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ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY SUB-DIRECTORATE

Protection of Asian Wildlife Species: Operation PAWS II (2015)



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Operation PAWS II participants

1 FOREWORD

The complex and transnational nature of wildlife crime requires a collaborative law enforcement response that is both international and inter-disciplinary. The criminals exploiting Asia's natural resources, drawn by the low risk and high reward nature of these crimes, are increasingly organised and unscrupulous. Important as they are, our response must go beyond seizures and target the individuals and networks that control the illegal trade, bring them to justice and seize any assets obtained through their crimes. To achieve this requires an intelligence-led approach to enforcement work, the use of modern, advanced investigative techniques and, above all, a commitment to work together to disrupt and dismantle these criminal networks.

The countries that contributed to the success of Operation PAWS II have demonstrated their willingness to communicate, share information and work collaboratively for the protection of Asian wildlife. The network of wildlife investigators across Asia spans multiple disciplines and agencies and offers the promise of a truly integrated and coordinated response to wildlife crime in the region.

Asian countries can have confidence that INTERPOL will continue to support them as they continue to take the fight to the wildlife criminals, regionally and globally.

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David Higgins Assistant Director Environmental Security Sub-Directorate Directorate for Organised and Emerging Crime

2 PROJECT PREDATOR

INTERPOL's Project Predator supports and enhances governance and law enforcement capacity for the conservation of tigers and other Asian big cats.

Situation

The illegal and unsustainable exploitation of wildlife in Asia has pushed Asian big cats, such as tigers and snow leopards, to the brink of extinction. Today, the greatest threat to Asian big cat survival is the criminals who control a burgeoning and highly lucrative illegal trade spanning countries and continents. Increasingly, this trade is becoming more organized with links to other crime types such as financial crime and firearms offences.



Objective

Tackling big cat crime requires an enforcement response that employs advanced, intelligence-led investigations and the engagement of the whole criminal justice system. INTERPOL is strategically placed to provide a wide range of services to help its member countries prevent such crimes. These efforts are designed, focused and targeted through Project Predator.

Project Predator aims to increase communication, coordination and collaboration between high-level enforcement experts and managers from Asian big cat range countries, drawing upon national and international strengths, resources and expertise.

The project works closely with the Asian big cat range countries and dedicated wildlife enforcement networks. It seeks to harness political will, transform it into departmental support, and train law enforcement officers in the necessary skills.

Support

Project Predator is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States Department of State (DOS) and the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC).

3 INTRODUCTION TO OPERATION PAWS II

Background

Operation PAWS (Protection of Asian Wildlife Species) II was a transnational intelligence-led operation targeting wildlife crime and criminals across Asia. The operation was part of INTERPOL's Connexus initiative. INTERPOL Connexus is an on-going joint initiative involving a series of concurrent country-led environmental crime operations, supported by a number of INTERPOL sub-directorates.

17 countries took part in Operation PAWS II, including all tiger range countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, supported by Australia, Canada and the United States of America. These countries were invited to participate based on their involvement in Operation PAWS I, shared international borders, or known wildlife trade and transportation routes. Australia, Canada and the USA were invited to participate because they are known destination countries for many wildlife products sourced from Asia.



Project Predator's team leader Luke Bond addressing Operation PAWS II participants

Objectives

INTERPOL's Project Predator team coordinated Operation PAWS II between January and June 2015. Conceptualized and developed through the initiative of member countries in May 2014, the operation aimed to enhance coordinated law enforcement responses to wildlife crime through cross-border multi-agency collaboration, systematic intelligence exchange, intelligence analysis and use of advanced investigative techniques. Operation PAWS II placed a heavy emphasis on improving the quality of investigations and on progressing on-going enquiries into the criminal groups controlling wildlife crime in Asia. Less emphasis was placed on quantitative results such as arrests and seizures.

The specific objectives of Operation PAWS II were to:

- Identify specific wildlife cases requiring joint transnational responses;
- Plan and carry out joint transnational investigations;
- Identify, locate and arrest fugitives and INTERPOL Red Notice suspects;
- Facilitate information exchange and analysis; and
- Encourage greater international collaboration on wildlife crime investigations.

A comprehensive debrief process after the operation concluded that all of these objectives were achieved.

Transnational Collaboration

During the planning phase of the operation, participating countries identified three primary focus areas for Operation PAWS II: tigers and other Asian big cats, pangolins and timber (red sanders and teaks). They also highlighted the illegal trades in turtles and bears as crime types requiring attention.

With these focus areas in mind, countries divided themselves into three groups taking into account their own national priorities, outstanding cases, and transnational links concerning trade and transportation routes and criminal groups. Each group nominated one country to represent and coordinate the work of the group. Countries also assumed ownership of each group by naming it:

#	GROUP NAME	FOCUS SPECIES	COUNTRIES	COORDINATING COUNTRY
1	SPIN (Save Pangolin International Network)	 Pangolins Ivory and rhino horn Tigers and other Asian big cats Bears 	Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam	Malaysia
2	STTAB (Stop Tiger Trafficking Across Borders)	 Tigers and other Asian big cats Pangolins Red sanders 	Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Russia	Nepal
3	Green Gold	 Tigers and other Asian big cats Reptiles Red sanders and rosewood 	Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand	Myanmar

Contrary to other operations in which participating countries created and actioned their own national operational plans and then reported on these at the end of the operation, Operation PAWS II encouraged greater ownership, collaboration and communication through the development of shared, transnational operational plans. Eight operational plans were developed with national coordinators during a series of planning meetings. The transnational dimension was crucial in ensuring that countries worked together on cases of international significance, rather than simply working alone on cases of national interest.

The creation of joint, transnational operational plans, concentrated on specific targets, assisted member countries to collaborate more effectively and to make the best use of their resources. As a result, participating countries took ownership of the operation, with INTERPOL playing a coordinating and investigative support role where required.

A Common Agenda

An overarching strategic framework for the operation as a whole was agreed by all participating countries and signed by group coordinators. A 'signing ceremony' was held and photographs taken of each group committing to the shared strategic framework. This event was symbolically significant and helped to bind participants together into a close knit network of contacts with a common agenda.





National coordinators from Nepal, Malaysia and Myanmar signing the strategic operational framework



4 OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Investigations				
Criminal groups under investi	gation	21		
		Fugitives		
Fugitives located		1	An INTERPOL Red Notice subject	
Fugitives located and arrested	d	3		
		Seizures		
Total number of seizures		67		
Target Commodities	Number	Weight (kg)	Comment	
Bear bile	3			
Bear paws	4		Himalayan black bear	
Big cat teeth (unidentified)	22			
Elephant Ivory	3,178*	9.3 tonnes		
Leopard (whole)	1		Whole specimen	
Leopard bones and teeth	154		Including 1 skull and 3 teeth	
Leopard skin	9		Including common leopard	
Pangolins	282	658.9		
Pangolin scales		275.5		
Pangolin meat		5 tonnes		
Red panda skin with fur	1			
Reptiles (turtles)	1,969			
Reptiles (other)	70	130		
Rhino horn	37 pieces	34.8*	Weight of 2 pieces unknown	
Red sanders / rosewoods		1,424.3 tonnes*	- 3 - 9 7	
Tiger bones and teeth	2*		<i>2 teeth; unspecified number of bones</i>	
Tiger leather	1		Believed Sumatran origin	
Tiger skin	3			
Other Commodities	Number	Weight (kg)	Comment	
Barking deer	1			
Birds and bird parts	879		480 birds; 399 bird or duck heads	
Camel teeth	1		Sold as tiger teeth	
Deer musk pods	2			
Endangered Fish	20 bags		Valued at over AU\$300,000	
Elephant/elephant hide	3		1 hide	
Iron traps	4		Used to snare big cats	
Sea cucumbers		5.6 tonnes		
Serow	1			
Wildlife parts (unidentified)	4 (teeth)	2.2 (bones)		
Yarsagumba		2.6		

Arrests					
Total number of arrests	305				
Tigers and Asian big cats	48				
lvory and rhino horn	39				
Pangolins	22				
Reptiles	6				
Red Sanders and Rosewoods	168				
Other (or unstated) species	22				
Vehicles					
Number of vehicles seized	201				
Prosecutions					
Number of successful prosecutions	26				
Number of cases awaiting proceedings	61				
INTERPOL Notices and Diffusions					
Red Notices issued	2				
Purple Notices issued	4				
Purple Notices in preparation	6				
Diffusions	1				
Operations, Meetings and Initiatives					
Number of domestic multi-agency meetings	17				
Number of inter-country meetings	4				
Number of training events	6				
Number of domestic initiatives	5				

Notes on the Statistics:

- An asterisk (*) denotes a minimum number, due to lack of specificity in results reporting;
- All weights are rounded to one decimal point; and
- Figures do not fully account for Cambodia, China or Laos who did not report official results.

5 TIGERS AND ASIAN BIG CATS

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam all investigated big cat cases relating to the poaching, smuggling or trade of tigers and leopards. Myanmar did not experience any big cat cases but continued to investigate the location where a large number of animal parts including tiger and leopard skins were seized earlier in 2015.

In total, the operation resulted in the seizure of three tiger skins, nine leopard skins and over 150 bones and teeth. The majority of these seizures occurred in India and Nepal. Authorities made 48 arrests in relation to both new and historical tiger and other big cat crimes.

The most significant developments in terms of the tiger trade came from India and Nepal. In a collaborative effort with India, Nepal arrested Ramjas BANJARA with a tiger (*Panthera tigris*) skin and bones in Bardia, Nepal in May 2015. With assistance from Project Predator, Indian and Nepalese authorities were able to identify this individual as a notorious poacher and smuggler. Later the same month, Indian authorities arrested another wanted criminal and tiger parts trader. This trader sold tiger parts to wildlife smugglers in India. Information from his interrogation led to raids on other suspects and the recovery of further tiger parts (bones and skulls). Both suspects were already under investigation by Indian and Nepalese authorities in relation to wildlife crime.

The close collaboration between India and Nepal revealed a potential link between the tiger trade and the shahtoosh trade. Project Predator is assisting India and Nepal to develop this

information. This potential link is consistent with information first uncovered by Indian authorities in the early 1990s regarding a tiger parts/shahtoosh barter trade.

In April 2015, a two-man delegation from the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) in India visited Nepal to discuss effective information exchange and coordination between their respective law enforcement agencies. The



A seized tiger skin and bones

meeting is understood by both countries to be an important step towards establishing a memorandum of understanding to facilitate the fight against transnational organised wildlife crime.

Information from a number of cases confirmed that tigers poached in India are being smuggled through Bhutan and Nepal with China as the known or likely destination. For example, Bhutan investigated a case in which two Indian traffickers sought to sell a tiger skin to a Bhutanese buyer who planned to smuggle the skin to China. In another case, an Indian citizen in Bhutan was apprehended with three Bhutanese suspects with leopard skins from India. Nepal also seized several tiger and leopard skins.



Tiger skins seized in Nepal and Bhutan

Countries also advanced investigations into other known or suspected criminal groups. In Bangladesh, forestry officers were briefed on the reported existence of armed pirate groups poaching tigers in the Sundarbans region. Meanwhile, Thai authorities continue to investigate a Thai national suspected of dealing in tigers and other protected wildlife products.

Countries also made other progress in relation to tigers and Asian big cats. India concluded an outstanding tiger trade case (involving tiger skins, meat and bones) by arresting 13 individuals including the principle suspect. WCCB officials and Uttarakhand forest officers department also conducted raids seizing four iron traps used for poaching big cats such as tigers and leopards, arresting four suspects. Indonesia seized a



A frozen tiger carcass investigated by Vietnam

piece of tiger leather believed to originate from a Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*) and made one arrest. Officers in Singapore seized suspected tiger parts from four jewellery shops; preliminary DNA analysis revealed a mixture of tiger, leopard and camel teeth and

some of inconclusive origin, all sold as tiger teeth. Vietnam is currently investigating seven suspects connected to a suspect arrested during Operation PAWS I for possession of a frozen tiger (*Panthera tigris corbetti*) carcass.

6 IVORY AND RHINO HORN

In total, 9.3 tonnes of ivory (at least 3,178 pieces) and over 35 kg of rhino horn (37 pieces) were seized and 39 arrests made.

During the operation, four major ivory and rhino horn seizures occurred in Thailand (two cases, both from Africa destined for Laos), Singapore (from Kenya destined for Vietnam) and Australia (from Malawi destined for Malaysia, for likely onward shipment). The incidents in Thailand saw the seizure of 802 and 510 pieces of elephant ivory respectively (weighing over 5.3 tonnes in total). Thailand has established a multi-agency task force to investigate these seizures.



Ivory seized in Singapore

The case in Singapore involved the seizure of 1,783 pieces of ivory (weighing 3.7 tonnes) in addition to four rhino horns and 22 big cat teeth. In Perth, Australian authorities detected 110 kg of ivory being transshipped to Malaysia and are coordinating with Malawi and Malaysia. Enquiries into each of these seizures (including DNA analysis) are on-going and INTERPOL is facilitating the sharing of information between all countries involved. INTERPOL's Project Wisdom is coordinating investigative support for the Thai and Singapore seizures, with support from Project Predator. Smaller ivory seizures were also made in India and Myanmar.

Bangladesh and Myanmar are both investigating elephant poaching cases. Having focused attention on its border area with China, Myanmar made 23 arrests of elephant poachers. Information about this group of poachers has been shared with Bangladesh, which has proposed a multi-agency discussion on elephant-human conflict involving India and Myanmar.



Ivory seized in Myanmar

Rhino horn seizures were also made in India, Nepal

and Vietnam, the latter of which seized 31 rhino horn from two couriers. DNA analysis indicates that the rhino horn seized in Vietnam is from African white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simun*). INTERPOL will support Malaysia in its continued investigation of the seizure of 14 rhino horns in December 2014.

On 5th May 2015, Nepal declared a 21% increase in the greater one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) population in Nepal. The official number of rhinos in Nepal is now 645. On the same day Nepal, once again, observed 365 days of zero poaching.

7 PANGOLINS

In total, over 650 kg of pangolins, over 275 kg of pangolin scales and five tonnes of processed pangolin meat were recovered. The largest pangolin seizures came from Vietnam and Thailand.

Operational activity in Indonesia and Malaysia resulted in the seizure in Indonesia of five tonnes of pangolin meat labelled as dried sea horses, 77 kg of scales and 95 live specimens, and the detention in Malaysia of a male transporting pangolins (*Manis javanica*) in the boot of his vehicle. India successfully disrupted a network of criminals poaching and trafficking Indian pangolins (*Manis crassicaudata*) from Madhya Pradesh to Vietnam and China. 13 arrests were made and 2 kg of pangolin scales seized.



Pangolins concealed in a vehicle

In total, 22 arrests were made by India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam of suspects from each country except Indonesia plus, additionally, from China. The majority of pangolins seized during Operation PAWS II were thought to be bound for Laos, Vietnam, Hong Kong or China, for use in traditional medicines.



INTERPOL PURPLE NOTICES

INTERPOL Notices are international requests for cooperation or alerts allowing police in member countries to share critical crime-related information. Countries were encouraged to issue INTERPOL Notices throughout the operation. As a result, five Purple Notices were issued and a further six were in preparation at the time of writing. Purple Notices are used to seek or provide information on *modus operandi*, objects, devices and concealment methods used by criminals.

Purple Notices were issued in relation to pangolin smuggling, the trade in shahtoosh, red panda poaching and red sanders smuggling. The issuing of these Notices has raised the profile of key wildlife crime issues globally, particularly in relation to vulnerable or endangered species such as the red panda and Tibetan antelope. They have also publicised a number of new and unusual concealment methods, thereby strengthening the global law enforcement response to organised wildlife crime.

8 **REPTILES**

Countries collaboratively investigated a number of incidents or suspects relating to the smuggling of turtles, snakes and other reptiles.

The largest turtle seizure occurred in Thailand, where 1,286 black pond turtles (*Geoclemys hamiltonii*) were seized at Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok. The turtles, valued at approximately USD 30,000, were concealed in luggage originating from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Black pond turtle seizures also took place in Bangladesh and in India (some bound for Malaysia). Almost 2,000 turtles were seized in total. Six arrests were made of individuals acting as couriers. Investigation into these cases and suspects are on-going.



1,286 turtles seized in Thailand

With support from INTERPOL, countries advanced investigations into an alleged turtle smuggling network operating between Bangladesh, India and Thailand involving suspects from Europe as well as Asia. Intelligence sharing led to the confirmation of several identities, identification of travel movements and the proactive searching of a suspect's personal items

while in transit in Asia. Enquiries into this group are on-going, with countries having identified specific actions to progress the investigation.

INTERPOL also assisted Singapore with an investigation into an individual trading birds and reptiles online.

9 RED SANDERS AND OTHER ROSEWOODS

Several countries affected by illegal logging briefed their own domestic law enforcement agencies about the operational plans targeting red sander smuggling routes and criminal groups. As a result, they reported heightened vigilance by agencies including customs, border guards and forestry departments. Countries shared information relating to suspected criminals and smuggling routes to facilitate investigation of identified targets.

Due to a high level of enforcement activity in India – the source of red sanders (*Pterocarpus santalinus*) – very few seizures of red sanders took place. No cases were reported from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore or Thailand and no new smuggling routes were identified. The only seizures were in Bhutan, of seven and 14 pieces respectively, the latter concealed in a truck carrying cement bags. Information from national coordinators indicated that they consider the situation in relation to red sanders to be, at this stage, "contained" in the region, though they acknowledged that criminal groups remain active.

The most significant results in relation to rosewood came from Myanmar, which in a series of major operations seized 896.7 tonnes of tamalan (*Dalbergia oliveri*), 527.6 tonnes of padauk (*Pterocarpus macrocarpus*), 201 vehicles including trucks, tractors, vans, buses and lorries, and arrested 166 suspects. Investigation of the network of individuals involved is ongoing, but Myanmar's rosewoods (tamalan and padauk especially) are known to be in high demand in China. Myanmar and Chinese authorities met to enhance legal trade of forest products between the two countries. As a result of the meeting, a Myanmar investigation team will visit China to study the timber trade process in China and discuss opportunities for collaboration.



Major rosewood seizures in Myanmar

Elsewhere, Thailand hosted a bilateral meeting with Cambodia to discuss cooperation in Siamese rosewood protection. The two countries identified areas of potential collaboration including joint border patrols and collaborative investigation.

10 OTHER COMMODITIES

In addition to the specific targets identified in the eight joint operational plans, a wide range of other species and commodity types were investigated or seized.

Bhutan arrested a man for an illegal transaction involving four Himalayan black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) paws, believed to have originated from Trashigang in Eastern Bhutan.



Seized bear biles



A red panda skin seized in Nepal

Nepalese authorities seized three bear biles and a red panda skin and other countries made seizures of duck heads bird and (being smuggled from Cambodia to Vietnam), high value endangered fish (being smuggled from Singapore to Australia), a variety of live birds and, during a series of intelligence-led operations in India, 5.6 tonnes of sea cucumber.

11 DOMESTIC ACTIVITY

Operation PAWS II inspired a range of domestic actions directed at identifying and preventing wildlife crime offences, apprehending suspects, fostering multi-agency collaboration and generating public awareness. In total, the operation saw 19 domestic meetings or initiatives involving Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Almost 80% of these were multi-agency events, in line with the PAWS II emphasis on enhancing multi-agency and multi-disciplinary cooperation. The events helped to raise the profile of wildlife crime, equipped officers with the skills needed to combat this type of crime and fostered multi-agency collaboration. As well as enhancing domestic communication, some of the events involved international collaboration between national environmental agencies:

- Bangladesh conducted an outreach program on wildlife conservation. Teachers and 425 students from two schools met to share knowledge about wildlife conservation during meetings in Dhaka. 50 students received awards and a certificate for outstanding performance in a quiz contest on wildlife conservation;
- In a 3-day event in Bangladesh supported by the 'Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Wildlife Protection' project and the World Bank, a train the trainer initiative instructed 25 senior Forestry Department officers in subjects including the roles and responsibilities of enforcement agencies (including INTERPOL), forensics, intelligence and analysis, and evidence management. The PAWS II national coordinator for Bangladesh presented on 'Wildlife Crime Intelligence and Networking';



A conservation outreach program in Bangladesh

- Bhutan trained 20 data managers from 20 field divisions in a newly created forest enforcement database. It also held a multi-agency training event in wildlife contraband identification techniques for 130 law enforcement officers from police, customs, immigration and the army;
- India conducted eleven training programmes throughout the country to sensitise law enforcement officers to a range of issues including wildlife crime and laws, CITES, export and import policy, *modus operandi* and identification of wildlife samples, and also initiated discussions aimed at running wildlife crime scenarios in key areas;
- Indonesia held a national workshop on forestry crime, resulting in a policy brief and recommendations on combating forestry crimes in Indonesia. It also resolved, through a meeting led by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, to create a national action plan identifying high priority wildlife crime areas;
- Part of Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry's 'Save the Yellow-Crested Cockatoo Programme', a month-long voluntary surrender initiative resulted in the surrender of 135 endangered yellow-crested cockatoos and other birds;

- **Malaysia** conducted Operation SNARE, which resulted in the identification and destruction of 158 snares and the seizure of a clouded leopard;
- Environment authorities in Malaysia met with the non-governmental organisation TRAFFIC to discuss a recent report on the bear bile trade in Malaysia. The two parties agreed to share information on the bear trade;
- **Nepal** established WCCBs in four districts identified as high priority areas for wildlife crime;



A clouded leopard removed from a poacher's snare

- Singapore conducted a training event for its Immigration and Checkpoints Authority
 officers during which the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority briefed attendees on
 CITES, wildlife awareness and standard operating procedures, and shared significant
 case studies on wildlife smuggling;
- **Singapore's** 'You Buy, They Die' public awareness campaign involved law enforcement officers hosting a public seminar at Singapore Zoo to raise awareness of wildlife crime in an attempt to reduce consumer demand. They were also invited by Wildlife Reserves Singapore to present on CITES in relation to wildlife crime;
- Thai authorities convened a multi-agency meeting involving police, customs, environmental agencies and the Office of the Attorney General. The meeting resulted in a plan for a joint investigation. Participants also discussed the creation of standard operating procedures for first response at a crime scene; and
- Vietnam held a national multi-agency meeting on environmental crime. The event was attended by representatives from police and customs agencies, procurement, Forest Services, the Border Army, the Anti-Economic-related Crime Department and the Anti-Environmental Crime Department.

12 CONCLUSION

The organised, complex and transnational nature of wildlife crime demands that environmental and law enforcement agencies constantly collaborate with each other and employ advanced, intelligence-led methods of investigation.

Coordinated by INTERPOL, Operation PAWS II brought together key countries in the Asian region and succeeded in building a trusted network of investigators, in a variety of national agencies, with the common objective of identifying, disrupting and dismantling the organised criminal groups behind the wildlife and timber trades in Asia. INTERPOL employed its tools, databases and technical expertise in the fields of intelligence, fugitive management and cyber investigation to support country-led enquiries into priority criminals and cases, resulting in a number of significant wildlife law enforcement outcomes.

The creation of joint, transnational operational plans within an overarching strategic framework endorsed by all countries was a new and innovative approach. Feedback from participating countries confirmed that these operational plans provided an enhanced focus to their operational activity. It also identified that the level of international engagement and the volume and frequency of information sharing during Operation PAWS II was greater than in any previous Asian wildlife crime operation in which they had participated.

Finally, post-operational target development work has ensured that participants will continue to work together on issues of transnational interest for the protection of Asian wildlife species.



This document is a redacted version of the full Operation PAWS II post-operational report (reference 2015/717/OEC/ENS/DGA).

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