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Rhino poaching – not just an environmental crime

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FAR-REACHING IMPACTS ... Poaching not only kills rhinos – it also destroys livelihoods, risks lives and undermines national development goals. Photo: Helge Denker

FOR two decades after Namibia's independence, the country experienced minimal commercial poaching.

Over the past 10 years this has rapidly changed. Wildlife crime has skyrocketed and Namibia has rallied to counter the surge. A high of 97 poached rhinos estimated for 2015 has been reduced to 45 in 2019.

It's obvious why Namibia has become a prime target. Namibia and South Africa now protect the most significant rhino populations left in Africa. Poaching is here to stay – either until radical changes stop the demand for illegal rhino horn in Asia, or there are no rhinos left.

At face value, fighting rhino poaching is about saving a charismatic mammal from extinction. Each poached rhino is one more animal lost out of a once healthy population. But what are the wider impacts? What is a rhino worth? Can its value

even be defined?

Before evaluating the impacts of the death of a rhino, it's important to note that rhino poaching involves firearms. This creates a direct threat to rhino rangers, security forces – and the public. Most guns used in poaching are unregistered, illegal firearms (often automatic weapons). This poses a national security risk.

Wildlife crime is a facet of organised crime – one that causes significant social disruption. Unscrupulous dealers often draw rural Namibians with excellent 'bush skills' but limited livelihood options into a life of crime.

Defining the worth of a rhino is more complex than it might appear. Like all large, charismatic animals, rhinos have traditional cultural values and form part of our natural heritage, which should be preserved for future generations.

Rhinos also have an important biodiversity value. A recent South African study highlights the central role white rhinos play in grassland ecology. The role of black rhinos in countering bush encroachment has not been studied in detail, but is evident.

Rhinos have a variety of economic values – as tourist attractions, breeding animals or legal conservation-hunting trophies. They have directly associated personal livelihood values for the people deriving income and employment from their presence. In Namibia, rhino beneficiaries are often communal area residents with few livelihood options.

The tourism focus in a number of community conservancies is almost exclusively on rhino tracking, with significant income being generated for the communities.

These interlinked tourism values are difficult to accurately quantify. On the other hand, live sales of rhinos can fetch N\$500 000 or more per animal.

The rhino horn currently has no legal value. The African Rhino Specialist Group of the IUCN recommends that estimated illegal values should not be publicised, as this may fuel poaching. The worth of rhino horn in any case varies significantly from its source to end markets.

The poachers who kill a rhino usually get low payments compared to the risks they take. At end markets in China or Vietnam, the rhino horn fetches very high prices.

The willingness to pay those prices in Asia – for a product with no scientifically proven medicinal properties – is creating havoc in Africa.

A 2016 study in South Africa concluded that rhinos have become a liability rather than an asset for private game reserves in that country! The cost of security measures and the risk of loss were higher than the rewards. Rhino owners and custodians in Namibia face a similar challenge.

Small populations on some private reserves and in some community conservancies have been wiped out. The linked tourism potential has collapsed. Poaching is not just killing rhinos – it's destroying an economic sector.

Namibia has only recently rebuilt its rhino populations after historic lows prior to independence – and has invested huge resources to do so. The custodianship scheme has re-established black rhinos in former ranges on freehold land and in

community conservancies.

White rhinos (which had become locally extinct in Namibia around the 1850s) were reintroduced from South Africa. A viable population has since been re-established through strategic translocations. Rhino poaching is eroding this significant investment.

To curb the poaching onslaught of the past decade, Namibia has also been forced to invest vast resources into conservation, anti-poaching, law enforcement and the judiciary.

Poaching syndicates are to blame that these funds have not gone to health or education or other urgent national development needs. Clearly, wildlife crime is an economic and social as well as environmental crime – with far-reaching impacts.

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