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'We need to tackle this illegal trade to prevent further pandemics': Poachers are exploiting a lack of tourism by targeting wildlife in empty reserves

In Botswana, at least six rhinos have been poached since it closed its borders to limit the spread of coronavirus



By [Padraic Flanagan](#)

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Park rangers charged with protecting the world's endangered animals are defying the global health crisis to brave the frontline (Photo: YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP/Getty)

Park rangers charged with **protecting the world's endangered animals** are defying the global health crisis to brave the frontline in the **relentless war against poachers**.

In protected areas and sanctuaries around the world, patrols regularly encounter evidence of illegal crime gangs preying on rhinoceroses, big cats and endangered birdlife.

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Even before the pandemic, the rangers averaged a 72-hour work week. Now the demands – and the danger – are even higher, as the collapse of the tourism industry has emptied national parks of holidaymakers and removed a key deterrent for the criminal gangs.

The **Wildlife Conservation Society** warned last month that “we’re already seeing a spike in poaching” in response to the coronavirus crisis.

Endangered by Covid-19





Even before the pandemic, the rangers averaged a 72-hour work week (Photo: YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP/Getty)

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Recent incidents around the world have underlined why many park rangers have been classed as essential workers during the global lockdown.

In South Africa, rangers have had to respond to reports of a rhinoceros poaching incident nearly every day since the country announced a national lockdown on 23 March. At least nine rhinos have been poached in South Africa's North West province alone.

In neighbouring Botswana, at least six rhinos have been poached since it closed its borders to limit the spread of coronavirus. Last week, the country's government announced that five suspected poachers had been killed by the military in two separate incidents.

In Kenya, which normally attracts 1.5 million tourists a year, 70 to 80 per cent of whom visit to see its famous national parks, rangers are concerned by reports of hunting groups crossing into the Maasai Mara national reserve from Tanzania. And as the lockdown grinds on, the rangers fear that former hunters may be forced to return to poaching if they cannot feed their families.

Previous safe havens





Rangers are putting in long hours to protect wildlife such as the endangered white rhino (Photo: WIKUS DE WET/AFP/Getty)

While poaching is not unusual in Africa – 9,000 rhinos have been killed by poachers in the past decade – experts said the incidents in Botswana and South Africa were surprising because they occurred in tourism hotspots that, until now, were considered relatively safe havens for wildlife.

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Elsewhere, three giant ibis and 100 stork chicks were recently poached by gangs in Cambodia. It is thought the birds were killed for their meat, which would have been consumed locally or sold on the black market.

In Colombia, conservation group **Panthera** has reported an increase in the poaching of wild cats.

And it isn't just distant wildlife havens that are being targeted: at least 27 protected birds of prey were illegally killed in Austria recently and another three in neighbouring Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

“While public life is severely restricted and the authorities are focused on fighting the pandemic, dozens of protected animals are victims of unscrupulous criminals. This is a real scandal,” said Christina Wolf-Petre, species protection expert at the World Wide Fund for Nature in Austria.

Poaching reward

The rewards for poachers can be high, according to wildlife analysts. The trade in rhino horn smuggled from Africa to Asia is so lucrative that it is controlled by international criminal syndicates. The horn can

sell for as much as £45,000 a kilo on black markets in China and Vietnam, where it is coveted for exotic remedies and as a symbol of wealth.

While **China banned the trade in wildlife in the early phases of the pandemic**, experts believe that moved illegal activity elsewhere. Reports have emerged of Vietnamese traders in Hanoi marketing tiger bone glue and rhino horn as cures for Covid-19.

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In India's Rajasthan region, Prem Kanwar, a ranger at Bhensrodgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, which is home to several endangered species including leopards, confirmed that the pandemic had brought a new and unwanted challenge. "Poaching and hunting pressure has risen substantially," she said. "This is not limited to local people; hunters from other areas have also increased the scale of their activities."

Rangers are continuing to go out on patrols despite a lack of personal protective gear. Five recently tested positive for Covid-19 in Suriname, while Jenny Geddes

Gomes of Ecuador's Galapagos National Park died last month after contracting the virus. With her team in Rajasthan, Ms Kanwar is doing what she can to protect herself on the frontline. "Those of us who cannot afford to purchase protective gear are using cloth-based masks," she said.



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In an effort to wrest the initiative back from the poachers, a number of environmental organisations have begun raising money for cash-strapped reserves that need help paying rangers and guards. It comes as Namibia warned that more than 600 community game guards could lose their jobs because of the collapse of eco-tourism.

Paul de Ornellas, Chief Wildlife Adviser at WWF-UK, said that the current crisis means greater efforts will need to be made to support the protection of wildlife and communities. "It's right that the global focus is on human health in this crisis, but to prevent further devastating pandemics we need to tackle the root causes. This includes halting deforestation and the illegal wildlife trade," he said.

"In the short term, with ecotourism revenue gone, we are seeing reports of spikes in poaching and illegal logging, as empty parks and reserves are left exposed. We need a plan that offers a sustainable way of life for all and ends the exploitation of wildlife and the decimation of our forests."

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