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COVID-19 SEES INCREASE IN WILDLIFE POACHING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Six months into COVID-19 lockdown and with most southern African nations not having social safety nets for their citizens, there has been an uptick in wildlife poaching across the region.

In early September, Zimbabwean wildlife authorities intercepted 26 great apes that were being smuggled from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to South Africa. The four traffickers – two Congolese, a Zambian and a Malawian – had passed safely through Zambia only for their luck to run out upon entering Zimbabwe with the gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees – all highly endangered species – using fake documentation.

Transnational investigations immediately kicked off to establish more information about this syndicate, which is believed to be one of the many wildlife trafficking gangs in the southern African region. The markets for trafficked animals are lucrative, particularly in several Asian countries where the demand for traditional medicines is high.

The Congolese Environment ministry also reported earlier on rescuing 32 chimpanzees on the country's border with Zambia, in addition to seizing large quantities of pangolin scales, which are also in very high demand in the “false medicine” markets of Asia.

RISE NOT UNEXPECTED

This comes at a time when most countries in southern Africa have seen an increase in poaching, both for commercial and private purposes. As in other parts of the developing world, while the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have brought some relief to endangered wildlife, with border closures and travel restrictions slowing illegal trade in certain high-value species, the lockdowns abruptly cut off citizens that have traditional, precarious lifestyles. Many of these people ventured into wildlife sanctuaries for survival during the lockdown.

The closure of the tourism sub-sectors of the African economies also took away incomes of families that depend on millions of tourists that pour into the continent from various global source markets. On average, a tourist spends \$500 a day when they are visiting African countries, some of which filtered down into the pockets of local communities. COVID-19 brought all this to a sudden halt.

WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING NOT SUBSTANTIALLY REDUCED

According to the World Wildlife Crime Report 2020 launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Vienna in July, while global travel restrictions and other factors will have an impact on the scale, transportation methods and overall mode of operations of organised criminal groups plying this trade, it is highly unlikely that wildlife trafficking will have substantially decreased.

“While there may be some short-term disruptions, buyers and sellers will likely reorganise and increase focus on online trade channels and related mechanisms”, the report said. “In addition, increased poaching due to declines in tourism and its associated revenue and increases in subsistence poaching are realistic risks.”

The report pointed out that park and protected area closures and a decrease in patrols by rangers had already contributed to increased poaching activities in some countries. “Further, wildlife products may be touted as ‘cures’ for COVID-19, notably bear bile and various plant species used in traditional Chinese medicine.”

The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), which is based in Nairobi, Kenya, warned at the beginning of the lockdowns at the end of March that the development was likely to see an upsurge in poaching activities on the continent.

“There are also early indications that poaching will increase during this time. Communities may turn to nature for their livelihoods or as a source of food – and opportunists can take advantage of the reduced focus on security to pursue commercial poaching of elephant, rhino, and other valuable species”, AWF said.

WORRISOME INCREASE IN BOTSWANA

True to AWF’s predictions, in August Botswana started debating rearming its game rangers because the country had seen an increase in both poaching and the number of armed poachers killed in the past few months.

Botswana’s Wildlife and Tourism minister Philda Kereng revealed to Parliament that as a result of increased poaching activities in the past six months – most of them targeting rhinos – the government was reviewing the law that prevents rangers from carrying weapons. Botswana disarmed wildlife rangers in 2018, saying that under the law, only the military was allowed the use of firearms in the country. When the proposed law change was brought to Parliament, it was rejected by legislators who – while not denying that there had been an increase in poaching activities – argued that this had nothing to do with game rangers being unarmed, since armed soldiers attached to anti-poaching units were adequately filling in that role.

COMMUNITIES RELAPSING TO POACHING

Fulton Mangwanya, the director-general of the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority said the pandemic had the potential of turning communities in areas abutting wildlife sanctuaries into poachers.

“The current global COVID-19 pandemic, however, has already raised concerns that rural communities, accustomed to employment with hunting outfitters, will relapse to poaching for meat and animal parts for the black market as hunting industry layoffs build.”

According to a report by the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), a Zimbabwean resources watchdog, in the first two months of the lockdown, there was a surge in poaching mostly for domestic consumption.

“Subsistence poachers often do not use sophisticated tactics. They rely on home-made snares and their dogs. Information gathered by CNRG indicates that a total of 1,150 snares were recovered between March and April while 40 domestic dogs were shot dead. A total of 75 local poachers were arrested in April and two were killed in the process.”

HARVEST OF SNARES

Hemmersbach Rhino Force – a group that is fighting rhino extinction in southern Africa – posted pictures on social media of large quantities of wire snares that it said had been removed from forests, a sign of increased poaching by people from communities near wildlife habitats.

“With tensions rising in southern Africa due to Coronavirus, poaching activities have increased dramatically in the last few weeks: during our patrols, we’ve found more and more traps in the area we protect – a severe threat to wildlife. Our rangers immediately took action and removed 69 snares, saving many animals from injury and death.”

In Zambia, reports highlighted how the pandemic was fuelling poaching in the Kafue National Park, while those from Mozambique actually suggested that the insurgency that is taking place in the northern part of that country is partly being financed through proceeds from wildlife poaching.

ONLY SOUTH AFRICA DOING BETTER

Only in South Africa alone, where the government has been able to provide some form of social safety net for its citizens during the lockdown, has there been a marked drop in poaching.

At the beginning of August, Barbara Creecy, the minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, revealed that during the first six months of the year, 166 rhinos were poached in South Africa, compared with 316 in the first half of 2019, a drop of 53 percent.

“We have been able to arrest the escalation of rhino losses,” Creecy said. She went on to reveal that in the three months from when a lockdown was implemented in South Africa on March 27 until the end of June, 46 rhinos were killed across the country. While the figures presented a welcome drop for South Africa, they still presented unacceptably huge numbers of rhinos killed.

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