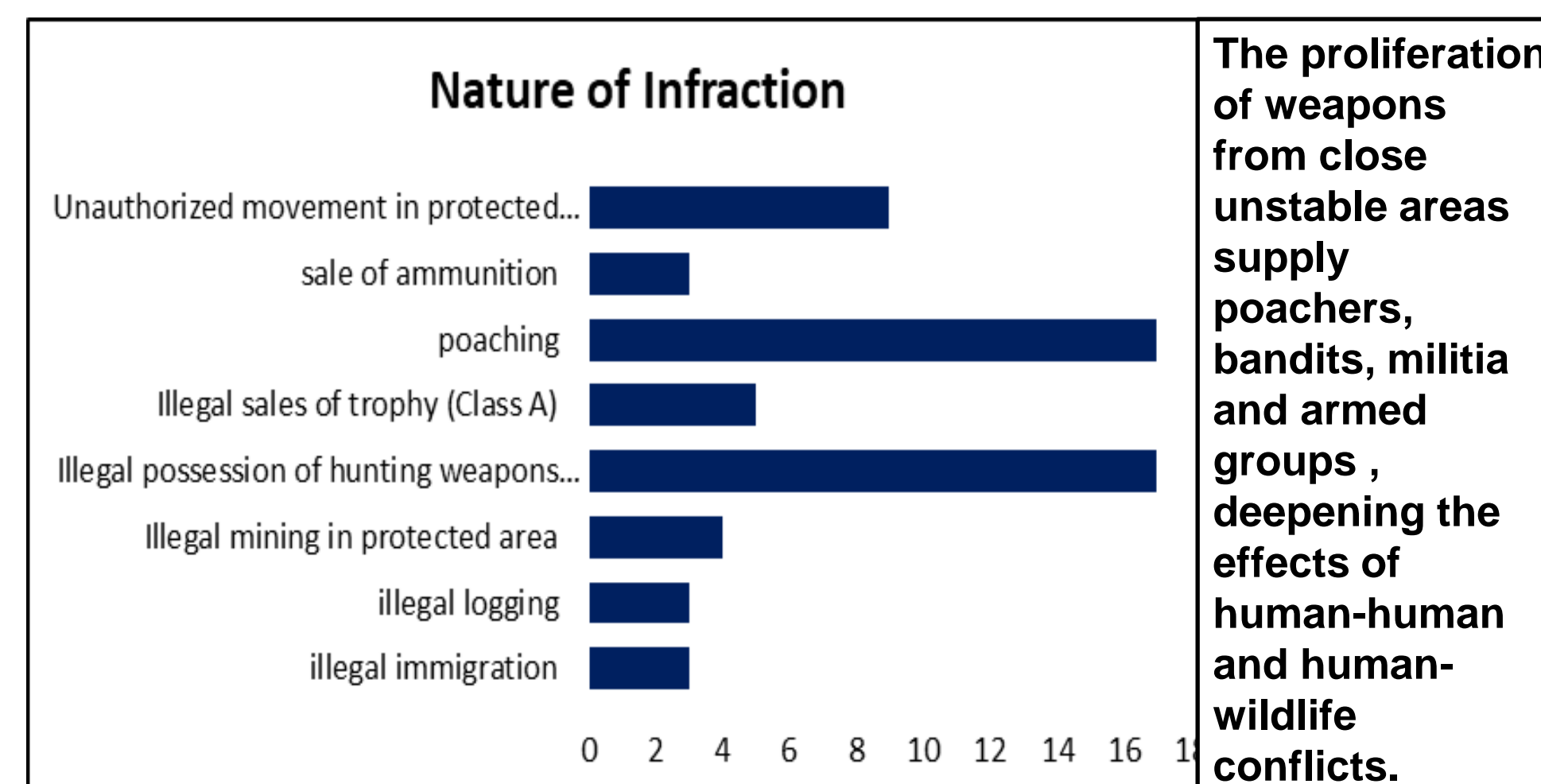
Figure 2: Wildlife trafficking operations case profile (LAGA Cameroon reports)



The conflict nexus

The rich ecology of these areas attracts criminal activities, with the demand for wildlife products giving traffickers financial benefits. While some traffickers move commit park-to-park poaching, others settle in communities surrounding protected areas masked as farmers and businessmen.

Figure 3: Security concerns at the LOBEKE National Park (LNP), and peripheries around Sangha Tri-National, bordering the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic Source: LNP Disputes Department, 2021.



Key findings

Most poachers are not terrorists, and most terrorists are not poachers, the relationship existing in-between is minimal. In the absence of war, wildlife trade still exists, with a ready market. The claim of financing terrorism through wildlife trafficking is a fallacy compared to the reality of the presence of wildlife species noted, and the financial demands of terrorists' activities.

Even though demand of wildlife products from China influences market, the major challenges impeding the countering of wildlife trafficking include corruption, reverse bottom to top approach, national security priorities (long standing civil wars) limited conservation funding, shortage of human resources, poverty, and bureaucracy.

Concluding remarks

The fight against wildlife trafficking continue to be challenging, due to insubstantial support on conservation issues. Changing the narrative requires an increase in investing for development, conservation funding and state prioritization of these issues in especially areas around protected regions in the entire Congo-basin. Striking a balance between development and conservation priorities will remain a challenge to these countries, provided China is a major development partner with numerous projects that affect biodiversity.

Acknowledgments

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