



# Towards extinction: How Facebook is enabling wildlife trafficking

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## Executive Summary

**Wildlife trafficking** is estimated to be a **multi-billion dollar business** that is cruelly harming animals, endangering species, negatively impacting entire ecosystems, creating fertile ground for the next pandemic, and harming local communities. **Facebook, with more than 2.9 billion monthly active users, is a major enabler of this trade.** In 2018, the company joined the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online with, at the time, the aim of reducing the illegal online wildlife trade by 80 percent by 2020. But four years on, research shows that **Facebook remains a thriving online marketplace for wildlife trafficking.**

Avaaz's research – representing only the tip of the iceberg – underlines the need for immediate action from Facebook on this issue:

- In two days and just a few clicks, researchers with no background in investigating wildlife trade patterns were able to find **129 pieces of potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content**<sup>1</sup>, as verified by experts in this field. This content included posts selling or seeking cheetahs, monkeys, pangolins and pangolin scales, lion cubs, elephant tusks, and rhino horn.
- Following this basic search, Facebook's recommendation algorithm suggested dozens of wildlife groups to Avaaz researchers. **More than half of these recommendations directed researchers to groups containing potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content, and 76% to content that likely violated Facebook's own policies on the sale of animals.** Posts included animals and animal parts or products from some of the most threatened species in the world, including tigers and African gray parrots.
- **Facebook appeared to remove just 13% of the posts our research found to contain potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content** before our researchers reported them, and then removed less than half – 43% – of these posts a week after researchers reported them through Facebook's 'Report post' tool.

Social media has played a major role in the creation of a vast and easily accessible online market for wildlife, where traffickers exploit the global reach and relative anonymity of platforms to reach new customers and evade detection – facilitating an often deadly trade. Avaaz's new research findings are consistent with research published by the Alliance to Counter Crime Online (ACCO) in 2020 showing substantial wildlife trafficking activity on Facebook, indicating that Facebook has failed to take adequate action to date despite being made aware of the shortcomings of their wildlife trafficking policies by ACCO and other advocates, and despite joining the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online in 2018.

Facebook has rolled out alerts to warn its users about potential wildlife trafficking content when they search for certain keywords, and it removes some suspicious content. For example, recently Facebook and Instagram took down several pieces of wildlife trade content when alerted by BBC News of new research. In response, parent company Meta said: "We prohibit the trading of endangered wildlife or their parts. Meta is a dedicated member of the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online. And through our partnerships with the likes of WWF [the World Wide Fund for Nature] and [wildlife trade specialists] Traffic, we are committing to tackling this industry-wide issue."

However, **despite its explicit commitment, Facebook's lax enforcement of its own wildlife trade policies, its alleged reluctance to share information with law enforcement and others, and its amplification of wildlife trafficking content through its algorithms** appear to be major **obstacles to progress towards ending the trade.**

This new research by Avaaz shows once again that the company's actions at present are insufficient to tackle the problem, which is why the following policy recommendations are so crucial. **Facebook and other social media platforms should:**

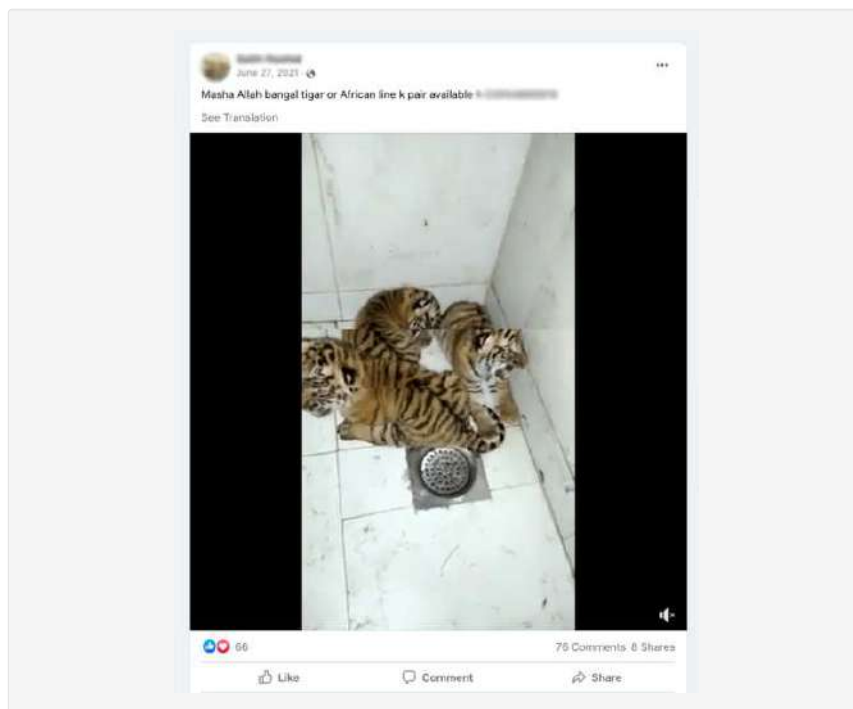
- Strengthen and enforce policies to end wildlife trafficking;
- Expand moderation efforts to detect illicit sales and policy violations;
- Restrict search results when users combine endangered species terms with sale terms;
- Detox their algorithms to ensure they do not boost wildlife trade;
- Cooperate with researchers, law enforcement and government agencies; and
- Provide full transparency on progress made towards ending wildlife trafficking.

## Section 1: Facebook puts harmful wildlife trafficking content at users' fingertips in just a few clicks

**In just two days, Avaaz researchers collected 129 posts containing potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content.** This content consisted of posts seeking to buy or sell species listed in Appendix I or II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international agreement that aims to ensure that international trade does not threaten the survival of species of wild animals and plants. Species listed in Appendix I of CITES are those currently threatened with extinction and species listed in Appendix II are at risk of becoming threatened with extinction if trade is not closely controlled – in other words, "species about which, based on international agreement, there is reason to be concerned" and the trade of which should be either prohibited or subject to strict rules and conditions.

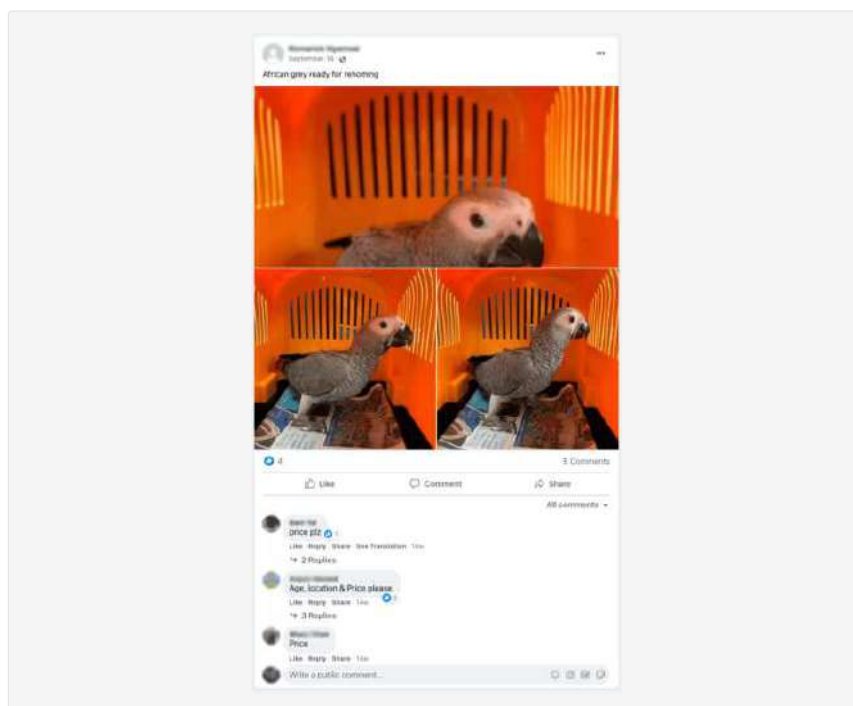
Despite the internationally recognized and agreed need to protect these species, researchers were able to find 129 posts in a matter of clicks, using the Facebook search bar. Researchers had no previous investigative knowledge of wildlife trafficking, therefore their experience demonstrates **how easy it is for average users to access potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content through Facebook's platform.** Furthermore, **Facebook removed just 43% of posts** containing potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content after these were reported by researchers using Facebook's 'Report post' tool, **evidencing a clear need to improve its moderation efforts.**

### EXAMPLE 1: TIGER CUBS



This advertisement for tiger cubs was posted to a public group on Facebook in June 2021. Tigers are [listed](#) in Appendix I of CITES. They are considered to be endangered, with just [3,900](#) estimated to be left in the wild. [WWF](#) identifies commercial captive tiger breeding as a “significant obstacle to the recovery and protection of wild tiger populations because they perpetuate the demand for tiger products, serve as a cover for illegal trade and undermine enforcement efforts.”

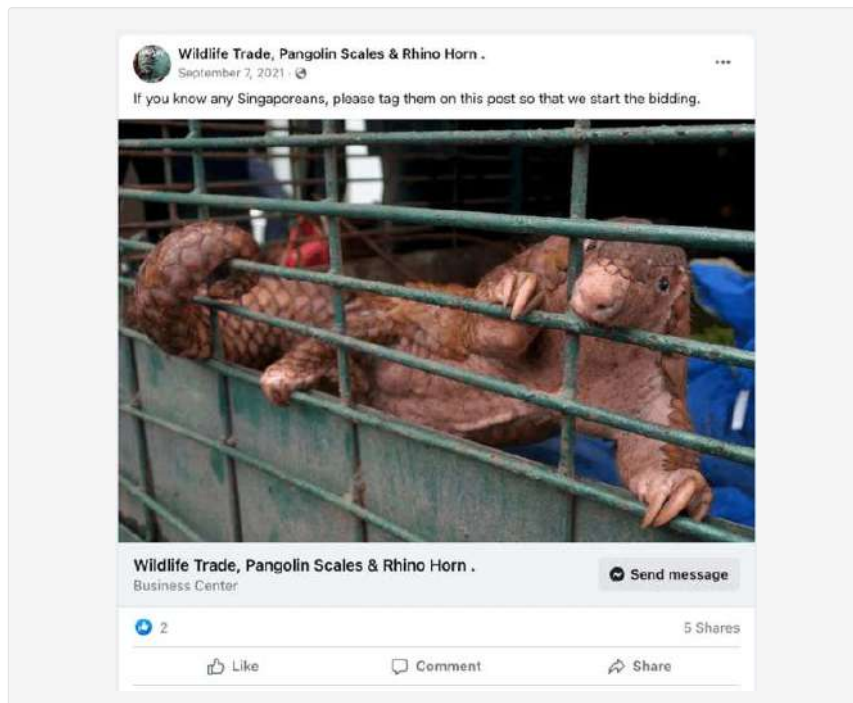
## EXAMPLE 2: AFRICAN GRAY PARROT



In the post above, a seller states that an African gray parrot is available for “rehoming” – a code [often](#) used by traffickers to indicate that an animal is for sale, confirmed on this post by prospective buyers asking for a price. African gray parrots are [listed](#) in Appendix I of CITES.

[Sociable](#) and highly intelligent, African gray parrots are one of the [most popular](#) pet birds in the world. Their friendly nature also makes them [easy targets](#) for poachers. The high demand for African gray parrots, in conjunction with habitat loss, is [pushing](#) the species towards extinction. They have been [marked](#) as endangered on the IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species.

## EXAMPLE 3: PANGOLINS AND RHINO HORN

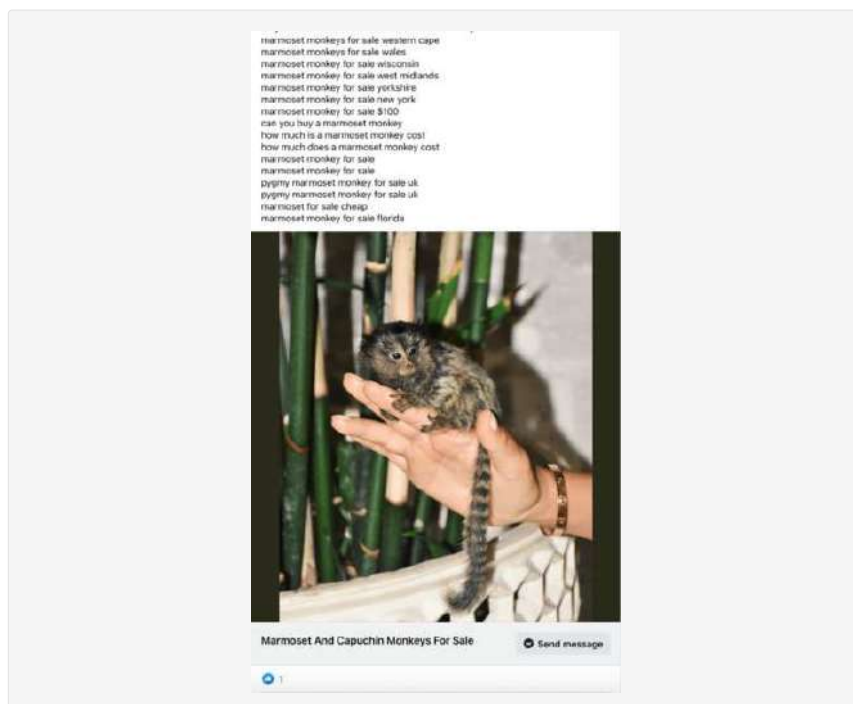


This post, found on a **Facebook page** that specializes in the trade and export of “Pangolin Scales & Rhino Horn to Vietnam, China, Hongkong, Malaysia, Singapore from Africa,” **puts out a call for bidders on their animals and products.**

Pangolins are a [CITES Appendix I species](#). Despite the CITES [ban](#) on international commercial pangolin trading, which entered into force in 2017, pangolins are the [most trafficked mammals in the world](#). They are trafficked most often for their [meat and scales](#), which are used in traditional medicine and leather products. This trade directly threatens pangolin survival – all eight species of pangolin are [protected](#) under national and international laws, and two are critically endangered.

Similarly, international trade in rhino horn is [illegal](#) under CITES, but high demand for rhino horn in Asia leads to the poaching of three rhinos per day on average in South Africa alone. Black rhinos, a main target for poachers, are critically [endangered](#), with only 5,600 left in the wild.

#### EXAMPLE 4: MARMOSET MONKEY



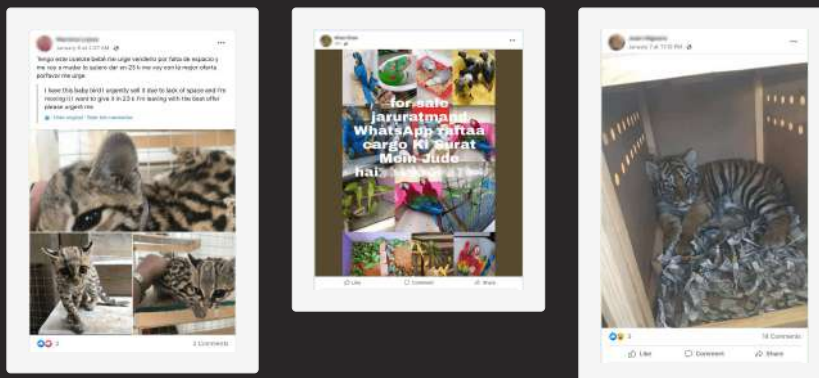
Posted on a page titled ‘Marmoset And Capuchin Monkeys For Sale’, this post features a **photo of a pygmy marmoset under a list of keywords meant to attract potential buyers in various countries.** Pygmy marmosets are [listed](#) on CITES Appendix II.

[Native](#) to the Amazon region, pygmy marmosets are among the [smallest primates](#), with adults weighing just [four ounces](#) when mature. They are often [sought](#) as pets for their size and appearance. For this reason, the pet trade is the largest threat to this species’ survival – they are increasingly threatened by [international demand](#) for so-called ‘thumb monkeys.’

## Section 2: Facebook's algorithms pull users down a wildlife trafficking rabbit hole

In the weeks after collecting posts containing potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content, Facebook made 95 wildlife-focused recommendations to Avaaz researchers through notifications and Facebook's 'Suggested Groups' feature:

- 54% (51) of wildlife recommendations from Facebook directed researchers to groups containing potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content, such as tigers, leopards, African gray parrots, and ocelots, all included in [Appendix 1](#) of CITES, which lists the most endangered animals.
- Additionally, 76% (72) of recommendations directed researchers to groups with posts seeking to buy or sell live animals, likely in violation of Facebook's own policies. Facebook's [Community Standards on Regulated Goods](#) prohibit commercial activity and poaching around endangered species or their parts. That same policy also imposes certain restrictions on the trade in live non-endangered animals. Facebook's [commerce policy](#) on Animals and animal products prohibits the "buying or selling of animals or animal products."



By promoting potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content to users through their recommendation systems, Facebook allows traffickers to reach a wider audience than they would otherwise, and creates the conditions for users with a casual interest in wildlife to be **dragged into an international wildlife trafficking rabbit hole**.

## Section 3: What Facebook and law- and policymakers can do

As mentioned above, Facebook has already taken some actions aimed at tackling wildlife trade on its platforms. In 2018, the company [joined](#) the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online. It has adopted a number of [policies](#) related to the trade in endangered and live non-endangered animals. Facebook also began to include [alerts](#) to warn its users about potential wildlife trafficking content when they search for certain keywords. But its **efforts to date clearly do not match the scale of the issue**. Wildlife [experts say](#), that **more can and must be done by the platform** and that its policies ought to be [enforced](#) not only more consistently, but also across all languages – because [research shows](#) that Facebook's policies are enforced sporadically, *particularly* in languages other than English.

**While there is no silver bullet to fix online wildlife trafficking, there are a number of policy and tech solutions social media platforms and policymakers can adopt in order to prevent its spread** – and they enjoy the [support of around 700,000 people](#) across the world.

**Meta (including its platforms Facebook and Instagram) and other social media companies should:**

- **Strengthen and enforce their existing policies to end online wildlife trafficking:** for example, [Facebook's Community Standards on Regulated Goods](#) already prohibit commercial activity and poaching around endangered species or their parts, and put restrictions on the trade in live non-endangered animals as well. [Facebook's commerce policy](#) on Animals and animal products prohibits the "buying or selling of animals or animal products." We applaud these policies while simultaneously calling for urgent improvements in effectively enforcing them across all languages.
- **Expand moderation efforts (both proactively and in response to user reports) to detect illicit sales and policy violations,** including in languages other than English
- **Restrict search results when users combine endangered species terms with sale terms:** while we commend Facebook's work to [add alerts](#) informing users about illegal wildlife trade in response to certain search terms, this measure on its own is not sufficient. For example, Avaaz researchers found that searching "pangolin for sale" on the platform returned the Protect Wildlife on Facebook alert – but among the search results, there was a post selling pangolins. According to [Gretchen Peters](#), Executive Director of the Alliance to Counter Crime Online (ACCO), there are multiple technical and policy fixes that Facebook and other tech platforms could implement that would reduce the amount of wildlife trafficking occurring on their platforms, including simple "If" code <sup>2</sup>. which could block search results and flag and remove any groups and pages that combine sales terms with animal species terms.
- **Detox their algorithms to ensure they do not boost wildlife trade:** social media companies' "curation algorithms" [decide](#) what we see, and in what order, when we log on. They're [designed](#) to keep us glued to the screen and always wanting to come back for more. Our research shows that once users have come in contact with wildlife trade content, algorithms keep feeding them more content of this nature. Fortunately, this can be fixed. Having designed and developed them, platforms can detox their algorithms by ensuring this harmful and sometimes illegal content is downgraded, not amplified, in users' feeds.
- **Cooperate with researchers, law enforcement, and government agencies** to decrease wildlife trafficking and to ensure wildlife traffickers are brought to justice. This kind of cooperation has proven

successful in the past: [eBay](#), has worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and significantly reduced the volume of suspected illegal wildlife sales on their platform. Traffickers have also been [brought](#) to justice in the past, but much more needs to be done.

- [Provide full transparency](#) on progress made towards ending wildlife trafficking on their platforms. Because online wildlife trafficking is always evolving and because of the great damage it causes, it is essential that governments, civil society, and the general public are informed of the scope and scale of the problem, as well as the measures taken to tackle it. Online platforms must therefore provide comprehensive, periodic reports listing – aggregated by country and/or language – the wildlife trafficking content found on their services, what actions were taken in each instance, and how many times users reported such content. The reports must also detail platforms' efforts to deal with wildlife trafficking beyond action taken against violative content – for example, cooperation and data sharing with authorities.

**Law- and policy-makers should:**

- [Enact and enforce legislation and regulation](#) to effectively address the problem of domestic and cross-border illegal wildlife trade in order to bring illegal wildlife traffickers to justice.
- [Cooperate with social media platforms and experts in the field](#) to address online illegal wildlife trade, in order to fully understand the scale and nature of the problem.

## Methodology

1. On December 21-22 2021, four Avaaz researchers searched for posts on Facebook using English, Spanish, and Portuguese search terms, and documented posts that fit the following “potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content” definition, using the Facebook search bar. In some cases, researchers found additional posts by viewing pages, groups or profiles that interacted with pages and groups returned in search results at random.
  - a. For the purposes of this briefing, we define “potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content” as social media content that warrants further investigation to determine whether it constitutes illegal wildlife trafficking activity, and that could be harmful to, among other things, animals, entire species, and ecosystems. For the purposes of this briefing, it includes content that:
    - i. Contains or appears to contain reference to live animals, animal parts, or products from species included in Appendix I or Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), in written or visual form; and
    - ii. Can reasonably be interpreted as seeking to buy or sell animals, animal parts, or products in the aforementioned categories, based on information included in the post in written or visual form, and/or contextual information, including but not limited to comments, the name of the group or page where content is posted, and posting behavior and profile information of posters and commenters.
  - b. Avaaz included animals that may have been bred in captivity, based on the fact that it is often difficult to verify whether animals are captive-bred or wild-sourced from social media posts alone, and because captive breeding is often done illegally or unsustainably, contributing to increased demand and illegal trade in protected species. Furthermore, Facebook does not make a distinction between the sale of captive-bred vs. wild-caught animals in policies related to wildlife trafficking on its platform.
  - c. Researchers excluded posts from businesses with physical addresses listed on their Facebook pages, and posts that sought or claimed to have appropriate documentation for animals pictured, except where animals being sold fell under CITES Appendix I. This appendix lists species threatened with extinction and for this reason, even those posts with claims to documentation warrant further investigation.
  - d. Where researchers did not speak the language featured in posts, they relied on Facebook’s ‘Translate’ tool.
  - e. Search terms: "Monkey for sale", "pangolin" and ("for sale", buy, sell, sale, price, ask, offer), Pangolin scales, Tusk + For Sale, elephant tusk + for sale, elephant ivory + for sale, "tiger", rhino horn + for sale, rhinoceros sale, "exotic pets", "animais exóticos", "hwamei", hwamei, animais silvestres venda, animais silvestres, animais exóticos, exotic pets, mascotas exóticas
2. On January 13-18, three researchers reviewed groups recommended to them by notifications and through Facebook’s ‘suggested groups’ features and documented all groups with content featuring live animals or animal products. They further documented whether groups had at least one post aiming to buy or sell live animals or animal products, and/or one or more posts that contained potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content, according to the above definition.
3. Wildlife trafficking experts from the Alliance to Counter Crime Online (Patricia Tricorache, Gretchen Peters, Damien Huffer, Carol Fukushima, Alisa Davies, Anton du Plessis, and others) reviewed posts found through search and the suggested groups feature to verify that they fit the Avaaz definition of potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content, and verified the number of posts from recommended groups that sought to buy or sell live animals likely in violation of Facebook’s [Community Standards on Regulated Goods](#).
4. On February 24, 2022, researchers flagged all live posts via the Facebook ‘Report post’ tool, and reviewed all posts on February 28, 2022 (three day window) OR March 3, 2022 (one week window) to determine how many posts had been actioned by Facebook.

## Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this briefing, we define "potentially harmful wildlife trafficking content" as social media content that warrants further investigation to determine whether it constitutes illegal wildlife trafficking activity, and that could be harmful to, among other things, animals, entire species, and ecosystems. For the purposes of this briefing, it includes content that: a) Contains or appears to contain reference to live animals, animal parts, or products from species included in Appendix I or Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), in written or visual form; and b) Can reasonably be interpreted as seeking to buy or sell animals, animal parts, or products in the aforementioned categories, based on information included in the post in written or visual form, and/or contextual information, including but not limited to comments, the name of the group or page where content is posted, and posting behavior and profile information of posters and commenters. ▲
2. "[if](#)" code is a programming conditional statement that, if proved true, performs a function or displays information. ▲