In September 2016, the conference of the parties of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) will hear about an ambitious anti-trafficking plan from the European Union (EU). Reflecting increasing concerns about international crimes against wildlife, the EU adopted its Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking in February 2016. The Plan recognizes the increasing sophistication of illicit wildlife trafficking organizations, and acknowledges the need for international cooperation and coordination against these criminals.

The first priority of the EU Action Plan is prevention of illegal wildlife trafficking, particularly through anti-corruption initiatives at the national and international levels. Steps to implement this goal include campaigns to reduce demand, as well as support for the development of sustainable livelihoods for people who live near wildlife habitats. The plan supports partnerships with the private sector to develop new approaches and share best practices.

The second priority is to implement and enforce existing laws against organized wildlife crime. For example, EU member states would improve detection and compliance at the national level, and ensure sufficient resources for Europol and Eurojust for investigating wildlife crime. Cooperation and coordination would be improved at all levels of national law enforcement and the judiciary, including customs, police, and CITES authorities.

Experts in cybercrime, money laundering, and other organized crime channels would assist in combating organized wildlife crime. Member States would cooperate through joint meetings and operations, and shared best practices. Finally, Member States would recognize international wildlife trafficking as a serious crime punishable by at least four years in prison, and would review and revise national laws to implement this requirement.

The Action Plan’s third priority emphasizes partnerships among source, consumer, and transit countries. Helpful tools include EU trade policies as well as trade sanctions for non-compliance with CITES regulations. EU engagement in these areas can be especially effective, since the EU is a large source, market, and transit route, including one third of worldwide ivory seizures, according to a report in Deutsche Welle.

If the EU Member States allocate sufficient resources to put teeth into these goals, the Action Plan will be an important step toward combating international wildlife trafficking. Strengthened laws, such as the total ban on ivory trade in France, are already on the books in some states. Uniform
laws across national borders will help make international wildlife trafficking more difficult, less profitable, and less common.