

## **Introduction**

This submission is made by the World Parrot Trust (WPT), a wildlife conservation NGO based in Cornwall, UK. The Trust was established in 1980 with the mission of helping parrots survive in the wild and thrive in our homes and has grown rapidly to become a globally influential conservation and welfare organisation. Capture and trade to supply the global pet trade is a major threat to many parrot species and has been central to the Trust's work over the last 30+ years. WPT has been at the forefront of efforts to address harmful trade, leading advocacy for the ban on the importation of Wild birds into the EU which came into effect in 2006, securing important protections for threatened species at CITES and engaging with corporations including airlines and tech platforms to put in place measures to end trafficking. Although countries and regions such as the US and EU have taken actions to end domestic legal markets in endangered parrots and other birds, the development of online platforms, increased transport connectivity and emerging middle-classes in the Global South present new challenges.

WPT is a member of the Alliance to Counter Crime Online (ACCO)<sup>1</sup>, an alliance dedicated to combatting illegal and harmful content online, including - but not limited to - the sale of illegal drugs, terror finance, cartel and gang activity, human trafficking, child sex abuse content, plundered antiquities, romance and get-rich-quick scams, review fraud, and the illegal trade in endangered species and exotic pets.

### **Summary:**

WPT strongly supports the principle and objectives of the Draft Online Safety Bill. However, it is our view that harms to wildlife should be explicitly noted in the final drafting of the bill, and we encourage the creation of statutory codes of practice to prevent harmful and illegal content accelerating the biodiversity crisis and the risk of another global pandemic. In its current form, there is no mention of illegal wildlife trade as an illegal activity within the scope of the Bill, and we fear this omission could give tech platforms the opportunity to claim immunity in court. This would be a grave oversight, since the online illegal wildlife trade has grown widely in the past decade, connecting buyers and sellers globally at a pace never before seen. This illegal trade poses a grave risk to biodiversity and threatens to undermine ecosystem functioning. Furthermore, it presents a serious biosecurity risk of zoonotic disease transmission, particularly given that animal-human spill-over events has been implicated in every major new disease in modern times, from the AIDS epidemic to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last decade, wildlife trade has expanded rapidly on social media platforms. As in other spheres of life, this technology has disrupted traditional practices and has become fundamental to how this harmful practice operates. The UK has been a global leader in the fight to address illegal and harmful wildlife trade, leading 50 countries to adopt the London 2018 declaration on Illegal Wildlife Trade, and the Online Safety bill presents a vitally important opportunity to further our global leadership in this area. We believe that that illegal wildlife trade should be explicitly defined within the scope of the Online Safety Bill under the category of Illegal content 'other relevant offence'. We recommend that a Code of Practice be created specifically for illegal wildlife trade in consultation with subject matter experts and OFCOM should have the powers to request internal documents and research to evaluate the effectiveness of these actions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.countercrime.org/>

## **Content in Scope**

*Are there any types of content omitted from the scope of the Bill that you consider significant e.g. commercial pornography or the promotion of financial scams? How should they be covered if so?*

## **Online Wildlife Trade**

- I. Poorly regulated wildlife trade poses an urgent and serious threat to wild populations and is a significant contributor to the global biodiversity crisis.<sup>2</sup>
- II. Wildlife trade can facilitate the transmission and international spread of infectious zoonotic diseases, with devastating consequences. Poor welfare conditions, high levels of stress and the dense housing of multiple species create the perfect conditions for the rapid spread of infectious diseases and mutation of new variants.<sup>2</sup>
- III. Illegal wildlife trade, here defined as trade that contravenes national and international legislation, poses a particularly concerning threat. Illegal wildlife trade may converge with other types of illegal activity and illicit trade.<sup>3</sup> Species may be particularly vulnerable to trade pressure and attempts to smuggle wildlife covertly increase the associated disease risk.<sup>4</sup>
- IV. In the last decade, the internet - particularly social media platforms and messaging services – have become an intrinsic mode for promoting and facilitating illegal wildlife trade globally.<sup>5</sup> Social media platforms provide traders of parrots and other threatened species with unparalleled access to a global customer base, significantly reducing friction to trade. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram offer a mix of public and private means of communication, giving traders huge reach, while encrypted messaging services enable means to broker sales freely and anonymously. Research conducted by the World Parrot Trust and ACCO partners has revealed the vast trade that takes place online in a dizzying range of threatened species, from African Grey parrots, Chimpanzees and Cheetahs to 1000s of lesser-known species of reptiles, fish, and invertebrates.<sup>6,7</sup>
- V. Social media platform features facilitate harmful and illegal trade and actively help create new trade networks. Sellers can set up fake accounts and direct enquires to private messaging apps. Facebook Groups provide focal points for illicit buy and sell activity.
- VI. Illegal wildlife can be difficult to identify in some instances due to the existence and overlap with legal and captive-sourced wildlife trade. Research by WPT, The University of Oxford and the University of Exeter has examined in detail how the functionality of social media platforms facilitate trade in wildlife, identifying opportunities for tech companies and regulators to triangulate across platform elements to infer illegal wildlife trade.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320721003931>

<sup>3</sup> <https://wildlifejustice.org/convergence-of-wildlife-crime/>

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[https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1471492220303470?casa\\_token=kyX8v\\_1nxNQAAAAA:PE8AZqtivjNIJ8kVIWLOJqf\\_gBmXbJyTxhT8hBPujY\\_NJXnWz07SxXEN4Lh4cO-IA8Vvw1e45Ok](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1471492220303470?casa_token=kyX8v_1nxNQAAAAA:PE8AZqtivjNIJ8kVIWLOJqf_gBmXbJyTxhT8hBPujY_NJXnWz07SxXEN4Lh4cO-IA8Vvw1e45Ok)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2287884X2030042X>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989418301768>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.counterintelligence.org/wildlife-sales-on-facebook>

<sup>8</sup> Davies et al (in Press) Identifying opportunities for expert-mediated triangulation in monitoring wildlife trade on social media. Conservation Biology.

- VII. Most concerningly, algorithms designed to direct individuals towards “Related pages” and groups that may be of interest directly **amplify** trade activity by connecting wildlife traffickers around the world. This feature, which critics have said can serve as an “echo chamber” for hate speech, has the similar effect of amplifying illegal wildlife traffic and other criminal activity, including the trade in drugs, antiques and child sex abuse imagery.
- VIII. The majority of trade in wild-sourced and threatened species is created by social media users outside of Europe. However, British users looking to purchase exotic animals can easily be exposed to this content, unaware of the associated biodiversity and health threats or of the potential illegality.
- IX. Footage of wildlife in trade frequently shows animals in cramped conditions and clear distress, which may cause emotional distress to social media users who come across these posts.

### **Response by Social Media Companies**

- I. Facebook and other platforms have taken steps to address harmful content shared on their platform, removing posts and pages which violate community standards. Many platforms have signed up to commitments as part of the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online<sup>9</sup>.
- II. However, ACCO published a report in 2020 demonstrating that current moderation by Facebook is largely ineffective at capturing large amounts of wildlife trade content and is heavily biased towards English-language pages and groups (which are unlikely to represent the majority of wildlife trade content).<sup>10</sup>
- III. In this report, ACCO found 473 Facebook pages and 281 Facebook groups openly trading wildlife; 57% of pages blatantly had terms ‘for sale’ ‘sell’ or ‘buy’ in the title.
- IV. Many groups and pages had existed for years without being removed, with the oldest being uninterrupted for over a decade.
- V. The report identified basic steps that could be taken by Facebook to improve their response to wildlife trade, including
  - a. Implementing code to block search results in multiple languages for wildlife species terms when coupled with sales terms like ‘sell’, ‘for sale,’ ‘trade,’ and ‘buy’.
  - b. Changing its policy from passively waiting for members of the public or NGOs to report harmful content to taking a proactive approach.
  - c. Collaboration between moderators and key taxa experts to remove wildlife traffickers from the platform, identify and remove trafficking networks and reporting evidence of illegal activity to relevant law enforcement.

### **Inclusion within the Online Safety Bill**

- I. In its current form, the Online Safety Bill only explicitly considers illegal behaviour and harms that negatively affect people. For example, Section 41: ‘Meaning of “illegal content”’,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.endwildlifetraffickingonline.org/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.countercrime.org/wildlife-sales-on-facebook>

‘relevant offence’, excluding offences related to terrorism, CSEA or regulations made by the Secretary of State, is defined as ‘...*an offence of which the victim or intended victim is in individual (or individuals)*’<sup>11</sup>.

- II. This definition gives no scope for illegal content that is perpetrated against animals, wildlife or biodiversity broadly, and thus ignores the potential downstream harms to people.
- III. The UK has taken an international leadership role in Illegal Wildlife Trade, hosting the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade in 2018, in which 50 countries committed to action to protect endangered species around the globe.<sup>12</sup> It has also taken a leadership position in animal welfare, stating that “We will use our position as a global leader for international advocacy on animal welfare... to promote high animal welfare” in the Action Plan for Animal Welfare.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the omission of animal welfare or conservation concerns from this Bill is a major oversight and could undermine the UK’s leadership role in these areas.
- IV. While most wildlife trade content on social media does not take place within the UK, the Draft Online Safety Bill states that ‘...*no account is to be taken of whether or not anything done in relation to the content takes place in any part of the United Kingdom*’<sup>14</sup> when determining whether content amounts to an offence.
- V. In order to capture illegal wildlife trade content, service providers should be working closely and pro-actively with subject-area and taxa experts to develop effective algorithms for flagging concerning content. Furthermore, they should work closely with conservation groups and law enforcement to identify trafficking networks on the platform, disrupt their activity and support law enforcement in relevant investigations.
- VI. OFCOM, in reviewing the effectiveness of platform actions and policies, should have the legal power to request internal documents and research regarding wildlife trade to independently evaluate whether platforms are taking appropriate action. This may include how platforms have engaged with subject-matter experts.

### **Algorithms and User Agency**

*What role do algorithms currently play in influencing the presence of certain types of content online and how it is disseminated? What role might they play in reducing the presence of illegal and/or harmful content?*

- I. Algorithms on social media play an active role in connecting users involved in wildlife trade around the world. Thus, when these networks are conducting illegal trafficking, the platforms play an **active** facilitating role in distributing illicit content. This feature, which critics have said can serve as an “echo chamber” for hate speech, has the similar effect of amplifying illicit wildlife traffic.

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<sup>11</sup> Draft Online Safety Bill, s 42 (4)(d)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/iwt-conference-2018-declaration-commits-over-50-countries-to-action-for-endangered-species>

<sup>13</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/985332/Action\\_Plan\\_for\\_Animal\\_Welfare.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985332/Action_Plan_for_Animal_Welfare.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Draft Online Safety Bill, s 44 (3)

- II. In their 2020 report, ACCO found that 29% of the pages they found were recommended through the 'Related Pages' feature.<sup>15</sup>
- III. It is vital that social media services monitor and adjust their algorithms and other products appropriately so that they prevent illicit activity rather than amplify it. Such actions should be part of their duty of care under the Online Safety Bill.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.counteringcrime.org/wildlife-sales-on-facebook>