Geointeresting Podcast Transcript
Episode 11: How the intelligence community is combating wildlife trafficking
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Welcome to Geointeresting, presented by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. For today's podcast we are talking to Dr. Odean Serrano and Mr. Terry Ford about the intelligence community's role in combating wildlife trafficking. Mr. Ford and Dr. Serrano lead the IC's engagement with the combating-wildlife-trafficking community and help integrate the data collection and analysis.

NGA: Welcome Odean and Terry. Thank you for joining us. Most of us know about wildlife trafficking; that elephants and rhinos are being poached for their tusks and horns. Why is it important that the IC is joining the combatting-wildlife-trafficking effort, and why now?

Terry: Let me just jump in and start out by saying there's a national strategy to combat wildlife trafficking. I think it was signed on about February 14; something like that. And we're part of the U.S government, so we have a responsibility — that is, we the intelligence community — to support this effort, and it's a meaningful effort. And so we're part of the government, so it's all of the government effort. So we need to do our part to contribute to that. And I think we bring a couple of things to it. I think we bring, first of all, some skills that are useful to this effort and in terms of, for example, how do deal with data, and how do you share data across different agencies and organizations? So I think that's one thing we do bring. And candidly, also, we are very interested in illicit activities. Most of what people see us working on is some other types of illicit activities, but there are nexus between traffickers of one sort and traffickers of another. They're all involved in illicit activity. So we do watch out, and so we think some of the information we do come across will probably be useful to the larger government sector.

Odean: And I would add that the charter for the intelligence community is spelled out, really, for each agency, as Terry mentioned, through the task-force working group. I'm at more of the practitioner level, and I've found you ask, why now? The intelligence community has been touching this topic for years. We have done some work on this, but we are competing with other requirements and other priorities. So the 'why now?' part is because we've had the leadership from both Terry Ford, Director Cardillo [and] DNI Clapper, and we are in a place where that convergence of leadership backing is prime, and so because of the 'why now?' part, we have their backing and their commitment to this, and now we are now part of the task force, which gives us the opportunity to work in a more integrated fashion.

NGA: OK, great. And speaking of integration, the combating-wildlife-trafficking community members are odd bedfellows, I'd say — NGOs, government agencies, the private sector and international partners — and DNI Clapper mentioned earlier; he called the group an unusual aggregation all linked by a common denominator So what kind of new dynamic does the IC bring to the fold?

Terry: One of the things we've tried to do is to further this whole effort of integration, and that's something that we do, I think, fairly well within the intelligence community. Director Clapper mentioned that this morning. [The] intelligence community itself is a relatively diverse group of

agencies and activities, and so he's charted with integrating the efforts with making the community work as efficiently and effectively as he can. So we've had a lot of experience working part of an integrated whole, so that's something we can bring to that as well. In the issue I mentioned before of data sharing — making a data accessible to a wide variety of different kind of customers, understanding what the requirements are — we are also probably experiencing that as well.

Odean: Right, so we've learned that the intelligence community is reliant on the NGOs, who are really the experts in this topic. What we add is more of the foundational component, sort of the mapping component, to allow our NGOs to contribute their various levels of data. The other part that I've learned even more so today through our first part of our symposium is that by understanding the exact nature of what the customer needs — we heard from traffic representatives and law enforcement representatives — it will help us to tailor and focus our contributions and fine-tune those to be more exact of where those gaps are. So this is a gap analysis of, what does the broader community need? versus what the intelligence community can provide, and we are going to do so through an aggregate as opposed to trying to ask for new resources, which we know are going to be difficult to achieve. So it's got to be through this collaborative effort to mitigate that gap.

NGA: It's important for the global community to be able to share data and collaborate, and the NGA portal makes that much easier. What kind of data is being shared, and what's the next step?

Odean: So again, coming from NGA, I believe that our geospatial mission, our geospatial-data mission, is the foundation of every other mission. It is a way to portray multiple instances of data in one view, and so NGA has led the way through their Director Cardillo's vision for working in the open to provide this conduit this environment for information sharing and platform [to] aggregate our data. You ask, what types of data? They range from global level — global-view satellite telemetry all the way down to radio; handheld radio. So it's everything in between. We're talking about Twitter feeds. We're talking about open-source data. We're talking about nontraditional sources of information, along with what we call a federated search. That is, every mission that you're going to hear about today has their own database, their own repository of very rich data, and our goal is to integrate these protected environments of data to help us get a better look, and that's what we try to achieve through our common operating picture.

Terry: Can I go back to your first question?

NGA: Sure!

Terry: I think it's also important to realize that we are a small part of much larger effort, and we think that we can and should contribute to that effort, but by no means are we the end to be all. Just because we are involved doesn't mean we're going have a major effort and successes against wildlife trafficking. This will be a hard slog for many, many years to come, and we hope we can contribute to that. But like anything else, we can only do our part. We're not policymakers. We're not law enforcement. We're not the justice community. We are, as you said, enablers and supporters and integrators of this overall effort. So we have an important role to play, but I wouldn't want anybody to walk away saying, "Well jeez, now that the intel community is involved in it, I don't have to contribute any more to [inaudible] conservation group

because all the problems are going to be solved in the next two years. I don't think so. We'll do our part.

Odean: And I would like to add that this effort is simply a model for other types of humanitarian relief or nontraditional intelligence topics where through by looking through the review of a topic and common goals and a common platform, we are harnessing a variety of sources of information to advance respective goals and missions. That model can be used for any topic: wildlife trafficking, Nepal, Ebola, the artic, etc. That's the vision from Director Cardillo, and I'm happy to see it coming to life.

NGA: OK. Thank you so much

Terry: Thank you very much.

Odean: Alright, thank you.

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