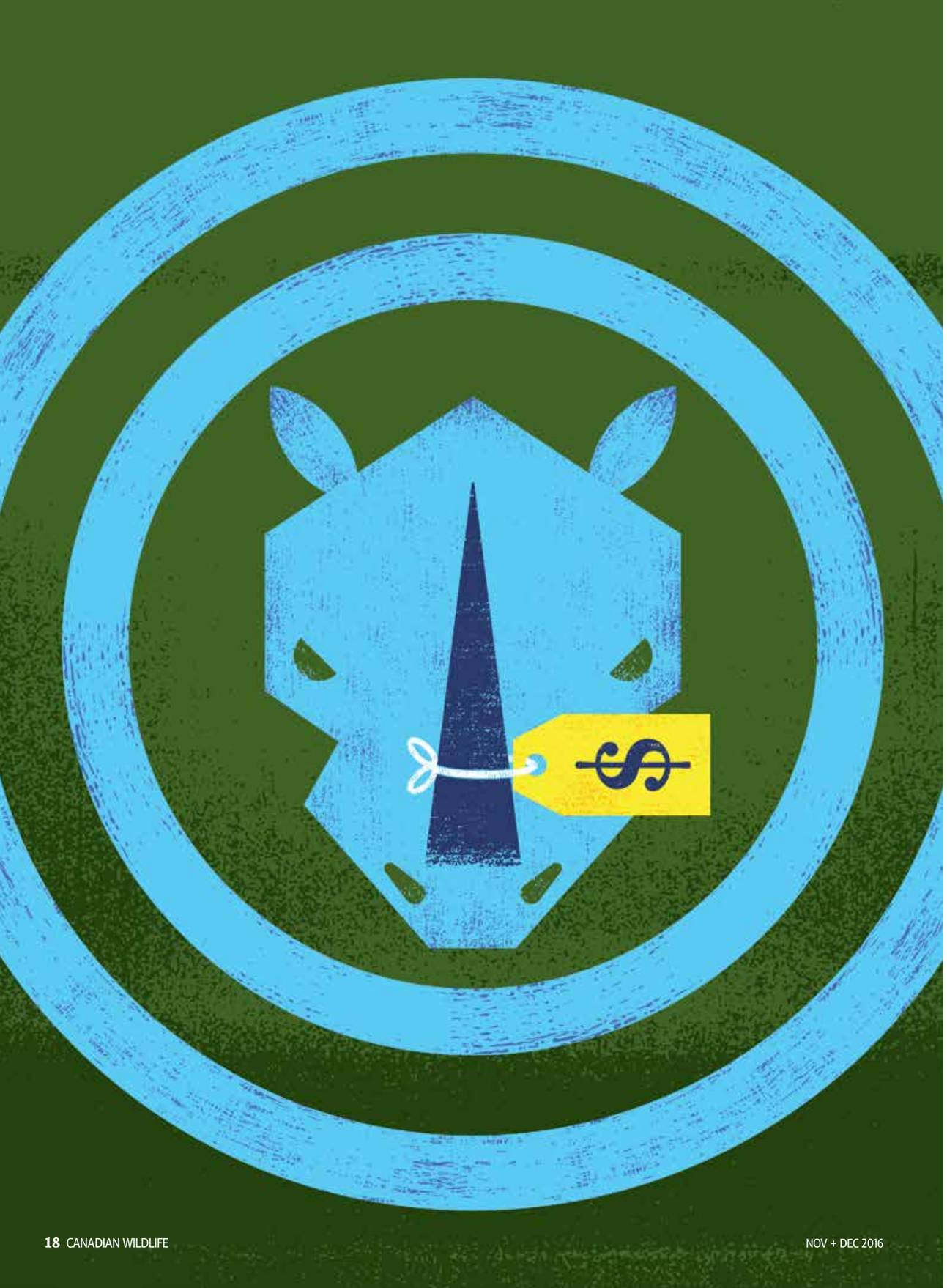

THE TANGLED WEB

Sheldon Jordan is Canada's top wildlife crime fighter. He also works globally with Interpol. Here's what he's learned: When it comes to illegal trade — from polar bear skins to zebra-hoof bookends — there are no borders.

By David Hayes Illustration by Matthew Daley

In the basement of a building in a secret location within the National Capital Region, Sheldon Jordan is cradling a black rhino horn with both hands. A dark, smoky colour, it could be mistaken from a distance for a wood like black walnut or ebony. It's actually made of thousands of compressed, hair-like strands of keratin, a fibrous protein that is also found in human fingernails, horse's hooves, porcupine quills and the beaks of birds and turtles. The horn weighs around two kilograms and is 45 centimetres long with a pronounced curve. But that's not why Jordan is handling it with such care.

"How much do you think this is worth?" he asks. Then he answers the question himself. "Between $300,000 and $350,000 on the black market."

A compact, fit-looking 48-year-old with a neatly trimmed goatee, Jordan is director-general of wildlife enforcement at Environment and Climate Change Canada and plays an international role as chair of the Wildlife Crime Working Group at Interpol, the global intergovernmental police organization. The room he's standing in contains a sad array of contraband seized by officials from Environment Canada and the Canada Border Services Agency: a polar bear skin with head attached, walrus and narwhal tusks as well as a carved elephant tusk, a black bear's gallbladder, an alligator head ashtray, zebra-hoof bookends, the two-metre-long skin of an African rock python, illegally harvested wild ginseng and more.

The room's location is kept secret because the total value of the goods here is about $3 million. It also illustrates how wildlife crime — whether it's a foreign smuggler removing a Canadian species from Canada or a Canadian buying African rhino horns from U.S. antique dealers to export abroad — is borderless.

Wildlife crime has significantly increased over the past decade to the point where it's now ranked the fourth highest-grossing illegal activity worldwide, after narcotics, counterfeiting and human trafficking. According to the comprehensive *World Wildlife Crime Report*, published earlier this year by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the trafficking of wildlife is not restricted to certain countries. It is a truly global phenomenon, aided by widespread corruption at many levels of government and society (everything from customs officials in Africa to taxidermists and auction houses in North America). And it has become an area of specialization for organized crime.

Another report released this year, *Rise of Environmental Crime* from the United Nations Environment Program and Interpol, estimates that environmental crime — defined as the illegal wildlife and fisheries trade, forest crimes, exploitation of minerals, trafficking of hazardous waste and carbon credit fraud — is worth as much as $258 billion. Figures for the illegal wildlife trade alone range from $10 billion to $30 billion a year. In Environment and Climate Change Canada's most recent report (2013-14), Sheldon Jordan wrote that "the value of wildlife products often exceeds the street price of illegal drugs in Canada."

Gently placing the rhino horn back on a display table, Jordan explains that the rhinoceros population in southern Africa is being decimated to meet a demand for rhino horn in East Asia — Vietnam, in particular — that has sent prices soaring over the past decade. "There is a correlation between the rise of East Asian economies, including Vietnam's, and the growing affluence of the people in those countries," he says, "and the increase in poaching and wildlife trafficking around the world."

In Vietnam, a rhino horn is a status symbol often given as a gift to family members, business colleagues or to impress someone in authority. Powdered rhino horn is thought to be a potent aphrodisiac, hangover cure and even party drug. More significantly, its powers are said to neutralize poisons and cure terminal diseases, including cancer. At a time when many in East Asia have new spending power but modern medicine isn't as evolved as it is in the West, people battling serious illnesses turn to their culture's long history of traditional medicine. Superstitions and myths are hard to combat, but Jordan is even more frustrated by the attitude of Westerners who don't take wildlife crime seriously enough, making it a relatively low-risk venture with high returns.

"If you were stopped with this rhino horn in your luggage at an airport, it would be seized and you'd be fined. There might even be a little bit of jail time," he says. "But if you were caught with $300,000 worth of cocaine in your luggage, the penalties would be far more severe. People don't take wildlife crime seriously. They think animals will just keep reproducing."

Walking across the room to another table, Jordan picks up what looks like a small, dark, dried-out sac. "This is a dried bear gall," he says. "In Canada, a hunter might get $50 or $100 for it. By the time it gets to Asia, it's worth many thousands of dollars."

With many bear species threatened or endangered internationally, Canada is a destination for those who want to hunt black bears, which are not at risk. The bears can be taken legally — in season and with proper permits — but the export of bear parts is prohibited by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which is given force in Canada by the federal Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act. Thus, with bear gall a prized ingredient in traditional Asian medicine, there's a thriving illegal trade here.

"When hunters cut it out, it looks a bit like a green pizza pocket," says Jordan, noting that in all provinces, except Nova Scotia, the gall must be left in the gut pile at the kill site. Jean-François Dubois, a wildlife enforcement officer who came with Jordan to the evidence room, adds that some buyers will pay six figures to accompany hunters so they can drink the fresh bile — the yellowy-green fluid inside the gall — on the spot. "We're one of the few countries with a healthy bear population," Jordan says. "So we have to prevent the demand for bear gall creating an even bigger illegal market."

For Jordan, among the world's top wildlife crime-fighters today, it's been a long journey from his childhood on a farm in the Interior of British Columbia. He is the eldest of four, born to an electrician father and homemaker mother who were hobby farmers. Neither his parents nor any of his younger sisters are in the conservation field, although the family loved the outdoors. (Decades later, Jordan says, his father admitted that he'd always wanted to be a conservation officer, although he'd never talked about it before.)

In the mid-1980s, Jordan went to the University of Victoria, intending to become a teacher. One summer he got a temporary job as a customs officer on Pender Island, clearing yachts, fishing vessels and private aircraft. He discovered that he liked law enforcement because he liked interacting with people and "I was helping the good guys by stopping bad guys."

Jordan wanted to learn French but wasn't having much success taking courses in Victoria so he transferred to Laval University in Quebec City. There he fell in love with a fellow student who is today his wife, became fluent in French and, in 1991, completed an undergrad in geography.

One day, while looking for job opportunities, he saw an ad for a part-time Canada Customs (now called Canada Border Services Agency) officer to work the night shift at the Quebec City airport. Being bilingual and with his experience on Pender Island, he was hired. Within two years he had a full-time job and ended up in criminal intelligence as an intelligence officer and, later, a front-line supervisor, for the next decade.

In 2002, a colleague told him that Environment Canada was creating an intelligence program in its wildlife enforcement branch in Quebec. Jordan applied for a job and was hired. Four years later, he became regional director in Quebec, and in 2010, was named the national director-general and moved to the department's head office in Gatineau.

A national approach to managing wildlife in Canada dates back to the turn of the 20th century, when a number of migratory birds were endangered by hunting. The federal government passed the Migratory Birds Convention Act in 1917, but it took time for a regulatory approach to managing wildlife to be accepted, given right-to-harvest attitudes embedded in Canada's pioneer past. It wasn't until 1947 that the Dominion Wildlife Service was founded. It was renamed the Canadian Wildlife Service three years later and in the 1970s incorporated into the new federal Department of the Environment.

As Jordan's career progressed, he became involved in Interpol's international wildlife enforcement activities and, in 2013, he was elected chair of the organization's Wildlife Crime Working Group, which acts as a forum for the 190 members of Interpol to discuss crime-fighting strategies, make recommendations and improve communications between law enforcement agencies.

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"Feel this," says Jordan, holding out what looks like a burgundy-coloured shawl. It not only feels softer than the softest cashmere imaginable, it's the focus of a major Interpol initiative. Shahtoosh is woven from the fine, light and very warm wool of the endangered Tibetan antelope. The wool allows the animals to survive in freezing temperatures at altitudes of 5,000 metres. But unlike the wool of other animals that can be harvested by combing or shearing, the hairs of Tibetan antelopes have to be individually plucked. So the animals must be killed and skinned.

Having at one time drastically reduced the poaching of Tibetan antelope, Interpol heard about a growing shahtoosh issue a couple of years ago when the Swiss began seeing shawls coming from the fashion capital of Milan to be sold at luxury ski resorts, with prices ranging from $6,000 to $15,000. It turned out the demand had reignited poaching and the raw material was being smuggled into India where master weavers made the shawls. (They're also a luxury item among the wealthy in India and Pakistan.)

To combat the re-emergent trade, Jordan created a project team within the Wildlife Crime Working Group. The shawls are often labelled pashmina, a legal kind of fine cashmere, so Interpol has helped supply key countries with microscopes that can identify differences in the fabrics. "It's been out of control," says Jordan. "We estimate that about 20 per cent of the animals of this species have been killed over the past few years. We're working on a number of different cases trying to stop the poaching."

Many of the issues Jordan deals with internationally relate back to his Canadian job. "Most Canadians don't understand that an increase in elephant and rhino poaching in Africa has an effect here," he says. "The demand in Asia for ivory tusks and rhino horns has also meant that narwhal tusks from our Arctic are now worth as much as elephant ivory."

Walking over to a dairy-white pelt that was once a majestic, living polar bear, Jordan explains that it was illegally harvested from the Baffin Bay population. "In 2009, the price of a really good polar bear pelt at auction was about $5,000. By 2013, the demand was so great that a pelt would sell for $20,000 to $25,000 and a full mount in China could be worth $100,000 or more. So it's all interconnected."

Jordan adds, "more than 100,000 jobs are linked to the legal wildlife trade, many of them in isolated or rural aboriginal communities. There are a lot of people in Canada who depend on wildlife for their living, and most of them live in places where there aren't a lot of other opportunities. Nobody's going to put a Tupperware factory in some tiny village in Nunavut. So we try to protect the legal guys by pursuing the illegal guys."

This partly involves intelligence gathering, an area of wildlife enforcement that Jordan has grown. He devoted 20 per cent of his staff to polar bears after his intelligence team identified a growing increase in world prices and some weaknesses in Canada's enforcement capabilities. About 15 per cent of his staff spend all their time analyzing data and trying to identify criminals who can become the object of investigations.

It also involves technology. Over the past year, Jordan has launched a pilot project that takes place when hunters register a harvested polar bear. A conservation officer implants a microchip in an undisclosed part of the anatomy, takes a DNA sample and collects a sample of the creature's stable isotopes, which can reveal its geographic origins. The reason: traceability. Many countries implant microchips in wildlife, but Jordan presented Canada's three-pronged approach at a wildlife symposium held in Johannesburg last September. Environment Canada even has its own DNA lab, which, for example, last year allowed it to analyze some confiscated ivory that its owners claimed was so old that it predated the 1975 CITES agreement and was therefore legal. (Tests proved it was from 2000.)

Sometimes, Jordan says, the technological approach involves forensic sleuthing. In 2015, the Saint John, N.B.-based natural gas company Canaport LNG was fined $750,000 in connection with the death of 7,500 migratory birds, some of them species at risk, two years earlier. On a foggy evening, the birds were attracted to a flare-off, a routine safety measure at natural gas plants like Canaport's. But after Jordan's officials seized the company's computer files, they were able to provide evidence Canaport had known its plant was on a migratory bird route and had failed to put in place backup systems to avoid an incident like this.

Hearing such stories makes you realize how broad the scope of wildlife enforcement really is, far greater than the average chump who fishes out-of-season or hunts a deer without a permit (although those cases are part of Jordan's mandate, too).

In fact, the biggest challenge he faces is staffing. With fewer than 100 officers in 22 locations, Jordan's staff is responsible for enforcing federal laws throughout Canada, in collaboration with provincial and territorial wildlife offices. The mandate also includes 54 national wildlife areas and 92 migratory bird sanctuaries, as well as customs-related incidents. Rolling his eyes, Jordan sighs and says, "We have at least twice as much to do as we have officers to do it all."

But Jordan is a resolutely upbeat guy. His plan is ambitious, nothing less than saving wildlife — not just in Canada but around the world. He still retains some of the excitement he felt when he arrived at Environment Canada and saw all the scientists, field workers and enforcement officers. Then he became involved with Interpol. "It's like stepping into *National Geographic*," he says. "This is such a wonderful field to work in, if you're curious and you care about wildlife."