

Pressuring the Poachers

Opinions | 2015-11-17

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AT ONE of Hanoi's priciest restaurants, a group of Vietnamese businessmen meet their new American partners to celebrate their latest venture. "A toast!" someone exclaims.

They raise their glasses, filled with the finest Scotch, which has been sprinkled with a fine powder. Not gold powder, as lesser moguls might offer, nor even the purest cocaine. No, this is far rarer and costlier: it is pulverised white rhino horn.

A half-century ago, white rhinos abounded in Africa. Today, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimates that only 25 000 still roam the continent, mostly in South Africa, with a handful in Namibia and Kenya. The

population of elephants - another of Africa's most iconic animals - is also dwindling fast, having fallen from 10-20 million a half-century ago to just 470 000 today.

The proximate cause of these precipitous declines is poaching. But the real reason is those businesspeople in Asia. Thanks to demand from people like them, the going rate for elephant tusk in Asian markets is around US\$1 500 per pound. Rhino horn fetches US\$45 000 or more. With prices like these, it is no surprise that poaching has become a US\$20 billion mega-business, reaching high into the political leadership of many African countries.

The World Wildlife Fund estimates that roughly 400 tonnes of ivory - taken from about 50 000 elephants - was trafficked in 2013. There are now about 50 000 elephants left in all of Central Africa. Farther east, Tanzania's elephant population declined by two-thirds, or more than 25 000 animals, from 2009 to 2014, while Mozambique's fell by 40%. All of Mozambique's white rhinos have been wiped out.

Conservationists have been sounding the alarm for years. But the poaching industry has only grown. Far from a bow-and-arrow affair carried out by local tribes, it has become a kind of mechanised warfare, featuring gangs equipped with AK-47s electronic tracking gear, and sometimes even helicopters. This industrial-scale destruction of animal species is enabled - indeed, encouraged - by collusion with national park authorities and government officials.

The numbers clearly illustrate this transformation. In South Africa, Save the Rhino International reports that poachers killed 1 215 rhinoceroses last year - one every eight hours - compared to just 13 in all of 2007. At this rate, the organisation predicts, deaths will overtake births as early as next year, meaning that, for South African rhinos, extinction is not far off.

The militarisation of poaching makes it increasingly difficult for conservation groups to protect animals, even within wildlife sanctuaries. For example, armed guards must patrol Kenya's Ol Pejeta Conservancy 24 hours a day to protect the 133 rhinos living there (the largest herd in East Africa, and one that includes three of the world's last four northern white rhinos).

But there is reason for hope. Last month, Chinese president Xi Jinping and US president Barack Obama agreed to impose a near-total ban on the ivory trade. While the agreement will not be implemented overnight, it represents important progress, not only because China is the world's largest ivory consumer, but also because this is the first time that the US and China have made a specific joint commitment to protect wildlife.

There is also progress on the ground. In Kenya, rhino poaching fell by nearly half last year, claiming only 34 of 1 024 rhinos; in the first nine months of this year, poachers killed only six rhinos. Fewer of the country's elephants are being killed as well. In 2013, roughly 60% of the country's elephants died at the hands of poachers; this year, that proportion has been about one-third - a significant improvement, if hardly a pretty picture.

In Kenya, this progress can be explained partly by the need to revive tourism, which has been badly eroded by security threats in the last two years. But it may also be a response to growing global scrutiny. As Richard Vigne, the chief executive of Ol Pejeta, put it, the government "got embarrassed." Reinforcing this interpretation is the recent re-appointment of Richard Leakey, the no-nonsense conservationist who founded the Kenya Wildlife Service, to head the agency.

Another major driver of progress in Kenya has been a strategic shift at the local level. Many of the country's private conservancies (which rival its national parks in terms of wildlife) have abandoned their old "fortress mentality," which prohibited human incursions, in favour of a community approach. Ol Pejeta, for example, allows herders to graze their cattle within its borders during the dry season; in exchange, the herders and their communities must report poachers in

the area.

This innovative approach to policing has already produced results. Ol Pejeta has not lost an elephant in many years, and only a very few rhinos have been killed.

Action at the international, national, and community levels is of course good news. But if poaching is to be limited to the point needed to ensure the long-term survival of Africa's rhinos and elephants, action must also be taken at the individual level. People - say, those wealthy Asian businesspeople, or their Western partners - must not only refuse to purchase products derived from poaching; they must also reject them when they are offered.

Just as finger-pointing helped to spur real action by Kenya's government, individual shaming could help bury the pointless traditions that fuel poaching. Add to that efforts to give local communities a shared stake in saving endangered wildlife, and one has all of the elements of an effective strategy - call it "blame, shame, and share". With elephant and rhino populations dwindling fast, there is no time to waste in implementing it. - Project Syndicate

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