

Potential Indicators of Illegal Fishing and Wildlife Trafficking by Terrorists



SCOPE: This product highlights indicators, evidence preservation considerations, and protective safety measures associated with illegal wildlife trade (IWT) and crimes associated with illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by terrorists.

Refer to the previously published First Responder's Toolbox "Natural Resources Provide Illicit Profits for Terrorists", for awareness of the threat posed by terrorists using natural resources to finance their illicit operations.

Terrorists, including Mexico-based FTO-Designated Transnational Criminal Organizations (FDTCOs), sometimes exploit natural resources to increase their funding. Illegally obtained commodities are often comingled with the products of legitimate activities in the global supply chain, providing illicit actors and criminal networks, such as FDTCOs, with opportunities to conceal their illicit activities. While IWT and IUU fishing are typically transnational illicit operations with international supply chains, in some cases the illegal product may be destined for local markets.

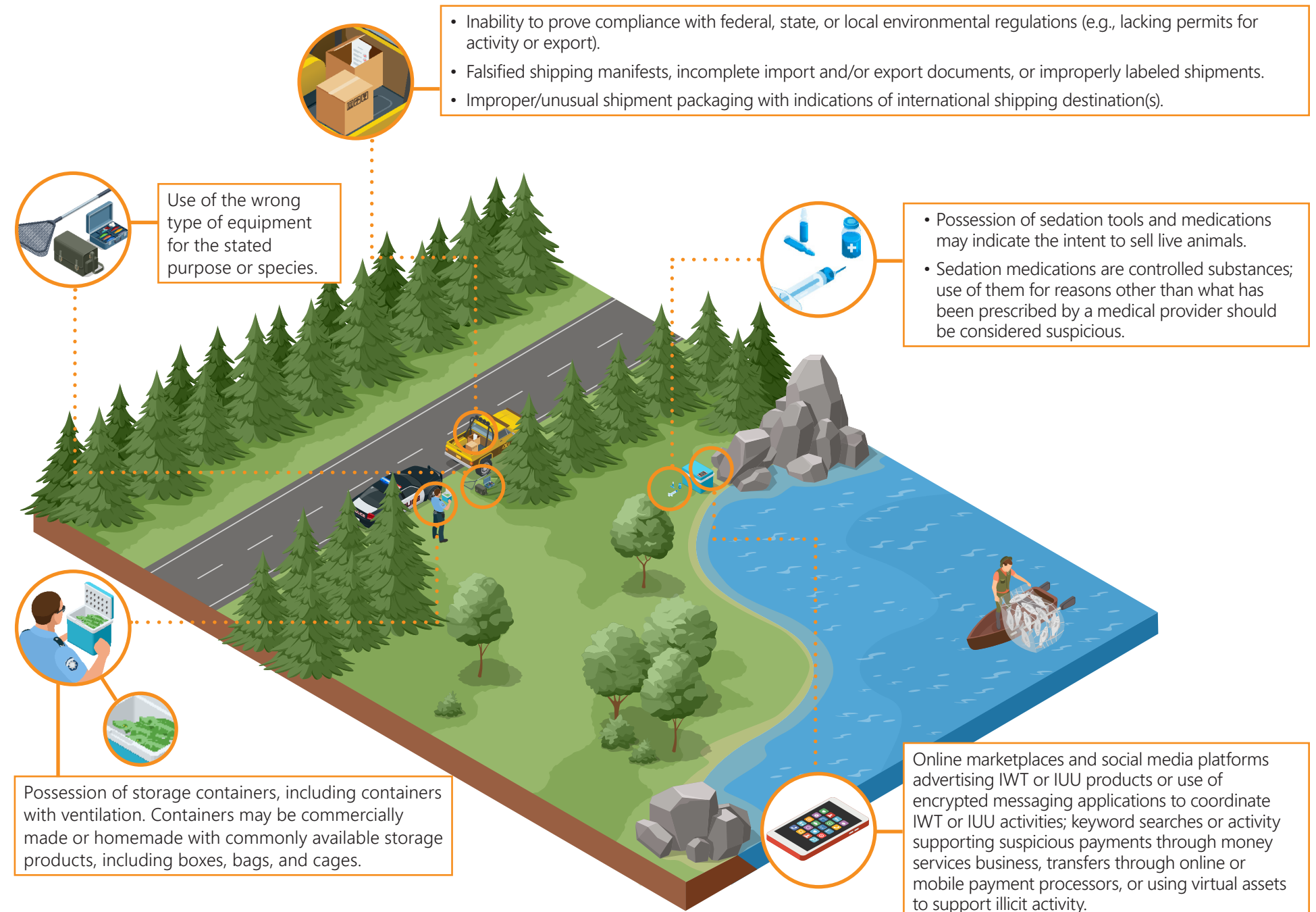
- In 2024, the US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned five Mexican individuals associated with the Gulf Cartel for involvement with criminal activities including IUU fishing operations, human smuggling, and narcotics trafficking. The Gulf Cartel uses light, fast moving boats to illegally fish red snapper and shark species from US waters, crossing back into Mexico to sell the product, and then oftentimes export it to the United States.
- In 2022, a US-based person allegedly associated with the Gulf Cartel was indicted for violation of the Endangered Species Act after an investigation into drug smuggling activity in Texas. The person obtained a jaguar to use in a sacrifice ritual intended to protect a drug shipment from law enforcement detection. Potential signs of ritualistic animal sacrifice may warrant further inquiry from first responders.

IWT and IUU fishing crimes, including those perpetrated by terrorists, can occur in various environments, locations, and circumstances. First responders may encounter evidence of natural resource crimes at the scenes of seemingly routine calls or emergencies.

^aThe totality of behavioral indicators and other relevant circumstances should be evaluated when considering law enforcement response or action.

Indicators of IWT and IUU Fishing Crimes

With awareness of criminal geographic hotspots and the products that move along these routes and an understanding of the behaviors of individuals and groups engaged in transnational crimes, public safety officials may be better positioned to identify natural resource trafficking. While indicators vary based on the species or commodity, common tactics may be used to conceal illicit activity^a.



NOTICE: This is a Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) product. JCAT is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, the FBI, and state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The product promotes coordination among intergovernmental authorities and the private sector in identifying, preventing, and responding to terrorist activities. Consider the enclosed information within the context of existing laws, regulations, authorities, agreements, policies or procedures. For additional information contact us at JCAT@ODNI.GOV. This document is best printed on 11"x17" paper.

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Potential Indicators of Illegal Fishing and Wildlife Trafficking by Terrorists (continued)

Evidence Preservation

- When encountering indicators of illegally trafficked fish or wildlife, contact the state or local natural resource enforcement agency or game warden (or equivalent) to minimize potential risks and ensure proper handling, evidence recovery, and documentation.
- The US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration maintain laboratories tailored to support wildlife crimes investigations. These laboratories are able to evaluate live or dead animals, wildlife parts, and animal products. Collection and preservation of critical evidence like DNA can be essential for investigation and prosecution.
- Laws and regulations may vary by state, and collaborating early during an encounter may assist identification and mitigation efforts. Invasive non-native plants, animals, and other living organisms can cause disease and damage to infrastructure. Coordination with federal authorities can help eradicate, control, and prevent invasive species.

Categories Of Evidence

The categories below describe types of evidence a first responder may encounter on the scene of a natural resource crime or violation. This list provides examples of common items that are sometimes used for legitimate purposes.

Acquisition or Possession of Weapons and Other Hazardous Materials

- **Weapons:** Firearms, bows, spears, knives, and clubs
- **Ammunition and Spent Projectiles:** Loaded cartridges and shells, spent casings, shotgun wadding, bullets, shot patterns, and arrows
- **Explosives:** Gunpowder, dynamite compounds, grenades, and other explosive devices
- **Poisons:** Liquid or powder form poisons, materials used to deliver poisons, and poison residues in blood, tissues, and organs

Species-Specific Hazards

- **Bones, Teeth, Beaks, Claws, and Horns:** Animal parts and products

^bDigital evidence is any information or data of value to an investigation that is stored on, received by, or transmitted by an electronic device.

- **Blood:** Blood evidence includes wet blood, dried blood chips and scrapings, and blood-stained objects
- **Feathers:** Feather evidence includes down, feathers, and feather products
- **Hair and Fibers:** Loose hairs from human suspects and animals, loose fibers, and hair or fiber products
- **Whole Animals:** Whole animal specimens, whether alive or dead
- **Tissue and Organs:** Fresh, frozen, and processed meats and organs, viscera, eggs, and decayed tissues
- **Hides and Furs:** Raw and tanned hides and furs, as well as leather and fur products

Equipment

- **Tools and Supplies:** Traps, nets, fishing tackle, bait, lures, and containers
- **Electronic Devices:** GPS devices, cell phones, tablets, computers, wearable devices (e.g., watches), depth finders or fish finders, vehicles, and digital storage devices that can retain vast amounts of information and potential digital evidence^b
- **Visual or Acoustic Devices:** Thermal and infrared devices, acoustic sensors (may be re-purposed phones), spotting scopes, binoculars, spotlights and flashlights for potential illegal nighttime activity
- **Vehicles, Vessels, and Aircraft:** Any vehicle, vessel, or aircraft an officer suspects was used to commit a natural resource crime

Fraudulent Documentation

- **Serial Numbers and Tags:** Possibly altered serial numbers on weapons, vehicles, vessels, and aircraft and possibly forged, altered, or re-used animal carcass tags
- **Documents:** Licenses, invoices, permits, and other documents in which the officer questions their origin, authenticity, or possible alterations, as well as documents that substantiate a violation

Indications of Criminal Activity

- **Fracture Evidence:** Sometimes called jigsaw puzzle evidence, this may include pieces of broken glass, fractured metal and plastic vehicle parts, torn pieces of paper, bone chips, or paint chips

- **Gunshot Residue:** Gunpowder patterns, gunpowder and primer residues found on the hands or clothing of subjects, and residues found on firearms and in wounds
- **Impression Marks:** Produced by shoes, boots, tires, and other hard objects into surfaces such as dirt, mud, snow, asphalt, or wood, particularly in areas where travel is prohibited
- **Latent Prints:** Produced by the friction ridge deposits (oils, salts, and soluble proteins) of fingers, palms, and feet
- **Tool Marks:** Impression or striation marks made by a tool edge coming into contact with a relatively soft surface, such as wood, plastic, or soft metals
- **Trace Evidence:** Minute or microscopic items of evidence, such as soil particles, glass and metal fragments, and unknown powders
- **Wound Characteristics:** Cut-out wounds, photographs of wounds, and wound contents

Scene Response, Safety, and Potential Hazards

Some species may carry diseases that can be passed to humans, posing a potential health risk to handlers. Disease transmission can occur through respiration or through a penetrating wound, such as a cut or small break in the skin, bite, or scratch. Solicit the expertise of professionals trained in handling the species to minimize potential injury to the handler and animal. If wildlife must be handled, the following considerations may assist with wildlife enforcement operations.

- Minimize potential contact and use personal protective equipment, such as gloves, eye protection, and respiratory protection appropriate for the species of animal. Wildlife capture/handling equipment like hoop nets, shields, crates, and cages will depend on the type and size of the species. Carry hand gel that is at least 80 percent alcohol, a first aid kit, and disinfectant and cleaning materials.
- Use proper equipment for forensic evidence collection to avoid cross-contamination and practice safety protocols.
- Animal carcasses should be placed in a double plastic bag and sealed as soon as possible. Avoid direct contact with dead animal's body fluids (blood, urine, feces). If

- contact does occur, wash contact area with soap and water as soon as possible. Avoid contact with dead animal's external parasites (i.e., fleas and ticks).
- Seek medical attention if disconcerting contact with wildlife has occurred or feeling ill after potential exposure.

Intelligence and Information Sharing

- Law enforcement officers should check for criminal history and warrants of suspects within the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. An NCIC check will automatically include verification through the Threat Screening Center (TSC) of the Terrorist Screening Dataset (TSDS), which contains the identity information of those who are known to be or reasonably suspected of being engaged in or intending to engage in terrorist activities. TSDS records may indicate a person's known or potential nexus to transnational criminal organizations.
- Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR): Submit a suspicious activity report to the state or local fusion center for activity that appears to be associated to a transnational criminal organization, individuals exhibiting signs and behaviors of violent extremism or terrorism, or other criminal actors who warrant further investigation by federal law enforcement authorities.

Resources

FBI Environmental Crime investigates the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Lacey Act, and the Endangered Species Act. <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/environmental-crime>

US Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement investigates wildlife crimes, regulates wildlife trade, and works with international, federal, state, local, and tribal counterparts to conserve wildlife resources. <https://www.fws.gov/program/office-of-law-enforcement>

Wildlife Crime Tips: <https://www.fws.gov/wildlife-crime-tips>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Office of Law Enforcement enforces domestic laws and international treaty requirements to protect marine wildlife and habitat. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/about/office-law-enforcement>

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<https://www.JCAT-url.com>

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(U) The Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, FBI, state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The First Responder's Toolbox is an ad hoc, unclassified reference aid intended to promote counterterrorism coordination among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government authorities and partnerships with private sector officials in deterring, preventing, disrupting, and responding to terrorist attacks.