

Renata Cao

WWF Mexico



Renata Cao is World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Counter Wildlife Crime Hub Lead for Latin America. Her work focuses on supporting WWF offices in the region to advance their counter wildlife trafficking agendas and to facilitate coordinated responses, build regional technical capacities, and forge strategic partnerships.

Her Story

What does your role entail?

My role is to coordinate activities that address illegal wildlife trade (IWT) and to build partnerships to counter wildlife crime in Latin America. As part of my responsibilities, I coordinate a project that is targeting regional anti-corruption efforts and advancing financial investigations to counter wildlife trafficking in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, funded by the United States Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

What drivers or facilitators of corruption are you working to address?

In the Latin American region, there's evidence that weak governance and constrained public institutions with limited or non-existent enforcement facilitate wildlife trafficking. Our project is looking to identify points in the criminal procedure chain that are vulnerable to corruption and to help develop mitigation measures for identified risks. Our results and lessons learned will serve as case studies for regional work in Latin America to address the facilitators of IWT.

Is there a critical moment that set you on the course you're on now?

I started my career in conservation working in Protected Area management, community development, and sustainable livelihoods. My past work on a Mexican strategy to promote sustainable use of wildlife by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities illuminated how corruption can undermine conservation and jeopardize communities and livelihoods. I discovered that corruption facilitates the laundering of specimens that may be illegally caught in the wild and falsely declared as captive-bred or legally harvested. Having the opportunity to lead the development of WWF's Counter Wildlife Crime Hub for Latin America has been a turning point for me, because it has created opportunities to build partnerships and test strategies to fight corruption.

"Situation analysis is key to understanding corruption behind environmental crimes; it can help you to focus efforts and design more effective conservation projects."

– Renata Cao, Counter Wildlife Crime Hub Lead for LAC, WWF

What's something unexpected that you've learned through your work?

Applying a corruption lens has helped me to better understand the different motivations and drivers behind IWT. I've also found that a gender lens (considering how social norms apply differently to men and women) adds an important further layer of detail to work with. For example, norms relating to masculinity may drive some men to engage in poaching. Gender-based violence may drive women

to be accomplices in a crime. I've learned a lot from a [recent effort](#) that analyzed different case studies around the world, looking at how social norms and gender shape the IWT space, from poaching, trafficking, and demand for wildlife products, and on to policy making.

What would you say to other practitioners seeking to address corruption through their conservation programming?

Developing a situation analysis at the beginning of a project (such as a political economy analysis) has been a really helpful way for me to better understand the drivers and facilitators of corruption that are associated with IWT. I recommend WWF's practical guide to [political economy analysis for conservation impact \(PEACI\)](#) because it's easy to use and doesn't require specialized expertise or an expensive consultant. My team recently worked with a graduate student to develop a PEACI before preparing a counter jaguar trafficking strategy. That analysis revealed a general lack of understanding about jaguar trafficking amongst relevant stakeholders. By failing to recognize that domestic (instead of international) trafficking is one of the main threats to jaguars, past conservation efforts have been hindered. These findings have helped us to focus our work on developing a common understanding of the real problems behind jaguar declines, so that we can design more effective interventions.

What gives you hope for the future?

Through my work, I've had the opportunity to meet many inspiring young professionals—men and women—who are committed to finding innovative solutions to solve the world's most pressing problems. I think that young generations are, in general, more aware of how their choices as consumers affect the environment. I believe they will be important drivers of change.

About Targeting Natural Resource Corruption

The Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) project is working to improve biodiversity outcomes by helping practitioners to address the threats posed by corruption to wildlife, fisheries and forests. TNRC harnesses existing knowledge, generates new evidence, and supports innovative policy and practice for more effective anti-corruption programming. Learn more at tnrcproject.org.

Disclaimer

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