

Untangling Wildlife Law and Enforcement in Pakistan: From Crime to Reform

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Abstract

Pakistan's wildlife laws have undergone notable evolution since colonial times, transitioning into a fragmented, provincially governed framework. While the country has enacted several federal and provincial statutes to regulate wildlife conservation, prevent illegal hunting, and control wildlife trade, enforcement remains weak and inconsistent. It is often undermined by legal loopholes, institutional incapacity, and socioeconomic privilege. This review examines key legal provisions governing wildlife protection in Pakistan, identifies enforcement challenges, and evaluates key and recent judicial interventions that have played a corrective role where administrative systems have failed. Drawing from recent precedents and conservation initiatives, the paper highlights critical gaps in legal architecture and compliance with international obligations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). Furthermore, the review underscores systemic issues such as overlapping species listings, outdated penalty structures, weak protected area management, private wildlife keeping, and the persistence of wildlife-related crimes. Additionally, while the judiciary has intervened in several landmark cases to uphold conservation principles and constitutional protections, these efforts remain reactive rather than preventive. It concludes by emphasising the need for harmonised legal reform, institutional strengthening, and transparent enforcement to secure long-term biodiversity protection in Pakistan.

Keywords: Wildlife crime, law enforcement, Pakistan, legislation, case laws

1. Introduction

The term *wildlife* encompasses all untamed living beings, regardless of size or origin, including animals, birds, insects, plants, fungi, and even microscopic organisms (Bandeira and Fonseca, 2020; Preece and Chamberlain, 1993). Many of these species are overlooked and threatened with extinction due to poor planning and lack of coordination among state agencies. Conservation systems are being undermined by accelerating habitat loss resulting from anthropogenic activities like land-use change and agricultural expansion (Goudie, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2024; Yuan *et al.*, 2024). Albert Einstein called human indifference toward animals both morally wrong and spiritually damaging. Most world religions, including Islam, clearly prohibit cruelty to animals and only permit their killing for food (Rahman, 2017).

Pakistan hosts rich biodiversity supported by varied ecological habitats and environmental conditions (Khan *et al.*, 2023). It spans three of the world's six biogeographic realms and four major biomes, from arid deserts to alpine forests, each sustaining distinct species shaped by the country's diverse topography and climatic zones (Baig and Ahmed, 2007). Its wildlife includes 198 mammal species, 700 birds, 177 reptiles, 22 amphibians, 198 freshwater fish, and around 5,000 invertebrate species (Pakistan National Report, 2019). Despite low endemism (5% plants, 0% birds, 4% mammals, and 11% fish) Pakistan's biodiversity remains unique and rich (key examples in table 1), shaped by a mix of ecological regions and species origins (Khan *et al.*, 2022). Owing to this richness, Pakistan appears to face heightened exposure to wildlife related crimes (WWF-Pakistan, 2019).

Table 1. Key Species of Pakistan (Source: IUCN Red List via www.iucnredlist.org/).

Species Name	IUCN Status (Global)	Population Trend (Global)	Protected under National Laws/Acts?	CITES Listing	Threats
Indus river dolphin (<i>Platanista minor</i>)	Endangered (EN)	Increasing	Fully protected	Appendix I	Biological resource use, habitat modification, pollution
Balochistan/ Asian black bear (<i>Ursus thibetanus</i>)	Vulnerable (VU)	Decreasing	Fully protected	Appendix I	Habitat loss, direct killing, poaching, trade, bear-baiting
Snow leopard (<i>Panthera uncia</i>)	Vulnerable (VU)	Decreasing	Fully protected	Appendix I	Habitat alteration, hunting, trapping, conflict with local people
Common leopard (<i>Panthera pardus</i>)	Vulnerable (VU)	Decreasing	Fully protected	Appendix I	Habitat fragmentation, illegal poaching and trade, conflict with farmers, trophy hunting
Brown bear (<i>Ursus arctos</i>)	Least Concern (LC)	Stable	Fully protected	Appendix II	Habitat alteration, hunting, bear-baiting, pollution
Indian pangolin (<i>Manis crassicaudata</i>)	Endangered (EN)	Decreasing	Fully protected	Appendix I	Hunting, poaching, illegal trade
Punjab urial (<i>Ovis vignei punjabiensis</i>)	Vulnerable (VU)	Decreasing	Protected (regulated trophy hunting)	Appendix I	Habitat alteration, poaching
Markhor (<i>Capra falconeri</i>)	Near Threatened (NT)	Increasing	Protected (regulated trophy hunting)	Appendix I	Illegal hunting, poaching, habitat loss, diseases
Woolly flying squirrel (<i>Eupetaurus cinereus</i>)	Endangered (EN)	Decreasing	Not mentioned specifically	No CITES legislation found	Habitat loss, trade

Wildlife crime refers to violations of laws protecting wild animals and plants. Such activities inflict harm on individual species and drive populations toward extinction, and are also often interconnected with broader criminal networks (Haq *et al.*, 2023). Some prominent types of wildlife-related crimes in Pakistan are illegal hunting and poaching (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022; Amin *et al.*, 2024), bear-baiting (Ahmad *et al.*, 2025), habitat loss (Business Recorder, 2022; WWF, 2022), poor management of protected areas and wildlife facilities (Ilyas, 2018a; Khan *et al.*, 2022), private keeping of wild animals and cruelty towards them (Usman *et al.*, 2022) etc. These issues can be attributed to inadequate funding, weak law enforcement, and human-wildlife conflict, compounded by socioeconomic conditions, and a general lack of public seriousness toward wildlife-related offences

(Ilyas and Qazilbash, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2025a; Rashind, 2024).

Each province has its own wildlife laws, while a single federal law governs trade and the implementation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, 1973). However, the core goals of wildlife protection and welfare remain unmet. According to the World Animal Protection Index, which grades countries from A (best) to G (worst), Pakistan received low scores across several categories, including “G” for animals used in farming, “E” for animals in captivity, “D” for the welfare of wild animals, and “F” for government accountability (Koreshi, 2020; World Animal Protection, 2020). While the amendment of the *Sindh Wildlife Protection, Preservation, Conservation*

and Management Act 2020 and several recent court decisions mark positive progress, they remain modest compared to the scale and complexity of wildlife crime in the country. Strengthening enforcement and legal reform will require far more sustained effort to match the pace of these challenges. Since the 18th Amendment, no comprehensive review has pulled together the fragmented pieces of Pakistan's wildlife laws. With illegal trade, habitat loss, and weak enforcement continuing to grow, this study set out to close that gap and take stock of recent legal and institutional changes.

Using a narrative, desk-based approach, the review examines where Pakistan's current wildlife laws and enforcement efforts stand, their strengths, their gaps, and the areas most in need of reform. Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed research, legal databases, case records, and reliable news reports published between 2018 and 2025. Each was chosen for its relevance to wildlife law, governance, enforcement issues, or policy developments.

The review's goal is (i) to assess how well existing laws are working, (ii) to highlight persistent governance and enforcement weaknesses, and (iii) to suggest reforms that can bring national efforts closer in line with global conservation standards and strengthen wildlife protection across the country.

2. Legal Provisions of Wildlife Protection in Pakistan

Pakistan's wildlife protection system has gradually evolved from colonial-era regulations into a fragmented framework shaped by post-devolution governance (Usman *et al.*, 2022). Today, the responsibility for wildlife conservation lies mainly with the provinces, while the federal Ministry of Climate Change oversees policy direction and ensures compliance with international agreements. The key federal legislation, the *Pakistan Trade Control of Wild Fauna and Flora Act 2012*, was introduced to implement CITES and related international obligations (Khan, 2021). At the provincial level, wildlife is managed through separate laws and corresponding rules unique to each region (see table 2). These laws mainly address two areas: habitat protection through the creation of protected areas, and regulation of hunting and commercial exploitation. Species are categorized under different Schedules that define their legal status, ranging from those that may be hunted under special permits, to species allowed for possession or export with certification, and those fully protected under a complete ban on hunting and trade (Khan *et al.*, 2025b; Rashind, 2024).

The *Pakistan Penal Code* defines animals as all non-human living beings and prohibits acts harmful to them. Under *Section 289*, neglecting the care of an animal in one's possession, if it endangers human life or causes serious harm, can lead to imprisonment for up to six months (Pakistan Penal Code, 1860). While this provision

indirectly safeguards animals, it primarily addresses risks to humans. Similarly, the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1890*, introduced by the British during colonial rule, provides the earliest legal basis for animal welfare. It criminalises abuse, including beating, cruel killing, neglect, starvation, and animal fighting. While it also addresses illegal hunting of endangered species, it excludes free-ranging wild animals from protection, and violations remain widespread across Pakistan. Similarly, *The Northern Areas Wildlife Preservation Act 1975* restricts private ownership of wild animals, permitting exceptions only for scientific research or accredited zoological institutions. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and illegal possession persists (Koreshi, 2020). Collectively, these provisions reflect Pakistan's gradual shift from colonial-era animal welfare concepts to a fragmented framework that still lacks modern wildlife protection standards.

In 2020, the Sindh government introduced a revised wildlife law with stricter penalties, broader species protection (including migratory wildlife), and provisions for First Information Report (FIR) registration and dedicated wildlife police stations. The law also criminalises the online and black-market trade of wild animals and promotes anonymous reporting. These measures led to 411 registered cases and the rescue of 25,000 animals in the same year (*Sindh Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2020*). While it marks progress, effective implementation remains a challenge.

3. Key Enforcement Issues

3.1 Legal inadequacies and loopholes

Historically, Pakistan's wildlife legislation has imposed relatively lenient penalties for wildlife related offences, reflecting low legal threshold for deterrence. While *Sections 289, 377, and 428 of the Pakistan Penal Code, Act XLV of 1860* criminalizes animal cruelty and negligent behaviour, the prescribed fines remain nominal (typically not exceeding PKR 3,000 i.e. $\approx$ USD 10.70). The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCA Act) 1890* sets an even lower penalty, with maximum fine capped at just Rs. 500 ($\approx$ USD 2). Moreover, penalty provisions are inconsistent across provinces (see table 2).

The categorization of species under provincial wildlife laws remains inconsistent, leading to confusion and enforcement challenges. For example, the *Balochistan Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2014* lists certain species simultaneously as protected and game animals, which reflects internal contradictions within the legislation. In contrast, the *Sindh Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2020* represents a more progressive reform, introducing stricter penalties, expanding the list of protected species, and establishing dedicated wildlife police stations. Despite such improvements, most provincial frameworks still fail to criminalize animal cruelty and baiting explicitly, relying instead on the outdated *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*

Table 2. *Wildlife-related National and Provincial Laws/Acts in Pakistan. (U.S = Under Section)*

Law/Act	Jurisdiction	Scope	Max. Penalties	Implementation Body
Pakistan Trade Control of Wild Fauna and Flora Act (CITES Law) 2012	Extends to All over Pakistan. Regulated under Federal Government.	Fauna & Flora	U.S 3: 1yr to 2yrs imprisonment OR with fine 0.500 million Rupees to 1 million Rupees	Management Authority (Ministry of Climate Change & Environmental Coordination in collaboration with Provincial/ Territorial Wildlife Departments & Pakistan Customs). Triable by: Senior Civil Judge in Islamabad having Special Powers to try offences under this law only on written complaint made by the duly authorised officer + Environmental Protection Tribunal.
Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1890 (PCA Act)	Extends to whole Pakistan. Regulated under Provincial Government.	Fauna	U.S 4: Fine which extends to 500 Rupees or with 2yrs imprisonment.	Police (Investigating Authority) & Magisterial Court (For Inquiry & Trial) on information and on application is authoritative for the implementation of the Act.
Northern Areas(Gilgit-Baltistan) Wildlife Preservation Act 1975	Extends to the whole of the Northern Areas. Regulated under Provincial Government.	Fauna	U.S 34[1(i)]: Fine which extends to 2000 Rupees or 2yrs Imprisonment or both with the cancellation of any license or permit held under this Act and recovery of shooting fee for the game specified in this Act.	Department: Forest, Wildlife & Environment Department of Government of Gilgit-Baltistan. Investigating Authority: Police/Officer Appointed by Provincial Government Triable by: Magisterial Court (Not less than 1 st Class) /Civil Court (For Inquiry & Trial) to take cognizance only on written application/ complaint from the relevant Authority.
Islamabad Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Ordinance 1979	Extends the Islamabad Capital Territory. Regulated under Federal Government.	Fauna	U.S 26(1): Fine (Rs. 2,000) or imprisonment (max. 1 year).	Department: Islamabad Board of Wildlife Management. Investigating Authority: An Authorised Officer of grade 17 or above in collaboration with nearest Police Station. Triable by: Magistrate of First Class appointed by Federal Government.
Punjab Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) (Amendment) Act, 2007	Extends to the whole territory of Punjab. Regulated under Provincial Government.	Fauna	U.S 21(ii): Fine (Rs. 20,000-30,000/-) or imprisonment (1-5 yrs) along with confiscation of the weapon and suspension of license or permit for a period of 5 years.	Department: Punjab Wildlife Management Board. Investigating Authority: An Authorised Officer in collaboration with Police Officials. Triable by: Magistrate of First Class appointed by Provincial Government

Table 2 continued on next page

Table 2. *Wildlife-related National and Provincial Laws/Acts in Pakistan. (U.S = Under Section)*

Law/Act	Jurisdiction	Scope	Max. Penalties	Implementation Body
Baluchistan Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2014.	Extends to the whole of Baluchistan except Tribal Areas and regulated under Provincial Government.	Fauna	U.S 52 (According to V Schedule): Imprisonment up to 10 years but not less than 5 years and fine which may extend up to Rs. 1,000,000/-.	Department: Baluchistan Council for Conservation of Wildlife. Investigating Authority: Authorised Officer with assistance of Police/Security Agency. Triable by: No Court Inferior than Judicial Magistrate of 1 st Class shall take cognizance on written complaint by the Authorised Officer.
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Wildlife and Biodiversity (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2015	Extending the whole of the Province of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa & regulated under Provincial Government.	Fauna	U.S 68(1) (According to 4 th Schedule): Fine (Rs. 45,000/-) or imprisonment (3 yrs) along with confiscation of the weapon and suspension of license or permit for a period of two years.	Investigating Authority: Wildlife Force along with KPK Wildlife & Biodiversity Board in collaboration with Nearest Police Station. Triable By: No court inferior than Judicial Magistrate of First Class.
Azad Jammu and Kashmir Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2014	Extends to whole of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir regulated under AJ&K Government.	Fauna	Fine: Rs. 10,000/- to 30,000/- or with imprisonment of 6 months to 1 yr [U. Sections: 15(2), 16(2), 18(v), 19(2), 21(2), 41(2), 44(7) & 52(2)]	Authoritative Departments: Wildlife and Fisheries Department along with Wildlife Management Advisory Board & Executive Committee with assistance of Police Department. Triable by: No court inferior to a Civil Judge or Judicial Magistrate of First Class & District Magistrate or any Magistrate of the first Class specially empowered in this behalf by the government may try summarily under the Code of Criminal Procedure 1898.
Sindh Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Management) Act, 2020	Extends to the whole of the Province of Sindh & regulated under Provincial Government.	Fauna	U.S 71 & 3 rd Schedule (Sr. No.5): Imprisonment of either description up to 06 years with fine up to rupees Ten lac with value of loss as determined (u/s section 90).	Authorities: Sindh Wildlife Department along with Sindh Council for Conservation of Wildlife & National Management Authority with the assistance of Wildlife Police (with the help of Police Officer, Rangers Officer, Coast Guard, Marine Security Agency and Custom Officer, Forest Officer).

Act 1890, which applies primarily to domesticated or captive animals and leaves wild species insufficiently protected. It also remained unamended until 2018, and even then, revisions were limited to increased penalties for select offences.

These internal contradictions hinder enforcement and conflict with Pakistan's obligations under international agreements such as CITES and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) (Ahmed, 2016). Furthermore, there is no policy or structured implementation framework at the national level governing the welfare and

treatment of captive wildlife, whether in zoos or private possession (Shah, 2018).

Between 2020 and 2025, constitutional benches began recognising animals as sentient beings with inherent dignity and rights rooted in Islamic stewardship. Yet, the legal landscape remains fragmented. Each province operates under distinct legislative frameworks, ranging from progressive reforms to antiquated colonial statutes. Without legislative harmonisation, Pakistan risks fostering an unequal landscape (Anjum *et al.*, 2025).

Under wildlife legislation, protected areas in Pakistan are classified into three categories: national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and game reserves. However, this classification is outdated and does not align with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s six-category framework (Dudley, 2008), which includes additional types such as strict nature reserves, habitat/species management areas and protected landscapes, that better capture modern conservation priorities. Moreover, provincial wildlife agencies manage protected areas but lack authority in surrounding areas, where development often threatens wildlife conservation (Daran *et al.*, 2023; Khan, 2003; Khan *et al.*, 2022).

Existing laws also fail to reflect current research findings, resulting in outdated or incomplete species listings. As a result, several species of both endemic status and international conservation importance remain unrecognized within provincial and national legislation. A striking example is the woolly flying squirrel (*Eupetaurus cinereus*), an endemic mammal documented in northern Pakistan, which is absent from all national and provincial wildlife protection schedules (Jackson *et al.*, 2022). This omission likely stems from the limited research available on the species, underscoring the critical need for updated evidence-based assessments to guide future legislative reforms.

While Pakistan has numerous wildlife laws in place, they remain fragmented, outdated, and poorly aligned with scientific knowledge and international commitments. The lack of coordination across provinces and the presence of legal ambiguities have created significant loopholes, weakening the overall effectiveness of wildlife protection. These legislative gaps directly weaken enforcement efforts, which already struggle with their own persistent challenges.

3.2 International Obligations and compliance gaps

Pakistan is party to key multilateral environmental agreements, including CITES (1973), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992), and CMS (1979). These treaties require member countries to regulate wildlife trade, protect endangered species, and report on biodiversity conservation (CBD, 1992; CMS, 1979; Government of Pakistan, 2017). Although Pakistan has taken steps like signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to counter illegal wildlife trade (Radio Pakistan, 2018), its compliance remains inconsistent. For

example, in 2014, Saudi Prince Fahd bin Sultan violated both Pakistani and international conservation laws by illegally hunting over 2,100 endangered houbara bustards (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*), exceeding permit limits and targeting birds within protected areas. This act breached the CITES and highlighted systemic failures in enforcement and permitting oversight (The Third Pole, 2014). Similarly, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also intercepted a shipment from Pakistan linked to fraudulent documentation in 2018, yet no domestic legal action followed (Shahid, 2021). Such cases reveal that Pakistan's treaty commitments often lack credible enforcement on the ground.

More recently, WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature)-Pakistan, in a letter to the Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, opposed the proposed transfer of two snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) from the Naltar Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre to Moscow Zoo. The organisation warned that it contradicts both national and international conservation commitments and could set a harmful precedent for future transfers of threatened species (WWF-Pakistan, 2025a).

3.3 Weak Institutional Management

Protected areas in Pakistan often lack the staff, resources, and authority needed for effective management. Most agencies are poorly funded, with limited research and training infrastructure or technological tools (Daran *et al.*, 2023; Khan *et al.*, 2022; Razzaq and Ali, 2024). They are only effective when backed by strong management systems and community involvement (Khan and Bhagwat, 2010). In this regard, existing wildlife legislation in Pakistan remains inadequate, as provincial authorities have jurisdiction only within protected areas, not their surroundings, where development often threatens biodiversity. Although local participation is key to long-term conservation success, Pakistan's protected area framework still lacks legal space for community-based or co-managed governance (Baig and Ahmed, 2007; Daran *et al.*, 2023; Hessami *et al.*, 2021). Evidence from further regional and international contexts shows that involving local communities into protected area governance significantly improves conservation outcomes and sustainability (Dutta and Dutta, 2023; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2024; Rahman *et al.*, 2022).

Pakistan's zoos reflect another side of this systemic neglect. Poor infrastructure, untrained staff, and the absence of binding welfare standards have led to repeated animal welfare crises, as demonstrated by the suffering and subsequent death of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) Noor Jehan (Ilyas, 2023) at Karachi Zoo. This gap is also reflected in the case of Kaavan, the elephant kept under horrific conditions in Islamabad Zoo since 1984. His prolonged suffering, despite public attention and expert concern, reflects the institutional inability to enforce even basic welfare standards. Only after a global campaign and court order by Justice Athar Minallah was Kaavan relocated to Cambodia in 2020 (Saeed, 2024).

Other examples include Suzie and Babloo, two brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) used for dancing in tribal areas and later transferred to Islamabad Zoo, where they continued to suffer from malnutrition and zoonosis due to poor enclosure standards, again requiring judicial intervention to secure their transfer abroad (FOUR PAWS International, 2020). Lahore Zoo has faced repeated incidents compromising animal welfare. International scrutiny prompted broader evaluation of zoo management across Pakistan. Notably, Islamabad Zoo lost 15 rare animals, while Peshawar Zoo reported over 30 animal deaths, including a snow leopard (*Mujtaba*, 2020). In 2020, following the High Court's order to close Islamabad Zoo, two lions (*Panthera leo*) died after caretakers set their enclosure on fire during relocation. Ten more animals, including deer (*family Cervidae*), a blue bull (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), and an ostrich (*Struthio camelus*), also died due to staff negligence (Rashind, 2024).

3.4 Illegal wildlife trading and hunting

Illegal wildlife trade and hunting remain equally pressing problems. According to the Snow Leopard Trust (2025), only about 3% of reported wildlife crimes reach law enforcement agencies. Despite the existence of multiple regulations, wildlife trafficking persists due to weak enforcement and the exploitation of legal loopholes. Traffickers often misuse licenses issued for breeding or research purposes to smuggle rare species, including lions (*Panthera* spp.), macaws (*family Psittacidae*), and iguanas (*family Iguanidae*), many of which end up in private collections. This illegal trade is further facilitated by fraudulent documentation and porous land routes, particularly through Balochistan, while enforcement responses remain inconsistent across provinces (Salim, 2025). Most existing laws restricting game hunting are not enforced. While some species like falcons and cranes are protected, many other threatened species still lack adequate management measures (Khan *et al.*, 2022).

In 2021, the Wildlife Department Rawalpindi Division arrested 103 individuals for illegal hunting and fined 653 others for various wildlife violations (The Express Tribune, 2022). The maximum penalty for snow leopard poaching is just PKR 45,000 (~\$160), a figure far below the species' black-market value (Snow Leopard Trust, 2025). The Islamabad Wildlife Management Board (IWMB) rescued five endangered turtles: Indian roofed turtle (*Pangshura tecta*), black pond turtle (*Geoclemys hamiltonii*), crown river turtle (*Hardella thurjii*), Indian flap-shelled turtle (*Lissemys punctata*), and Ganges softshell turtle (*Nilssonina gangetica*) that were being illegally sold at a pet shop in Islamabad's F-10 sector and safely released them into the Indus River (Pakistan Observer, 2022). Additionally, an undercover survey of 55 markets in 23 Pakistani cities revealed that the majority of wildlife species and animal products sold were listed under CITES and the IUCN Red List of threatened species (Ilyas, 2018b). The Punjab Wildlife Department recovered a rare snow leopard skin and arrested a suspect during a raid in a private housing society in Lahore,

highlighting ongoing efforts to curb illegal wildlife trade (Mehmood, 2024). Recently, Amin *et al.* (2024) reported the presence of both legal and illegal trade of wildlife and domesticated birds in District Tank, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which highlights the ongoing challenges in regulating local wildlife markets.

3.5 Private keeping and bear-baiting

The illegal ownership and exploitation of wild animals by influential individuals remains another serious yet under-addressed enforcement issue in Pakistan. Members of the elite class frequently violate provincial wildlife laws by keeping tigers, lions, leopards, and even crocodiles in private residences, often as a display of social status and prestige (Usman *et al.*, 2022). While Section 12 of the *Punjab Wildlife Act 1974* technically permits the private keeping and breeding of wild animals through the issuance of a "certificate of lawful possession," such allowances are conditional and apply only to species not listed as fully protected under the Act's Second and Third Schedules. In practice, however, broad officer discretion and weak enforcement have turned this provision into a loophole, enabling the proliferation of private menageries and commercial breeding farms under the guise of legality. This disregards ethical and welfare considerations and undermines the fundamental conservation principle that wild animals belong in their natural habitats. A particularly disturbing case involved Kashif Zameer, a businessman and TikToker, who was filmed in 2021 beating a chained lion and allowing it to roam his home. Despite widespread public outrage, no legal action was taken, and the lion remained in his custody (Daily Pakistan, 2021). This was not an isolated incident. According to Punjab Wildlife and Parks Department, a recent crackdown led to the confiscation of 18 illegally kept lions, raids on 38 breeding farms, and arrests of eight individuals involved in violations (The Jerusalem Post, 2025). Alarming, the department reported that 584 lions and tigers are currently being held in private homes and breeding facilities across Punjab.

Similarly troubling is the persistence of bear-baiting, a cruel blood sport that continues despite being outlawed under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1890* and explicitly banned in 2001 (Ahmad *et al.*, 2025; Khan, 2020). The practice remains especially prevalent in Punjab, where nearly all of bears used in such fights are subjected to extreme cruelty, including the removal of claws and breaking of teeth to make them defenceless (Rashind, 2024). Most of these bears are Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN (Garshelis and Steinmetz, 2020). Although Sindh province has made some efforts to curb this practice, enforcement remains inconsistent, and illegal bear-baiting events continue with impunity, often protected by powerful landowners (Khan, 2020). Socio-economic and cultural factors also strongly influence bear baiting in Punjab, along with the lack of alternative livelihoods shaping kalandars' (bear keepers') willingness to give up bears, highlighting the need for targeted awareness and livelihood interventions (Rooney and Millam, 2014).

Post-2020 reports confirm that while wildlife authorities and NGOs have helped limit the practice in some regions, bear-baiting remains widespread in Punjab, where multiple recent rescues of Asiatic black bears revealed severe mutilations, including claw removal, tooth breaking, and forced dog fights (FOUR PAWS International, 2024; The Express Tribune, 2025).

4. Recent Key Legal Precedents:

Despite persistent gaps in legislation and weak enforcement, judiciary has shown a positive trend in playing a corrective role in upholding wildlife protection laws. Recently, at the inaugural 2025 International Conference on Animal and Environmental Rights in Lahore, Pakistan, Supreme Court Justice Ayesha A. Malik emphasised the need for "strict punishment" for perpetrators of animal cruelty, asserting that the protection of animals constitutes a constitutional obligation (Dawn, 2025). The following case laws reflect how courts have intervened to safeguard ecological interests where institutional mechanisms have fallen short.

Province of Sindh v. Lal Khan Chandio (2016 SCMR 48)

The Supreme Court of Pakistan examined the legality of a notification issued by the Sindh Forest and Wildlife Department under Section 40 (1) of the *Sindh Wildlife (Amendment) Act, 1993*, which sought to remove the houbara bustard from the list of protected species and permit its hunting. The Court, comprising Chief Justice Jawwad S. Khawaja, Justice Dost Muhammad Khan, and Justice Qazi Faez Isa, found that the Provincial Government had acted beyond its statutory authority in attempting to alter the conservation status of a species classified by scientific authorities as "vulnerable" and under severe population decline. The Court emphasised the binding nature of Pakistan's international commitments under the CITES and CMS, both of which prohibit the exploitation of the threatened species.

Rejecting arguments based on economic or diplomatic justifications (such as the supposed benefits derived from foreign dignitaries hunting the bird) the Court underscored that legal protections for wildlife are not transactional nor subordinate to political or financial considerations. It declared the impugned notification *ultra vires* the *Sindh Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1972* and held that neither the federation nor the provinces possessed legal authority to permit the hunting of a species listed as threatened or vulnerable. The judgment directed the federal government to align domestic legislation with its international treaty obligations and to ensure that provincial laws are compliant with CITES and CMS frameworks. Beyond its immediate impact on halting Houbara Bustard hunting, this judgment set an important precedent for strengthening judicial oversight of wildlife governance in Pakistan, reinforcing that environmental protection and treaty compliance are constitutional obligations rather than discretionary policy choices.

Prof. Zahid Baig Mirza v. CDA & Others (PLD 2022 Islamabad 398)

In this landmark judgment, Chief Justice Athar Minallah of the Islamabad High Court ruled on multiple disputes concerning illegal land use within the Margalla Hills National Park. The Court held that the *Islamabad Wildlife Ordinance 1979*, being a special law, overrides the jurisdiction of the Capital Development Authority (CDA) in the National Park area. It declared the construction of a golf course and other unauthorised commercial activities by various state-affiliated entities as unlawful, unconstitutional, and violative of the right to life under Article 9.

The Court reaffirmed that no authority, including the armed forces, is above the law and emphasized that national parks are inviolable ecological assets meant exclusively for conservation. Citing the constitutional obligation to protect natural habitats, the Court ordered immediate cessation of unauthorised activities, sealing of the golf course, restoration of encroached land, and strict enforcement against further degradation. The federal government, CDA, and Islamabad Wildlife Management Board were held jointly accountable for the park's protection.

This case sets a critical precedent by establishing that environmental protection is a constitutional duty and that no institution can claim immunity from compliance with conservation laws. It also has since guided subsequent judicial oversight, including the Supreme Court's *Monal Group of Companies v. CDA* (Civil Petition No. 304 of 2022, decided 21 Aug 2024), which reaffirmed the IHC's findings on encroachments and the public-trust doctrine.

Haji Ali Muhammad & Others v. Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Others (2025 CLC 922)

In this case, the petitioners (members of local community) challenged the declaration of a community-owned area as a Community Game Reserve under Sections 38 and 39 of the *Balochistan Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation & Management) Act 2014*, seeking to halt regulated hunting of the Houbara Bustard by Arab dignitaries, under restrictions imposed under Section 16 of the same Act. The petitioners alleged infringement of local rights, including restricted movement, displacement of residents and livestock, and intimidation by foreign hunters and officials.

However, the Balochistan High Court, per Justices Muhammad Ejaz Swati and Nazeer Ahmed Langove, found the petition legally deficient, as the petitioners failed to provide documentary proof of land ownership or demonstrate that they represented the requisite 80% of the local community, as required under the law. The Court held that vague and unsupported factual claims cannot warrant relief under constitutional writ jurisdiction. The judgment upheld statutory hunting restrictions under Section 16, dismissed the petition for lack of evidence, and reinforced the legal obligation to comply with wildlife protection laws.

Although the petition articulated credible socio-economic and livelihood concerns, the judgment illustrates a recurrent procedural problem i.e. legitimate grievances are frequently defeated by evidentiary and standing requirements. Where laws impose high thresholds for community representation and require documentary proof of ownership, marginalised groups, often lacking formal title deeds or organised representation, are disadvantaged. This gap can turn substantive rights into illusory protections. Communities facing genuine harm may be unable to obtain interim relief or substantive remedies because the courts must apply strict proof and jurisdictional rules. Remediating this requires procedural reform (lowering onerous representation thresholds and accepting alternative evidence of communal use), strengthened legal aid for affected communities, and institutionalized consultative mechanisms that document community consent before designations are made.

The Monal Group of Companies v. CDA & Others (2024 SCMR 1563)

In this significant environmental ruling, the Supreme Court, comprising Justices Qazi Faez Isa, Jamal Khan Mandokhail, and Naeem Akhtar Afghan, held that all licenses, allotments, or permissions granted by the Capital Development Authority (CDA) or the Remount, Veterinary & Farms Directorate for the operation of restaurants within the Margalla Hills National Park were in direct violation of the *Islamabad Wildlife (Protection, Preservation, Conservation & Management) Ordinance 1979*. The Court declared such permissions are void and of no legal effect, reinforcing the inviolability of protected areas under statutory conservation mandates.

The petitioners' plea to legalise such commercial operations within the National Park was rejected. The Court directed that all restaurants, except small kiosks licensed by the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board under strict limitations, must vacate the premises within three months. To strengthen the governance of the National Park, the Court further recommended appointing a CDA officer as a member of the Wildlife Board and suggested WWF's involvement in implementing these directives.

By ordering the removal of restaurants, the Court reinforced a key conservation principle i.e. that economic or recreational interests cannot override statutory protection of wildlife habitats. The decision is widely viewed as a positive precedent for conservation, reaffirming the ecological integrity and non-negotiable status of Pakistan's protected areas.

5. Other positive developments

Recently, WWF-Pakistan, in a press release issued on World Wildlife Day 2025, announced the launch of Pakistan's first mobile application to report wildlife crimes and support coordinated action by government and law enforcement agencies (WWF-Pakistan, 2025b). The first Wildlife Crime Scene Investigation (WCSI) training was also held in Chitral, Pakistan, equipping field staff to

tackle illegal wildlife trade (responsible for the poaching of an estimated 8 snow leopards annually) through forensic techniques, legal enforcement, and community engagement (Snow Leopard Trust, 2025). Moreover, in April 2025, IUCN Pakistan, in collaboration with the Punjab Wildlife Department, launched the province's first comprehensive wildlife census to gather data on species distribution, populations, and threats (IUCN, 2025). The project is expected to provide critical insights that could inform evidence-based wildlife policy and legislative reforms in the future. Most importantly, the Punjab government has established wildlife courts to tackle offences like poaching and encroachment, with amended laws now imposing fines up to Rs. 5 million (≈ USD 18,000). A new conservation board has been formed, alongside initiatives worth Rs. 1.73 billion (≈ USD 6.18 million), including a 3D wildlife cinema, ecotourism projects, a Rs. 1.47 billion (≈ USD 5.25 million) wildlife hospital, and Rs. 60 million (≈ USD 0.21 million) youth internship program (Khattak, 2025).

6. Recommendations

After examining the numerous legal and ethical shortcomings that undermine effective wildlife protection, it is essential to propose targeted reforms to address these critical gaps.

- Provincial wildlife laws should be standardised by aligning species schedules, penalties, and enforcement mechanisms with scientific data and international commitments under CITES, CMS, and CBD.
- Existing laws should be amended to explicitly criminalise cruelty against wild species, remove contradictions in species classifications, and incorporate updated species assessments, including endemic and at-risk taxa like the Woolly Flying Squirrel.
- Law enforcement agencies should tailor their strategies based on emerging trends and intelligence gathered from social media platforms (Haq *et al.*, 2023).
- Funding, training, and technological support for provincial wildlife departments should be increased. Government should establish dedicated units for forensic wildlife crime investigation and ensure coordination with police and customs authorities.
- Government should also expand the legal authority of wildlife agencies to include buffer zones around protected areas and embed participatory governance mechanisms.
- Moreover, the *PCA Act 1890* should be strengthened by incorporating species-specific welfare standards (particularly for animals in captivity such as zoos) aligned with the internationally recognized FIVE FREEDOMS of animals i.e. freedom from (1) hunger and thirst, (2) discomfort, (3) pain, injury or disease, (4) fear and distress, and to (5) express normal

behaviour (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1992; Mäekivi, 2018).

- Strict enforcement and regulation of judicial directives must involve holding violators accountable regardless of their background, timely implementation of rulings, interdepartmental coordination, and stringent monitoring frameworks.
- Finally, promotion of nationwide public awareness campaigns addressing wildlife crime and animal welfare should be encouraged.

Priority reforms include standardising species schedules and improving captive-wildlife welfare, while near-term feasible steps involve boosting funding and training for provincial departments.

Conclusion

While Pakistan's wildlife legislation has gradually progressed with time, the gap between policy and enforcement remains substantial. Legal inconsistencies across provinces, outdated species classifications, minimal penalties, and the lack of a centralized implementation strategy continue to hinder effective protection. Institutional weaknesses further aggravate the issue, with understaffed and under-resourced agencies unable to monitor protected areas or curb illegal trade

effectively. Private keeping of wild animals, illegal hunting by privileged actors, and cruel practices like bear-baiting persist with impunity, reflecting deep-seated enforcement failures.

Nonetheless, judicial pronouncements have begun to play a pivotal role in rectifying administrative shortcomings. Landmark judgments by superior courts have reaffirmed constitutional and international commitments, holding state entities accountable for violations of law. Complementary efforts, such as the establishment of wildlife courts, conservation boards, and cross-border collaboration, signal progress. Yet, these developments must be institutionalised and expanded in line with the proposed reforms, particularly legal harmonisation, strengthened enforcement, and public awareness, to address the scale and urgency of the threats facing Pakistan's biodiversity.

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