

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106553](#), a report to the Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Wildlife trafficking—the illegal trade and poaching of wild animals—is a transnational crime that threatens security, economic prosperity, and conservation efforts, according to State. In recent years, media reports have alleged that park rangers trained by U.S.-funded partner organizations overseas have committed a range of human rights violations, including sexual assault and murder.

GAO was asked to review human rights protections in U.S. efforts to combat wildlife trafficking. This report addresses (1) changes agencies have made to human rights protection mechanisms in efforts to combat wildlife trafficking since 2020; and the extent agencies have (2) planned for and (3) monitored the effectiveness of social safeguards for selected awards. GAO reviewed documentation, including for a non-generalizable sample of 19 awards, and conducted fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making nine recommendations, including that USAID ensure partners submit social safeguards plans in a timely manner; USAID, FWS, and State ensure partners provide monitoring updates on social safeguards; and FWS and State require partners to report abuse allegations in a timely manner. USAID, FWS, and State agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106553](#). For more information, contact Kimberly Gianopoulos at (202) 512-8612 or gianopoulosk@gao.gov.

July 2024

WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Agencies Should Improve Efforts to Protect Human Rights in Overseas Activities

What GAO Found

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the Department of State award funds to partner organizations that support park rangers' efforts to protect wildlife around the world. Since 2020, these agencies have taken steps to enhance human rights protection mechanisms, or social safeguards, to help prevent human rights abuses in ranger activities they support. For example, USAID published guidance for partners on social safeguards, including on community consultation and engagement; consideration of Indigenous Peoples' rights; human rights training for park rangers; and grievance mechanisms. FWS began a pilot to assess social risks and safeguards for its awards. In addition, State began adding language on social safeguards to combating wildlife trafficking award notices.

While agencies have taken steps to ensure partners plan for social safeguards to protect human rights, GAO identified gaps in selected awards. For example, USAID generally required partners to provide social safeguards plans, but several of its partners, among the awards GAO reviewed, did not provide the plans in a timely manner. These partners provided plans 6 to 21 months after their due dates. As a result, USAID did not have timely information to determine whether partners had designed appropriate social safeguards to address human rights risks and prevent abuses from occurring in projects they support.

GAO also found weaknesses in agencies' monitoring of social safeguards in the 19 awards GAO reviewed. For example, the agencies have not ensured that all partners provide updates in monitoring reports on the status and effectiveness of planned safeguards to protect human rights. In addition, while USAID requires partners to report human rights abuse allegations to USAID in a timely manner, FWS and State do not have similar clear requirements. GAO identified abuse allegations that State was unaware of, including an alleged incident involving sexual abuse by a ranger. Without ensuring partners provide monitoring updates and notify agencies of abuse allegations in a timely manner, agencies may be unaware of abuses, or of whether social safeguards are working as intended to protect Indigenous Peoples or other vulnerable populations.

Rangers Work to Protect Wildlife at Parks and Protected Areas Around the World



Source: GAO (photos). | GAO-24-106553