

OPINION

Endangered species among virus victims



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This slain rhino's horn has been hacked off by the poachers. At least nine rhinos have been poached in South Africa's North West province since the coronavirus pandemic began, as wildlife sightseers stay home. (Photo: NYT)

Social distancing may save human lives, but it's wreaking havoc on some of the world's most threatened species.

In Botswana, which depends heavily on tourism, poachers have taken advantage of suddenly empty wildlife reserves to kill at least six endangered rhinos during the coronavirus pandemic.

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big cats stayed home. Fears are rising that tigers, elephants and countless lesser-known species might soon face similar threats.

For decades, there's been a broad consensus among governments, conservationists and industry that well-managed tourism gives local communities an economic stake in preserving wildlife. It's a good idea that has supported the conservation of threatened habitats around the world. But the cruel lesson of the coronavirus is that this model isn't sustainable in a steep economic downturn.

If conservationists want to preserve species and habitats for the long term, they'll need to rethink some long-held assumptions.

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Few sectors have been hit harder by the virus than international tourism. Globally, daily flights are down by almost 80% since early April. Those planes that remain in the air are generally flying domestic routes in Asia and the US. The World Travel & Tourism Council, a trade group, estimates that small island developing states like the Seychelles and the Maldives generate as much as 30% of their gross domestic product from tourism.

Since flights have been cancelled, that industry has been erased.

The downturn has been especially painful in places where biodiversity is the primary draw for travelers. Madagascar, for example, has spent decades promoting its unique habitats and rare species. Its goal was not just to preserve biodiversity, but to create lasting economic benefits for local communities. It has succeeded spectacularly: Madagascar is home to 144 protected areas, most managed by NGOs, which typically work with local communities to ensure that the benefits of tourism and conservation are widely shared.

Thanks to the pandemic, that model is now all but defunct. Since January, the combined impact of travel restrictions and cancellations has wiped out US\$500 million (16 billion baht) in expected revenue. Ranomafana

generating no revenue at all. These losses will surely trickle through the country's economy and civil society.

And Madagascar is not alone. Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have all suspended tourism activities to protect mountain gorillas from the virus, leading to lost revenue for both local communities and conservation efforts. In Costa Rica, a global draw for birders and ecotourists, wildlife guides say that 100% of future bookings have been cancelled. In Cambodia, conservationists have seen an uptick in poaching of protected wildlife, including the giant ibis, due to the pandemic's effect on local economies.

The threat to endangered species is likely to worsen. Studies long ago established that poverty and poaching are strongly correlated, but it doesn't take a social scientist to understand that communities deprived of tourism revenue will look elsewhere for income. Without an economic rebound, the pressure to poach will only ramp up over time. In previous major epidemics, it took an average of 19 months for visitor numbers to recover, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council. The depth of the current downturn will almost certainly require longer.

For now, debt relief and other assistance to developing countries with rich biodiversity could help. Longer term, conservationists will need to ensure that the economic benefits generated by preserving wildlife and habitats are widely shared. A first step should be including locals in decision-making and the management of wild populations.

In practical terms, that generally means giving them hunting and agricultural rights in otherwise protected areas. In Namibia, that approach has resulted in a net increase in rhino, elephant and lion populations over the past few decades. It could work in other regions too.

Meanwhile, governments and NGOs should tap into the growing sustainable-investments industry for assistance in creating market incentives for conservation. Last year, the Zoological Society of London and Conservation Capital announced a five-year, \$50 million impact bond designed to protect rhino populations. If their numbers grow, investors will get back their capital, and a yield. Similar bonds could promote conservation and economic development in emerging regions worldwide.

Of course, there's no simple recipe for maintaining global biodiversity. But the failure of ecotourism in the midst of a pandemic is a reminder that it takes more than a safari to ensure there's enough habitat for humans and

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