Uncovering the nuances of criminal motivations and modus operandi in the Russian Far East: A wildlife crime case study

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Abstract
Wildlife crime is a relatively new line of inquiry for scholars of criminology; traditionally it has been the purview of conservation science. However, as conservation is fundamentally about changing human behavior, the value of a criminological perspective to understand both the theoretical underpinnings of wildlife crime commission and practical mitigation strategies is being increasingly recognized. Based on an ethnographic case study on the poaching and trafficking of Amur tigers in the Russian Far East, this article reflects upon the use of criminological ethnographic methods to understand the complexity and subtleties of wildlife crime by directly interviewing the poachers, middlemen, buyers, and smugglers involved. The article seeks transparency on how qualitative methods can be successfully employed to engage in fieldwork with active criminals in peripheral settings.

Keywords
Wildlife crime, ethnography, tigers, criminology, qualitative methods, Russian Far East, wildlife trafficking, poaching, subculture

Introduction
Wildlife crime, defined as the poaching of and the illegal trade in wildlife (Moreto and Pires, 2018), is becoming increasingly ubiquitous and constitutes the greatest threat to the continued existence of many species. The empirical study of wildlife crime falls between two disciplines: criminology and conservation science. Criminology, a field within both the behavioral and social sciences, has a well-established interdisciplinary scholarship. However, traditionally it has focused on the study of conventional street crimes (e.g. robbery and burglary); the exploitation of wildlife has rarely been addressed in orthodox criminal law and therefore remains a subject that has received limited attention from scholars of criminology (Gore, 2011; Lynch et al., 2017; Pires and Clarke, 2012; Van Uhm and Siegel, 2016). Conservation science falls within the purview of conservation biologists and ecologists (Drury et al., 2011), situating wildlife crime research in the realm of the natural sciences. Consequently, within conservation biology, a focus on numerical quantification favored by the natural sciences has occurred at the expense of a criminological perspective. While there has been a recent increase in criminological attention to conservation science (see, for example, Lemieux, 2014; Moreto and Lemieux, 2015a, 2015b; Sollund and Runhovde, 2020; South and Wyatt, 2011; Van Uhm, 2016; Wong, 2016), it is necessary for criminology’s contribution to conservation scholarship to continue to develop, as it still has much to contribute to theory building, methodological breadth, and policy application in our understanding of the human dimension of wildlife crime.

Quantitative data analysis employs techniques and perspectives such as modeling, to minimize error variance, while qualitative data provides opportunities to understand and explain the nature, underlying characteristics, and meaning behind the observed variability (Rust et al., 2017). Moreto (2016) contends that wildlife crime studies have traditionally favored quantitative over qualitative methods due to scholars within conservation lacking awareness on the

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theories and methods utilized by social scientists. This preference fails to account for the complex interface between human-natural systems—the sociocultural and political processes alongside the ecological considerations—highlighting a common dilemma in conservation-related problems, where challenges may well be biological in nature, but many influencing variables are rooted in the human, social world. Natural science problems are embedded in human and social systems; as such, conservation is both about biology and about changing human behavior (Balmford and Cowling, 2006; Schultz, 2011).

Scholars of green criminology were instrumental in expanding the traditional concept of crime by bringing attention to the many destructive and often marginalized forms of environmental crimes (Lynch et al., 2017). More recently, wildlife crimes, including the illegal wildlife trade and its associated correlates, causes, and links to globalization and capitalism, have become significant green criminology concerns (Goyes and Sollund, 2016). However, these issues have generally been explored quantitatively (Lynch, 2019). Qualitative methods can infuse conservation-oriented research topics with the necessary context needed to fully appreciate and understand the complexity between the natural and social world that may otherwise be overlooked through quantitative methods (Drury et al., 2011).

Recently, there has been an increase in the use of qualitative methods to explore wildlife crimes. Qualitative methods have been used successfully to interview those directly involved in the illegal markets of parrots in the neotropics (Pires et al., 2016), black caviar in Russia (Van Uhm and Siegel, 2016), tigers in China (Moyle, 2009; Van Uhm and Wong, 2019; Wong, 2016), and live wildlife trade in Peru (Leberatto, 2016). Scholars have also employed other techniques to acquire related wildlife crime data, for example, interviewing non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders, government officials, and scholars (e.g. Arroyo-Quiroz and Wyatt, 2019; Wyatt, 2009, 2011); law enforcement personnel (e.g. Moreto, 2016; Moreto and Lemieux, 2015b; Runhovde, 2015, 2017, 2018; Warnholz and Harrington, 2016); and a combination of environmental experts/authorities and law enforcement agents (e.g. Sollund, 2017; Sollund and Runhovde, 2020).

This article further builds on this literature and discusses how qualitative methods can be utilized in the field of wildlife criminology, based on my ethnographic fieldwork in the Russian Far East (RFE). My research on Amur tiger poaching and trafficking in the RFE, sought to expose details about an enduring wildlife crime problem in a politically, socially, and culturally complex region. My chosen methodology and subsequent methods were focused on adequately exploring the interdisciplinary nature of wildlife crime. My decision to pursue a criminological ethnographic study was necessitated by wildlife poaching and trafficking’s deep interconnections to culture and society and ethnography’s ability to capture the intimate and immediate sociocultural aspects of crime and the contextual logic and emotion that define criminal experience (Ferrell, 1999, 2006; Katz, 1988). Long-term solutions to wildlife poaching and trafficking must successfully connect to a region’s culture and society, requiring a knowledge of the local experience.

This research was influenced by cultural criminology, where crime is explored and understood in the context of culture in late modernity through the eyes of the offender (Ferrell et al., 2008; Hayward and Young, 2012). As a criminology inspired by sociology and focused on the individuals involved in crime and deviance (Becker, 1963), cultural criminology’s associated qualitative methods emphasize ethnographic models for direct, naturalistic inquiry (Adler, 1985; Ferrell, 1997; Ferrell et al., 2008). I also drew from green criminology, which focuses on extending the scope of conventional criminology to include acts that cause ecological damage, regardless of whether they are recognized in traditional law; the central question transitioning from not whether an act is or is not punishable, but whether it is harmful (White, 2008; Wyatt, 2013). By acknowledging the influence of these two theoretical perspectives on my study, this work may contribute to the dialog taking place in green cultural criminology, a relatively new approach, which seeks to integrate the array of perspectives that have influenced both cultural and green criminology (Brisman, 2017).

Within this framework, one of the goals of criminologists is to acknowledge and address the connections and overlap between theoretical positions, of which there are many between cultural and green criminology—particularly the cultural dimension of environmental harm (Brisman and South, 2013, 2014). This work recognizes the underlying socio-political, economic, and cultural factors associated with environmental crimes and harms and can contribute to the green cultural criminology perspective by critically evaluating the intersection of the environment, culture, crime, and justice along with forms of resistance that challenge the modern foundations of society and forms of social control responsible for environmental harm (Brisman and South, 2013).

In the RFE, poaching has been identified as the most direct threat to the Amur tiger subspecies (Robinson et al., 2015); however, virtually no empirical data exist about those directly involved. Fieldwork with active offenders can be dangerous and challenging to conduct, however, to gather the most complete data possible, I made the decision to interview offenders directly involved in the illegal tiger trade. Ned Polsky, an American sociologist and author of Hustlers, Beats, and Others (1967) defines this type of on-the-ground fieldwork as a move away from secondhand information, an abandonment of “jailhouse sociology,” and a shift in focus toward the “messy reality” of deviance as constructed by criminals. Put bluntly, to understand the dynamics of tiger poaching, I endeavored to simply ask those involved. Of course, this task was not simple, but I hope my experience helps future researchers in similar tasks.
My research was influenced by edge ethnography and naturalistic inquiry, as advocated by Ferrell’s (1997) research and his methods of being a complete participant in criminological research. I used ethnographic methods to enter the world of poachers, as I felt acquiring information from offenders themselves offers undiluted information that is crucial and cannot be acquired with as much accuracy in any other way. However, I never engaged in tiger poaching and so separate myself from those who actively participated in the crimes they were researching (see, for example, Adler, 1985; Ferrell, 1996, 2018). Beyond what one’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal requires, there are ethical limits on what a researcher should or should not do in the field, those being defined by the researcher’s own morals.

The goals for this article are threefold: (1) to stimulate a greater confidence in the methodology of ethnography for collecting firsthand data involving criminals and their organization and activity; (2) to elucidate how these methods can contribute to understanding context-specificity and nuances; and (3) to provide an example of how ethnography can be integrated into a field historically dominated by natural sciences. Following this introduction, I describe how ethnography has been used historically and how it can be used in wildlife crime. I then discuss why I chose to study tiger poaching in the RFE and describe my study area and research design. This is followed by a description of how I used ethnographic methods to achieve a research goal in a field dominated by natural sciences, and some key insights I learned. Discussion and conclusion follow.

**Historical use of ethnography and its applicability to the RFE and wildlife crime**

The orthodox definition of crime and deviance are societal constructions, where behaviors are criminalized as defined by the state in the form of administrative and regulatory law (Wyatt, 2013). If crime has no ontological reality (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004), it manifests subjectively and cannot rely solely on positivist methods of inquiry (Fleetwood and Potter, 2017). Ethnography, as a fluid and adaptable research method, both interpretive and immersive, is a method that strives to transcend scientific objectivity. The methods associated with ethnography, focusing on participant observation and interviewing, allow the investigator to embed themselves near or within a phenomenon to gain a deep understanding of a group’s lived experiences, including shared culture, conventions, and social dynamics (Ferrell, 1997). Ethnography captures context—nuances and individual subjectivities—about a topic from a firsthand, on-the-ground perspective, which makes it an ideal method to use when virtually no empirical data exist (Moreto, 2016). Ethnographic methods place emphasis on the meanings, perceptions, and beliefs held by participants, enabling them to speak for themselves, and allowing their social realities to be depicted in intimate detail (Eliason, 2004).

The two academic disciplines traditionally associated with ethnography are anthropology and sociology (Adler and Adler, 1987); however, much criminological theory developed from ethnographic research during the early 20th century, especially the Chicago school of criminology and sociology (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2001; Hochstetler and Copes, 2016; Park et al., 1925). Criminological research during the second half of the 20th century was fundamentally positivist and reliant on quantitative data. While this epistemological frame remains dominant in contemporary studies, particularly in the United States, ethnography received a resurgence of attention in the 1990s when cultural criminology gained recognition as an emergent criminological perspective (Treadwell, 2019). Cultural criminology directs its focus on the layering of culture merging with large-scale societal structures (e.g. political influence, industrial activity, economic fluctuations) to influence the everyday lives and decisions of actors who commit crimes (Kane, 2004). Melding the cultural and postmodern studies emerging in European discourse with the contemporary American Chicago School of criminology, the emergent and hybrid nature of cultural criminology explores deviancy within the context of culture, the rise of deviant subcultures as mechanisms that foster criminality, and the influence of power relations and social control within the mediated construction of crime (Ferrell, 1999; Hayward and Young, 2012).

Through the intellectual exploration of the convergence of culture and criminal processes into contemporary social life, cultural criminology highlights the importance of ethnographic work with a particular focus on subjectivity and reflexivity (Ferrell, 1999). In this way it frames inquiry based on integration of the social context, something that traditionally has been ignored in quantitative social science research (Sankofa et al., 2017). Within the field of criminology, ethnographic research most frequently involves observation of, and at times participation in, the activities of deviant populations (Ferrell, 1997; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998). This work usually necessitates verstehen, a researcher’s subjective understanding of a criminal. This process engenders an empathetic understanding for the context of the lived social reality for those that you study (Ferrell, 1997). **Verstehen** is cultural criminology’s response to conventional criminology’s fixation with objectivity, by placing emphasis on subjective experiences and meanings to gain deeper insight into deviant behaviors (Mills and Fleetwood, 2019).

Due to the focus on human experience, ethnography is well suited for criminological inquiry, to decern the *modus operandi* of criminals, including their decisions and the contexts where their decisions are made and carried out (Cornish and Clarke, 2003). These details can help elucidate the broader social and cultural structures that foster subculture deviant behavior (Fleetwood and Potter, 2017). By focusing on the context and intimate details of a setting, a researcher...
can focus on the motivation frameworks of criminals, teasing out both the empirical and emotive aspects of crime. Reliance on quantification can bury important situational characteristics that can be critical to understanding how crime is mentally scripted and physically accomplished (Miller et al., 2015). Quantification can obscure individual reality and meaning, while ethnography seeks to understand emotive foundations and motivation frameworks of perspective and behavior of offenders (Young, 2011).

Ethnography is a robust methodological approach to explore the layered complexity and variability that define wildlife crimes (e.g. Moreto, 2016; Pires et al., 2016; Van Uhm and Siegel, 2016), due to its ability to capture the disparities between settings, drivers, species in demand, and individuals involved. Generalizations, a goal of quantitative methods, can be tangential to exposing the critical details in understanding the nuances of wildlife crime. Ethnography, by placing emphasis on the constant comparison between what participants say and do across interviews demonstrates great potential to contribute to theory and inform context-specific policy solutions (Hochstetler and Copes, 2016).

A legacy from early criminological research is the acknowledgment that offenders are generally not social outcasts and that criminal lifestyles are connected with local economies—they often reflect the activities of informal or illegal markets. Criminal identities become nested in the subculture society in which they develop and occur (Levi, 1981). Ethnography is well suited to address the role of subculture and the transmission of criminogenic values (Miller and Miller, 2015) and thus can aid in uncovering how wildlife crime relates to deviant subcultures and peripheral environments. Fraser (2013) emphasizes,

> While ethnography remains marginal within mainstream Anglo-American criminology, it is a method particularly well attuned to illuminating the deep-seated tensions, fragmented realities and hybridized identities that emerge from the margins of globalization; and for developing theory that speaks to the shifting boundaries of power, politics and identity in the contemporary era. (p. 252)

Ethnographic research is uniquely suitable for the study of borders, boundaries, margins, and edges of cultures, nations, disciplines, and legality (Khosravi, 2010). Peripheral environments, characterized by ambiguity and contradictions, are amenable to ethnographic inquiry (Fraser, 2013). Conventional crime constructions have most likely marginalized the groups within such environments, therefore, by attentively documenting the lived realities of these groups, the marginalization process can be better understood and the production of alternative images of deviance can be brought forward (Ferrell, 1999).

In the RFE, in lieu of a coherent and functioning government, corruption and obligate self-sufficiency persists. Systems of behaviors, values, and societal norms support various forms of criminal behavior, creating an embedded and systemic subculture. Here, the discrete act of a wildlife crime occurs within a criminal subculture of deviance, then again within a larger system of power structures and economic, political, and social relationships. Qualitative criminology can aid in understanding this complex milieu, as it places emphasis on the layering of these relationships and how large-scale societal influences or patterns ultimately influence the actions of individuals in daily life (Kane, 2004).

In the context of the RFE, the intersection between entrenched structural contradictions due to the government’s inability to meet the basic needs of its citizens, economic asymmetries, and social stratifications merge to engender a state of societal anomie4 resulting in chronic instability. Ethnography, via a lens of capturing organic and nuanced social reality, can help us understand this process, elucidate the resultant poaching subculture, and point in the direction of interventions and reforms to protect endangered wildlife.

Case selection: Amur tigers in the RFE
At the beginning of the 20th century, there were approximately 100,000 tigers; today their population is below 3500 individuals and they occur in only 7% of their historic range (Goodrich et al., 2015). Population declines are due to habitat loss and fragmentation, loss of prey base and poaching for international trade. Although tigers face a multitude of threats, poaching is generally accepted among experts to be the most immediate threat to their survival (Moyle, 2009).

Studies have examined the last link of the poaching supply chain: the domestic markets in China (Moyle, 2009; Van Uhm, 2018; Van Uhm and Wong, 2019; Wong, 2016) and Nepal (Karmacharya et al., 2018). However, the first link, including the range of people involved, their motives and methods, and associated links to the commercial trade, has rarely been examined. Studies in Bangladesh (Saif et al., 2018), Indonesia (Shepherd and Magnus, 2004), and Sumatra (Risdianto et al., 2016) stand out with this focus.

In Russia, poaching has been identified as the most direct threat to the Amur tiger subspecies (Robinson et al., 2015); however, only anecdotal information exists about motivations and methods, who is involved, and the structure of the supply chain. The RFE is the last stronghold of the Amur subspecies, which hovers around 300–350 adults. My research sought to gather the first empirical evidence of the illegal tiger trade in this understudied region. I addressed three questions: (1) What are the motivations and methods behind the poaching of Amur tigers in the RFE? (2) What is the structure and organization of the supply chain of tiger parts and derivatives from Russia into China? (3) Is the population of Amur tigers in the RFE stable?

Based on anecdotal information and conversations with a confidential source within Russia, I knew tigers to be a highly political topic—a reality I knew would complicate my research. Many Russian government officials, protected area managers, and members of the FSB5 are aware of the extent of...
tiger poaching and are not being truthful to the international conservation community about this information. Members of these agencies are often involved in some aspect of the poaching or trafficking themselves and are actively pushing false information about the extent of the problem (Skidmore, 2021a; b).

**Research design**

I sought primary data from the firsthand accounts of the individuals who are directly involved in the illegal tiger trade (e.g. poachers, middlemen, buyers, and smugglers). The extant range of Amur tigers encompasses two distinct regions in the RFE, Primorye and Khabarovsk. I chose Primorye as the location of this study as approximately 80% of the Amur tiger range falls within this region. Data collection comprised two separate trips, January–February 2019 and January–March 2020, for a total of 5 months in the field. This study utilized an ethnographic case study approach, and my goal was to conduct qualitative conservation science research from a criminological perspective. I drew closely from the work of Van Uhm (2016), Moreto (2016), and Moreto and Lemieux (2015b) to develop my methodology, as these studies used ethnography to explore the nuances of wildlife crime issues. I also drew from the work of Wyatt (2009, 2011, 2014) whose qualitative research on wildlife crime in the RFE inspired me to further delve into the subject.

Today, within the methodological literature, ethnography is defined using a variety of typologies. Identifying a canon can be an elusive and ambiguous task (Hammersley, 2018). Despite this, Walford (2009) argues that although traditions change and evolve, there must be recognizable continuity within what is considered “ethnography.” These criteria include “long-term engagement, the use of multiple research methods and the generation of rich data. The research process also needs to be theory-led and systematic” (Walford, 2009: 273). Traditionally, within sociology and anthropology, classic ethnography requires deep immersion into a foreign culture to acquire “thick description” of the subject of inquiry and requires the long-term engagement of the researcher (Geertz, 1973). The time required to “do” ethnography does not seem to be set, but is an “extended period of time” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3). Other methodological criteria that seem to be agreed upon by most is that ethnography requires direct observation from the researcher in a naturally occurring setting and that the method of participant observation is “. . . often seen as a core element, if not the core, of ethnography.” (Hammersley, 2018: 8)

Miller and Miller (2015) suggest that criminological ethnography is rooted firmly in naturalistic inquiry and that ethnographic concepts like nonjudgment positionality, contextualization of study setting, and recognition of social network and structure help a researcher with this task. I believe that what is important about ethnography is dedication to capture a culture through the organic collection of data, to provide a deep analysis of a social world from the members’ perspectives and to maintain the integrity of the phenomenon in question.

My study was not classic ethnography in terms of its length of time or full immersion since my total time in the field for this particular study was 5 months broken between two visits. These research trips followed multiple trips to the region to participate in The Amur Tiger Symposium in Khabarovsk and in tiger monitoring research in Durmin in Khabarovsk Krai; therefore, I was already familiar with the region and culture prior to beginning my data collection. Importantly, my study was centered around dedication to an ethnographic approach and methods. The shorter time frame can be justified in part by the length of time poachers are accessible in the taiga during the Russian winter, as well as the nature of my research—I had prior knowledge that Russian authorities did not want this research project moving forward, which became a reality when I was pursued by the FSB. Although I was deported from Russia before my planned study length was completed, after completing 116 interviews in addition to participant observation, I feel confident I reached data saturation for this topic and I had not planned to stay longer than one extra month.

My study was necessarily multi-sited. Rather than following a more traditional ethnographic method, where inquiry is framed within an intensively focused-upon single site of observation, I employed multi-sited ethnography, which facilitates a deep and grounded understanding of a particular cultural or social phenomenon (Siegel, 2009; Van Uhm, 2016). Multi-sited ethnography considers regional dynamics—how the local and regional are now inextricably connected—and frames an object of study that cannot be understood by remaining focused on a single site of concentrated examination (Marcus, 1995). This method also allows the researcher to follow the subject of inquiry—the people, the practice, the object, the idea, the story, the symbol, or the conflict (in my case, the illegal tiger trade) along its entire route (Marcus, 1995; Van Uhm, 2016). Shah (2017) strongly asserts, all ethnography is multi-sited in that, “Inevitably, to understand the social relations that the people we study are embedded in, we must work across time and space” (p. 11).

I blended the methods of participant observations and semi-structured interviews, with a focus on the comfort and security of the participant, due to the sensitive and clandestine nature of the topic. Extensive effort and time went into building trust with participants, which included participating in sociocultural norms and activities (e.g. meal sharing, going to the banya, going into the taiga on snowmobiles/skis, and drinking vodka). Participation in such activities and forming social relationships with participants was essential to gain trust. In total, I spoke to 116 participants; these talks ranged from quick semi-structured interviews that lasted 30–45 minutes, to multiple-day interactions that incorporated several informal interview sessions and hours of participant observations. Conversations varied from one-on-one talks to
group-setting interviews, including conversations over a meal and spending the night in a participant’s residence. In total, 43 participants (37%) were involved in the poaching or trafficking of tigers (n = 31 admitted tiger poacher; n = 12 admitted tiger buyer). What follows are some key insights and reflections from conducting ethnographic work in a complex region on a challenging subject.

**Context matters—situating the research location**

The conservation of tigers in the RFE in inextricably linked to the region’s geo-political situation. The region, characterized by abundant, valuable natural resources, is also one of the most remote, impoverished, and corrupt regions in Russia (Wyatt, 2014). Moscow is nine time zones away, and following perestroika, the formal collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was an extensive dissolution of management, investment, government resources, and industry by the central government. Historically, the RFE was almost exclusively resource-dependent; as an outlying region it was locked into an enduring colonial type of economic relationship with European Russia, which included heavy subsidization of industry (Braden and Lynn, 1998). After perestroika, virtually all forms of economic assistance and government support evaporated and almost immediately the RFE began to experience a protracted socio-economic crisis. Privatization of state-owned companies in the absence of a credible regulatory regime led to a criminalization of the economy (Passas, 2000). Structural asymmetries due to a breakdown of a functioning government marginalized most of the population, as without the state managing essential services, the region failed to maintain basic social and economic infrastructure (Newell and Henry, 2017; Poelzer, 1995). Increased crime, capital flight, emigration, and poverty became characteristic of society.

The devolution of decision-making power and legal authority also eroded legitimacy within environmental state agencies, causing the deinstitutionalization of environmental regulation (Mol, 2009). The stagnation and erosion of policies on natural resources led to entrenched confusion, corruption and ineffectiveness, leaving a legacy of glaring disparity between Russia’s formal environmental laws and state agency capacity and interest in enforcing them. Perestroika opened the border with China, leading to an influx of Chinese citizens offering money and basic necessities for trade opportunities of the RFE’s natural resources (Bradshaw and Lynn, 1998). The open border substantially increased poaching of protected wildlife, game species and other natural resources (e.g. timber and ginseng). Scholars define the illegal harvest of natural resources as Russia’s most persistent and intractable environment challenge (Newell and Henry, 2017).

Without government support, the RFE has become increasingly self-sufficient. The people, many of whom are hunters, progressively began to rely on a subsistence lifestyle, with hunting being the most common way to eat and make a living. Marginalization by the state, coupled with an open border with China and little oversight over commerce, contributed significantly to the creation of an informal shadow economy that many Russians came to rely on (Kuhrt, 2012). This informal economy flourished; similar to legal and state-controlled economic operations, informal and illegal economies in the RFE formed networks of mutual aid, reciprocity and cooperation (Holzlehner, 2006). This informal economy has fostered a subculture of corruption and the illegal harvest of the region’s natural resources.

In their book on environmental crime in Russia, Stoecker and Shakirova (2014) discuss how corruption is so endemic in Russian society that an inherent system of commonplace norms and values allowing for the inclusion of corrupt practices has permeated everyday life. These principles, legitimizing and fostering corruption, have become embedded so deeply that they are often inseparable from daily socio-economic relations and are accepted by the citizenry on the same level as formalized laws (Ledeneva, 2013). Corruption has become so routine that there is a generalized belief that nothing will get done without corrupt practices (Stoecker and Shakirova, 2014). This set of behaviors and norms is pronounced in the RFE and has engendered a condition of societal anomie influenced by criminogenic asymmetries and a subculture of normalized deviance. In sum, the RFE has specific characteristics that make it especially vulnerable to poaching: remoteness, poverty and unemployment, abundant natural resources that are poorly managed and monitored, high external demand, stultifying bureaucratic processes, high levels of corruption, and a society of obligatory self-sufficiency.

**Collecting wildlife crime field data**

**Preparation for the field and my exploratory trip**

I knew ethnographic fieldwork as a foreigner in a country as notoriously difficult as Russia would be a challenge. Furthermore, my topic of wildlife trafficking would put me in front of those directly involved in illegal activity. I could expect to find myself in difficult, unpredictable, and unexpected situations. As a conservation biologist with a background as a ranger in South Africa, I knew that I had the necessary mental and physical skills and situational awareness to feel confident conducting this work. However, it is important to emphasize that not every scientist should engage in ethnographic fieldwork with active criminals in a location that can be dangerous. Due to the illegal and covert nature of the activities I sought to investigate, many details are impossible to account for or plan for in advance. Once you get into the field, unanticipated situations will happen, so you must know beforehand that you can handle the unexpected.
Based on the complexity of my study, and logistically due to the remote area and the illegal and political nature of my topic, two separate research trips were planned. To the best of my knowledge, my study would be the first detailed examination of Amur tiger poaching, so my first priority was to establish that I could, in fact, locate and speak with those engaged in this activity. Understanding the context of my study region prior to entry was crucial. For example, I knew poachers would be part of the hunting community, and based on preparatory research, I knew they would be in the taiga in hunting concessions during the winter months. Wintertime would therefore be the best opportunity to locate necessary participants. Through a confidential source within Russia, I received tips on cultural nuances. For example, I learned I should bring small tokens of appreciation for interviewees’ time: vodka and Leatherman knives. These gestures helped me build trust and establish rapport. This task of building trust with key participants was the most important aspect of my exploratory trip. Besides developing trust, I was able to set up future plans for meetings when I returned for my full-length study. Some participants I met during my initial trip did not disclose critical information to me about tiger poaching until I came back for my second trip a year later. My participants took my word very seriously—by returning the following year, I held up my promise of returning, proving that I was trustworthy and serious about the research. Gaining familiarity with the locations and culture was essential. I had already been to Russia on multiple occasions, including my study region, where I spoke at a conference on Amur tigers the previous year. However, I knew the more context-specific details I learned about Primorye, the better prepared I would be. I took the opportunity during the exploratory trip to acquire as much interview data as possible. By doing so, I was able to begin to recognize important trends and start developing themes, thus aiding my preparation for my subsequent research trip.

During my exploratory trip, I needed to understand and mitigate risks as much as possible. I learned from my confidential source that having my information confiscated and being deported would be my biggest risk, due to the political nature of my topic and the government’s desire to keep tiger poaching information confidential. This source informed me that acquiring a scientific exchange visa, rather than a tourist visa, would be vital. Visitors claiming to be foreign scientists can be met with skepticism bordering on paranoia; therefore, such a visa would establish my legitimacy to conduct research in Russia. I would be uncovering information I suspected would implicate the government, so I needed every type of leverage available. As I was eventually deported from Russia, this visa became critical. Along with the visa, I knew I needed to not draw attention to myself during my exploratory trip. Tigers are politically sensitive, and I knew in advance that the government and FSB had some level of involvement and/or knowledge about the poaching occurring. I would need to return to Russia the following year for my full-length study, so needed to maintain a low profile on my first visit. This included not visiting regions that I knew were political, had a high level of government presence or particularly high levels of corruption—I saved these locations for my second trip.

I needed to establish what characteristics (personality, age, and sex) of interpreter would work best for my full-length study. I worked with three interpreters during my exploratory study and decided it would be best to work with a young woman, like myself. To generalize, women are considered non-threatening and submissive in Russia. As a woman from the West, I would generally be offended by such positionality; however, in this setting, it was crucial. By appearing non-threatening to participants, my interpreter and I would have a greater chance of acquiring the information I needed. I must emphasize the importance of finding the right interpreter, as it is not an exercise that should be taken lightly, and I spent months finding someone I knew would not only interpret but understand the importance of the work. For this type of subject, an interpreter and researcher must have a connection and comradery; my interpreter and I developed a strong bond—we had our own sense of rapport and trust—that was not only crucial for acquiring information, but also important for our safety.

Finally, due to the nature of my research, interviewing human subjects who are in some cases active criminals, I undertook an extensive IRB application process (University of California Santa Cruz IRB # HS3434). Most importantly, within this application, I had to explain how I would present myself to participants (overtly as a student researcher) and the how I would guarantee the anonymity of willing participants (no identifying names/ features would be taken, and no recording devices would be used). All participants provided verbal informed consent.

Gaining access and entering the criminal world

Due to the covert and often unreported nature of criminal networks, finding those engaged in illegal activity can be a difficult task. The people involved are hidden populations outside the scope of conventional society, and they often purposely conceal their activities due to their illegality (Van Uhm, 2016). Wildlife crime is facilitated by corruption, weak governance, and lack of enforcement (Van Uhm, 2018; Wellsmith, 2011; Wyatt, 2013; Wyatt et al., 2018). In the RFE, the criminalization of many aspects of society has engendered systemic corruption and organized crime, both of which have been shown to be associated with wildlife and environmental crimes in that region (Wyatt, 2009, 2011, 2014). Gaining insider status with those that have extensive knowledge of how the illegal tiger trade is facilitated was essential. I also had to physically locate these people; the RFE is remote, has one of the lowest population densities in the world, there is generally no cell coverage, the climate is extreme (often –30°C in winter), and moving from village to
village requires a $4 \times 4$ truck. This environment is not conducive to easily finding people to interview. To focus as much as possible on my research and to mitigate the possible influence on participant behavior that two women alone in a remote and male-dominated environment might have, I hired an older local Russian to drive my interpreter and I around for the duration of my study. Due to the extreme climate during this time of year and lack of maintained roadways, his local knowledge of remote villages and accessibility proved vital, as we covered approximately 7000 km by car. My driver proved to be excellent at melting into the background and was not present for interviews; however, his masculine presence could have aided in reassuring participants in speaking with me.

Purposive sampling, a type of nonprobability sampling, was utilized; participants were chosen subjectively based on specific characteristics rather than being representative of the entire population (Bernard, 2011). My initial task was to locate hunters, as poachers are a part of the larger hunting community. The Primorye region is divided into approximately 100 hunting leases, which are sites managed for the legal hunting of game species. Hunters buy a permit from the lease manager, which allows them to hunt a certain number of animals. These hunting leases were critical for my recruiting process as they were the means by which I was able to connect to those in the hunting community. For the initial stage of the recruiting process, I needed a gatekeeper to facilitate access to the hunting community. In my situation, researching illegal activities, it is essential that my gatekeeper’s identity remains a secret. Through my gatekeeper, I was able to make initial contact with a few managers of hunting leases who subsequently asked hunters if they would be willing to speak to me. These initial introductions led to a snowball sampling method, where future participants were recruited among acquaintances of those I was initially introduced to (Goodman, 1961). I followed this method for every new location I went, often getting references or introductions from participants to others in their network.

One should not expect to find a gatekeeper on their first visit to a region. It would be inaccurate to even say that one “looks for” a gatekeeper. The meeting or connection is more fortuitous, which makes research in the area possible. The sequence of events is not as clear as identifying a research topic and finding the gatekeeper; rather, the discovery of the gatekeeper creates the opportunity for the research to occur. Building a trusting relationship with a gatekeeper occurs over time through professional and personal connections with individuals with partial knowledge of the study topic and who provide guidance and character references moving forward. The relationship a researcher has with a gatekeeper can vary; a gatekeeper assists, but in some cases, even controls the process of a researcher accessing a site and participants (Ball, 2020). Interactions with my gatekeeper occurred at the beginning of my research, setting up the first few introductions. I then used the snowball sampling method from there, no longer communicating with the gatekeeper. This level of engagement, at the onset of the project, was sufficient to help define the study and launch the fieldwork. Also, for security reasons to keep my gatekeeper’s identity a secret, limited contact was essential.

Polisky (1967) discusses entrée into the world of criminals, emphasizing, “In studying a criminal it is important to realize that he will be studying you, and to let him study you” (p. 132). Ethnography can make the researcher feel vulnerable, exposed. Similar to reflections from earlier criminological studies, emphasized by Hochstetler and Copes (2016), I found poachers in Russia are generally not social outcasts or introverts. They are part of the hunting subculture community and are usually gregarious individuals. As such, they were curious about me, questioned me, studied me, and I had to let this process happen. I learned how important it would be to have a reciprocal sharing of information. Ethnographic research necessitates expecting the unexpected and being able to take advantage of chance encounters and unforeseen circumstances. Regardless of prior knowledge or preparation, ethnography’s close alliance with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Van Uhm and Siegel, 2016), necessitates an inductive research process: letting the data guide the research in the field. To do ethnography, a researcher must be comfortable with not always being in control of where the research takes you.

Establishing an identity and discussing illegal activity

Establishing an identity before you enter the field is vital—know who you are. Polisky (1967) writes, “In field investigating, before you can tell a criminal who you are and make it stick, you have to know this yourself, know where you draw the line between you and him” (p. 125). Interviewing those involved in illegal activities requires a distinctive method that is both cautious and assertive at the same time. My first interviews were awkward, sounded scripted, and I had a difficult time establishing an “identity”—how should I present myself? I have to be forthright in my role as a researcher but sounding like a researcher not only bored my participants but also sometimes made them uncomfortable. I learned how to manipulate my tone and approach to be more conversational: to sound like a friend or neighbor. Body language, tone, eye contact and the way questions are phrased are particularly important. I also had to decide how to introduce myself, as I could not directly say outright that I was a researcher interested in tiger poaching. Academics and Westerners can be met with skepticism in the RFE. I also did not want to suggest an unbalanced power dynamic with those I wanted to speak to, or I would have most likely been met with suspicion. As per my IRB application, my approach was to introduce myself as a student researching hunting in Russia. Only after establishing comfort and rapport with a participant would I begin to discuss the more difficult and sensitive topics of poaching.
I learned that if I want to know about tiger poaching, I do not begin by asking about tiger poaching. As O’Reilly (2005) discusses, an “iterative-inductive” approach is important, where questioning begins in a passive and indirect way. I would ask questions about how and when they learned how to hunt, what they like about being in the taiga, and personal questions about friends and family. These types of questions are critical to building trust, understanding important contextual details, and letting themes emerge naturally. People loved to talk about themselves. I learned to point them in a direction and let them get to the details I wanted in their own time. Similar to Van Uhm’s (2016) research, my participants would often begin to tell me about a “friend” who was involved in tiger poaching, later admitting that they themselves were also involved.

Limiting what you say, unless asked, may sound like a small detail, but it is essential. Do not put words in your participant’s mouths. The purpose of ethnography is to not assume what is important, but to let the subject tell you what is important. The best way to get participants to talk is to simply let them—another strength of criminological ethnography, as these methods are best for the discussion of sensitive or complex topics. Structured questionnaires, frequently used in quantitative studies, impose artificial categories on questions that are a reflection of the researcher’s own bias and ideology, and also constrain responses (Drury et al., 2011; Hochstetler and Copes, 2016). I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, a method that necessitates openness and flexibility during conversations (Davies and Francis, 2011). I would prompt the participant and at times steer the conversation, but I learned the most from when I let the participant talk. I became adept at leading questions and making it seem like I already was “in the know.” If participants thought I already knew a lot of information, then I was “in the club” and they were more willing to talk to me.

Participant observations

There is ongoing debate as to what constitutes participant observation (Adler and Adler, 1987); here, I define it similar to Van Uhm (2016), that I participated in the everyday lives of poachers, seeking to disrupt their routines as little as possible, but did not actively participate in poaching. I did, however, see the aftermath of poaching. For example, I was shown processed tiger products multiple times and taken into the forest to see a tiger carcass. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) refer to this type of participant observation as direct, naturalistic observation and it facilitates a more in-depth understanding of the general context of the everyday lives of participants, as well as their modus operandi, that cannot be gleaned from interviews alone.

At the beginning of my fieldwork I made every attempt to get one-on-one interviews with participants. However, I quickly learned that many participants felt more comfortable speaking in a group setting, typically with their hunting partners and usually felt more comfortable in their home. If I was introduced to a participant in a more formal setting, (i.e. an office), I actively sought invitation to a hunting base or to the home of the participant for a meal or banya. These are social activities, where people are drinking, become more relaxed and gossip is shared. These types of participant observations can often turn into informal, spontaneous chats and during these informal settings I could note important details that I would not necessarily have access to during a formal interview. The prosaic day-to-day activities of my participants often led to unexpected conversations. Capitalizing on these chance encounters, chance opportunities, became an unanticipated well of opportunity for knowledge.

Hunting is an essential part of the culture—the lives of locals in the RFE are structured around it. During hunting season, friends come together, are gregarious and love to drink and gossip. I obtained much more information in informal group settings and adapted my approach to fit this reality. I would speak to four or five hunters at once, assess who knew what, develop camaraderie, and then seek one-on-one conversations with those I felt could especially aid my research. I knew my prior professional background as a ranger would be helpful, and the ease at which I adjusted to the life in the RFE made it possible for me to acquire sensitive information. Participant observation in organic settings engenders trust and comfortability. Because of this I was able to establish insider status, gain better access to participants and their activities, and obtain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena I was investigating. Gaining access, and establishing trust and legitimacy were never a static development, but an ongoing and negotiated process within the study population (Berg, 2004).

I learned to take advantage of my relevant personal qualities or experience. Polsky (1967) writes, “Where and how you start depends, other things being equal, on what you do best that criminals are also likely to be interested in” (p. 133). I spent many months understanding the nuances of this region and culture and learned I had specific skills that participants would be interested in. These hunters were just as curious about me as I was about them and they wanted me to join their lives. I visited their homes, cooked dinner with them, and drank vodka with them. Understanding context and culture is critical and vodka is a central part of life in the RFE. In a region where hobbies are few and temperatures drop to −30C, vodka and meal sharing brings family and friends together. I went snowmobiling and skiing with the people I met and once they learned about my experience with a rifle, I found myself a few times in the forest shooting targets with an old SKS rifle. I looked at photo albums, learned about their grandkids and asked them about their lives—and they asked me about mine. I even sang karaoke, a beloved pastime in this culture, and learned to play Russian card games. I joined a snowmobile parade and was serenaded with an accordion. This type of camaraderie is essential for
trust building and information sharing, for developing my insider status.

Many interesting findings are unanticipated, which is why gaining access to the personal lives of participants through participant observation is critical. For example, on my exploratory trip, I stayed overnight in the home of hunters and their families in a very remote village. These hunters claimed that they had no formal employment, that they were subsistence hunters, but not poachers. What I noticed about their lives, however, did not match up with those claims: they had an expensive Toyota SUV, their own wireless Internet router, and plumbing (all rare and expensive in all rural Russia, especially the Far East). In the West, these types of modern conveniences are so prevalent that they are not even noticed. In the RFE, I took note of them almost immediately because of their rarity. Eight hours and a few drinks later, they unabashedly admitted to me what I already suspected: they were tiger poachers. Participant observation is important because it provides a greater chance of stumbling accidentally into unplanned information that can turn out to be significant.

Reliability of data

One of the primary threats to the internal validity of a study involving active offenders is deception (Fader, 2016), which I discouraged and countered to the best of my ability in a variety of ways. This included the amount of time that went into developing trust and rapport. An ethnographer must recognize and account for the existence of Hawthorne effects that occur when the presence of the researcher changes the way subjects behave and what they disclose (Oswald et al., 2014). Hawthorne effects can taint observational data and interviews. My research design, which included hundreds of hours of participant observation, helped mitigate these effects. My exploratory trip was also important in this regard. By developing trust and rapport with participants over multiple years and visits, I was able to feel more confident about the reliability of my participants’ information. My chosen snowball sampling design method also facilitated trust. Recruiting participants through individuals that could vouch for my sincerity and motives alleviated feelings of mistrust and suspicion. In addition, I allowed participants to select the location of our meetings. With no scholarly data available, my research on this topic in this location was novel, making data triangulation with other sources more difficult. However, my sample size of 116 participants was relatively large, aiding in data triangulation. To probe for any inconsistencies that arose during the interview, I would repeat questions later in the conversation with a participant, ask the same question in a different way and repeat the same questions to other people in a separate setting.

As per my IRB application, I gave full anonymity to participants and did not record any interviews, due to the risk to the participants should my data be confiscated. However, based on a review of the literature in advance (Polsky, 1967; Van Uhm, 2018), I would have chosen not to record the interviews anyway, due to the possibility that it would change the way people spoke to me and what they spoke about. Technology can alter the behavior of participants, especially those dealing in illegal goods, as its use can influence what they disclose. Organic, informal discussions, without recording devices, made my participants feel more at ease and helped avoid potential Hawthorne effects. During the interviews, I took extensive notes for each question, directing my interpreter to clarify specific details, expand a response, or pause for me to catch up with my notetaking when needed. Most of my notes included just the relevant details; however, verbatim quotes were also frequently recorded. During the interviews, I also observed and recorded participants’ behavior and demeanor. These notes, both observational and interview, were reviewed, and discussions took place with my interpreter for clarity and accuracy as soon as possible following each interview. As a precaution, I transcribed my notes into my computer, saved them in the cloud, and then deleted everything from my hard drive every night.

Emotional reflections

There is a constant tension in ethnography between the balance of subjectivity and objectivity, between involvement and detachment (Adler and Adler, 1987). My research was no exception to this ongoing methodological debate. During this type of study, as deep immersion into the culture builds trust and establishes rapport, there can be an impetus to sympathize, defend, and even facilitate the behaviors one is studying. There can also be an impulse to be repulsed and take immediate action against what one sees. Regardless of what I heard and saw, I sought to retain emotional distance as a researcher. Ethnography is at the same time predicated on intimacy with participants, while reliant on neutrality and detachment as an inquirer. This is a complicated, constant, and emotional balancing act. During my time in the field, everything relied on my ability to remain neutral during discussions about poaching tigers, about seeing dead tigers in the forest, about bearing witness to their parts being sold as products, and neutral about how it is just “business” for some people. As a lover of wildlife, it was truly one of the greatest challenges on my life to remain detached and objective during these situations, but it was imperative that I did. Any judgments on my part perceived by participants would result in cessation of sharing information or even worse, being turned in to the FSB.

Criminological verstehen, described concisely by Mills and Fleetwood (2019) as the process of sustained presence, immersion and participation within the culture of study, enable the ethnographer to get inside the logics of criminal behavior. This process, engendering subjective interpretation and sympathetic understanding of those I was studying, was essential for me and was an ongoing and negotiated process.
with myself. I needed to engage in constant reflection—to think of the broader context that could be impacting the individual realities of participants. Along with verstehen, I needed to be wary of where I drew the line between myself and my participants. Many of these people are charismatic and they are survivors. Being empathetic to their lives is natural, but in this type of research one must always be wary of how participants can negotiate their own reality. Sykes and Matza (1957) contend that law-breaking individuals can account for their behavior by utilizing “techniques of neutralization.” In the context of environmental crime and harm (Wyatt and Brisman, 2017) and wildlife crime (Eliason, 1999, 2004; (Skidmore, 2021a)), offenders are known to use neutralization techniques to rationalize or justify their behavior. Based on my interviews, neutralization techniques that include ignorance of the law, lack of care about laws viewed as unfair, and lack of respect for corrupt authority and/or government, seem to be evident with those engaged in the illegal tiger trade (for a full account, see (Skidmore, 2021a)). A researcher must be prepared mentally for criminals to rationalize or justify their behavior. In the field, I learned a constant balancing act was required between sympathetic understanding and objective detachment.

While I did not want the focus of this article to be made via a gendered lens (for an account of gender-based reflexivity in criminological ethnography see Ball, 2020), as a woman doing research in an almost exclusively masculine environment, I understand the necessity to briefly reflect on this fact. In Russia, outside of major cities, women generally fill very specific “house wife” roles (e.g. raising children, looking after the house affairs and usually not working), something that is highlighted further in the rural regions I was working. I was frequently confronted with astonishment that I was a researcher, that I was “allowed” to travel so far for work, and that I should be home, married with children. I am acutely aware that most participants were willing to talk to me because I am a woman; going even further, I do not believe a man would have had the same success acquiring the necessary information for this project. Participant behaviors and attitudes toward me ranged from astonishment to glee to curiosity at my presence. I believe these behaviors and feelings, coupled with the fact that I was as non-threatening as possible in my demeanor and behavior, engendered their overall openness with me. While I was at times uncomfortable and had to deflect personal questions and questions that were clearly patriarchal in nature, I never felt threatened. Having a Russian male driver, who did very well at disappearing into the background, most likely helped facilitate participants comfort to converse freely with a foreign woman, merely by his presence.

Discussion and conclusion

As time passed in the field, I became increasingly aware (thanks to confidential and trusted sources) that the FSB was trying to locate and interrogate me for the subject matter I was delving into and the sensitive information I was uncovering. Deeply suspicious of foreign scientists, they did not want the information I was gathering on tiger poaching leaving the country. In many cases, this information implicated those associated with the government, FSB and police service and shed light on Russia’s systemic corruption and problematic wildlife conservation schemes (Skidmore, 2021a; b). From the onset of my research, I was aware that my research was not something the Russian government wanted disclosed publicly and I took numerous precautions. Every night, I uploaded my data to the cloud and subsequently deleted all interview information, pictures of poached tigers and products, and so on. My precautions were warranted because toward the end of my planned fieldwork, warnings from trusted sources increased in frequency and my interpreter and I were forced to “lay low.” I was able to get my interpreter safely out of the region before I was eventually caught, questioned and deported. Although my research materials were confiscated, due to the safeguards I took, my data remained intact and my sources and participants remained secret. I would not recommend working in a region like the RFE unless you are well prepared, aware of the risks and take all necessary precautions to mitigate them. I stress again the importance of having a gatekeeper as an initial contact point who has deep knowledge of local nuances and networks.

Despite being ultimately deported from Russia, I do not think, overall, my methods posed significant risk to myself, my interpreter, or my participants. Before my fieldwork, I thought the most significant risks would be direct, in the form of interviewing active criminals. What I discovered was despite the illegality of poaching tigers, I never felt physically at risk with my participants. I was surprised at the ease which participants spoke to me. Similar to Van Uhm (2016), I found participants willing to talk about illegal business for numerous reasons, including that they were excited, even flattered to speak to me. In many cases, they had never conversed with someone from the West and as I was a foreigner, an “outsider,” the information I acquired would be leaving with me. They also did not fear being caught due to the lack of enforcement. Tiger poaching was fully criminalized in 2013, but there is a significant difference between something being illegal and the law being enforced. In many cases, enforcement officers were directly involved in the trade. My participants were further impressed that a young woman had the courage to investigate the illegal tiger trade and wanted to help me. They were proud of their business and wanted to brag, using neutralization techniques suggesting they did not believe they were doing anything wrong. I was also always clear and upfront with the anonymous nature of my research, that their identity would never be recorded, which aided in participants’ willingness to speak.

Quantitative methods remain an important tool in wildlife crime studies. Customs seizure trends (Petrossian et al.,
In hopes that ethnographic methods will become more mainstream for collecting and analyzing wildlife crime data, this article sought to demonstrate how ethnography enabled me to do emergent research to achieve a study objective in a field dominated by the natural sciences. One of the limitations of qualitative methods is the findings lack generalizability. However, wildlife crime is unique to the location it is occurring in, the species in question, and the overarching sociocultural nuances within the region that influence the everyday lives of individuals. Therefore, in terms of policy implications, preservation of context is crucial to identify ways to interrupt illegal wildlife supply chains within a particular setting.

Ethnography’s ability to capture individual subjectivities and illuminate the lived experiences of participants make it one of the best ways to explore the periphery of both people and places.

Because of this focus, I was able to capture data about the individual motivations for why hunters poach tigers and what specific methods they employ (Skidmore 2021a; b). I used mixed methods during the data analysis stage. After coding individual interviews, I was able to categorize motivation and method of poaching into groups to establish percentages, an admittedly quantitative presentation of results. For example, 23% of tiger poachers engage in poaching due to human/tiger conflict. This generalized percentage can be used for broad description or it can form a context for individual subjective quotes, as in the case of this hunter, I interviewed: “Many hunters do not like tigers and kill tigers because they take away their prey—they are competition.” I now have both individual, nuanced details about each participant and generalized, broader categories represented as percentages, giving me a variety of ways to discuss the dynamics of poaching tigers in the RFE.

My work builds on Drury et al.’s (2011) assertion that qualitative methods help provide internal validity when studying complicated and ambiguous concepts and contexts. Qualitative methods alone or in combination with mixed methods can advance understanding in human behavior in conservation contexts and provide an important complement to natural sciences. Besides individual subjectivities surrounding motivation and methods of poaching, I was able to use discrete interviews to map out illegal tiger supply chains by employing multi-sited ethnography. By directly interviewing poachers, middlemen, buyers, and smugglers, I used methods that focus on the contextual subtleties and the individual to collect data on a regional process, and in doing so I have data on both the micro and macro dynamics of this illegal trade. I am confident that the data I gathered could not have been acquired in any other way. I interviewed 116 individuals who belong to a poaching subculture crafted out of a remoteness, prolonged marginalization and a larger hunting culture. These individuals contributed varying amounts of information to help me piece together a picture of the motivations, methods, and extent of Amur tiger poaching in Russia.

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Notes

1. Scholars have defined wildlife crime in a variety of ways. Besides the definition used in this article, others include “any harm to (or intent to harm or subsequent trade of) non-domesticated wild animals, plants and fungi, in contravention of national and international laws and conventions” (Harrison et al., 2015; Sollund and Runhovde, 2020). Wyatt (2013) and Nurse and Wyatt (2020) use a green criminological framework to expand the definition of wildlife crime to include harm that is legal, but causes suffering and/or injury to wildlife, thus arguing that defining crime in a way that only includes actions prohibited by criminal statutes and laws is too limited in scope.

2. Ethnography is a variant of traditional qualitative methods where the researcher often intentionally situates themselves in risky situations (sometime covertly), wherein the role distinctions between researcher and criminal subjects can become blurred. This method emphasizes understanding deviant groups and settings through complete immersion into the culture or setting being studied (see Ferrell, 1997; Miller and Miller, 2015; Miller and Tewksbury, 2010).
3. Early on in cultural criminology, the US movement was pre-dominately focused on issues of situated meaning, while the European adaptation, with roots in critical criminology, was more concerned with structural issues linked to capitalism and power (Hayward, 2016). The two movements shared their focus on existential agency, influenced strongly by Katz’s (1988) authoritative Seductions of Crime and Stephen Lyng’s (1990) concept of “edgework, which allowed for collaborate and development of the perspective.” Cultural criminology today can be conceptualized “as a triadic framework concerned with meaning, power and existential accounts of crime, punishment and control.” (Hayward, 2016: 500).

4. Originally conceptualized by Durkheim ([1893] 1984), in sociology, anomie is a societal condition where there is a breakdown or disappearance of shared societal norms and values that bind community and regulate behavior. This disintegration of previously held beliefs and standards usually follows periods of drastic and rapid changes to the social, economic, or political societal structures. High rates of crime, corruption and deviance are common symptoms. Passas (2000) gives a description of anomie in modern times, using Russia as an example, where societal anomie occurred after the collapse of the USSR.

5. Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) is the principal internal security agency of Russia and the main successor agency to the USSR’s Committee for State Security (KGB).

6. In Russian culture, the banya or sauna, is a vital part of life.

7. The colloquial name for the boreal forest in the Russia Far East.

8. Regardless of the ethical limits imposed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the limits of ethnography can be morally subjective, and in this case, I would have never considered poaching a tiger. Protecting tigers was the fundamental imper- tus of my work.

9. Hunting bases are usually located in remote areas, on hunting leases. They are permanent communal living cabins that groups of hunters will use as a base to hunt. They are used for a large portion of the winter months by the men who belong to a hunting lease.

10. The techniques of neutralization are divided into five categories: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Wyatt and Brisman, 2017).

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