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Emmanuel Koro

SADC countries have individually decided not to get involved in the non-commercial international trade in rhino horn. This questionable decision has happened despite approval for such trade by the UN international wild trade-regulating agency, CITES, and despite the help, it would give to wildlife conservation, the jobs it would create, and the socio-economic benefits it would bring to Southern Africa.

Why? The reluctance to trade rhino horn in any way possible seems strange in the face of the economic devastation, particularly to rural areas, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It has almost stopped the tourism and hunting industries.

Both are currently failing to generate the needed conservation revenue to sustain wildlife areas. In light of the Covid-19 emergency, which may last another six to nine months - SADC citizens, as well as friendly foreign observers, should be forgiven for asking why SADC countries are still refusing to do anything to take advantage of any kind of trade in rhino horn.

“Are officials looking after our wildlife or their pocketbooks in the current crisis?” asked a SADC country citizen who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Responding to questions why they would not jump at the opportunity to raise rhino conservation funds through international non-commercial rhino horn trade, most of the SADC countries suggested in their answers that non-commercial trade would not earn them much revenue. They prefer commercial trade that they say would potentially fill the market with legal and cheaper rhino products and put the poaching syndicates out of the rhino horn business once and for all.

“Refusing to trade in non-commercial rhino horn products is troubling,” said the Managing Director of the US-based Ivory Education Institute (IEI), Godfrey Harris – a strong supporter of SADC countries’ sustainable use cause.

For example, this month he strongly objected to an option offered by the CITES Secretariat to “manage” stockpiled ivory by destroying it.

“Establishing a legal non-commercial market — the mechanism for exporting and importing the product — will reduce unwarranted fears,” said Harris.

“It will also make the public aware that rhino horn harvesting is not lethal to the animals and make commercial use seem like a normal extension of national policy when it comes. Crawl before you walk; walk before you run. The bureaucrats overseeing rhino horn trade seem to want to be in a position to compete in a marathon from the get go.”

United

In contrast, SADC citizens said that they fully support the position taken by most SADC countries to not get involved in non-commercial trade but instead work towards the resumption of strictly controlled international commercial trade in rhino horn.

These citizens include Chieftainess Rebecca Baneka of Botswana’s Pandamantenga Community in Chobe District, former CEO of Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA-TFCA) that has the world’s biggest elephant population, Dr Morrison Mtsambiwa and Botswana Chobe Enclave Conservation Trust Vice-chairman Nchungu Nchungu.

Others supporting the position of non-involvement in non-commercial trading in rhino horn include Masoka CAMPFIRE Community representative of Zimbabwe, Mr Ishmael Chaukura and Botswana's Executive Director of Ngamiland NGOs, Mr Siyoka Simasiku.

"I think they [SADC governments] have a point about getting full commercial value [out of rhino horn] as it's likely to bring in more money for conservation as part of the sustainable use of natural resources etc.," said Dr Mtsambiwa.

The Executive Director of Botswana's Ngamiland NGOs, Siyoka said that "yes, I agree with them [SADC governments]" because commercial rhino horn trade would bring more revenue than non-commercial rhino horn trade.

Meanwhile, critical observers exhibit their doubt about this approach by asking the question, "Will commercial trade in rhino horn ever happen in view of the fact that there is very strong international opposition to it?"

Until when?

The UN agency CITES banned international trade in rhino horn in 1977. Since then, the influential anti-trade non-governmental animal rights organisations and some Western governments have made sure that the ban would remain in place by buying the votes of various countries (when necessary) and through other corrupting moves (providing travel, schooling, training, speaking honoraria, consulting fees, discounts, job opportunities, gifts for relatives, etc.) that have prevented trade for the past 43 years.

"The real answer of course would be to open up the legal international trade [in rhino horn] to optimize conservation funding, to compete with the illegal trade which is rampant anyway and to enable the custodians to break the monopoly held by the criminals who [currently] take 100% of the revenue while [we the] custodians pay all the costs of [animal] protection," said Ted Reilly, the CEO of the Big Game Parks, an agency that King Mswati of eSwatini has mandated to manage the Kingdom's wildlife. "If legal trade in rhino horn were permitted, Eswatini would not need aid to meet its commitments and would be better able to perform its conservation priorities."

The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Director General, Fulton Mangwanya said that Zimbabwe will benefit more from commercial than "exceptionally authorized" non-commercial trade of rhino horns and derivatives.

"Certainly non-commercial international rhino horn or ivory trade will help raise conservation funds," said Director General Mangwanya. "Zimbabwe is in need of funding to conserve its wildlife. I think we are the only country in SADC that self-funds conservation."

Elsewhere in the SADC region, Botswana's Minister of Environment, Conservation and Tourism, Philda Kereng, said "Botswana does not sell rhino horn and its derivatives for non-commercial purposes. To this extent, Botswana has exercised its rights on non-commercial by exchanging some rhinos (mainly bulls) with South Africa for genetic viability, as our rhino population is small. However, as for non-commercial trade with research institutes, hospitals and museums, this has not happened yet as none of these entities have approached us for such proposed transactions, which we could consider on a case-by-case scenario."

South Africa's Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) allows qualifying rhino farmers to trade in non-commercial activities. The challenge that these farmers are facing is that

currently the rhino horn markets in such countries as China, Vietnam and Taiwan are closed. A statement issued by DEFF, on behalf of Minister Barbara Creecy, said that under CITES regulations an importing country has to show interest in the incoming trade before an export license can be approved.

Because of innovative conservation policies that allow its citizens to own wildlife, South Africa has become the champion in rhino conservation with the world's largest population of about 21 000 rhinos. It is the only country in the SADC region that allows private custodianship of both African rhino species. Currently, there are 330 private rhino custodians who protect more than 6 300 rhinos, or about 35% of the country's rhino population.

The CITES online trade database reveals clearly that most countries are trading in captive bred species more than they trade in species from the wild.

Rather than deal with non-commercial trade in rhino horn, SADC countries would prefer the establishment of a SADC Regional Commercial Rhino Horn and Ivory Trade Body capable of conducting auctions in wildlife products.

“But why hasn't it been established?” asked Harris of the Ivory Education Institute who would like to participate in this long-awaited trading process. “Why has no body of experts been formed to suggest how best to establish this trading body? Who is holding up the process of moving forward?”

Harris who is also a former advisor to US President Lyndon Johnson said that Africans “owe it to themselves” to make ivory and rhino horn trade happen.

“Years ago, CITES found a way to bring back the Nile crocodile from near extinction and sponsored a way to save the vicuña while harvesting its wool,” he said. “Since CITES now seems incapable of thinking or acting beyond the dictates of the animal rights groups which argue that all wildlife should be left untouched by human activity, I believe that the SADC countries can move forward themselves to establish a trading platform for rhino horn and ivory.”

Frustration

Africa has been frustrated with the animal rights CITES capture since 1975, when the organization was established in Washington DC with an anti-wild trade culture.

“Why can't Southern Africa see the problem?” asks Harris. “The Animal Rights Groups have long sought to remove the middle name [Trade] from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Stopping international trade by a thousand cuts of individual prohibitions renders CITES useless.”

Without fully opened markets, SADC countries can't trade easily, but this should not stop SADC countries from setting up the SADC Ivory and Rhino Horn Trading Body. The SADC countries need to make the first move to make ivory and rhino horn trade happen worldwide. This will send a signal to China and other Asian countries that the producer countries are ready to deal in these two commodities. The big rhino horn and ivory trade markets of China, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam will surely get the message. About a year ago, China announced that it had re-opened its ivory and rhino horn markets but then said it had suspended trade until further notice. That was before the SADC countries had gone on

reservations in order to supply ivory and rhino horn. Now with Chinese rhino and ivory markets having been opened (but remains suspended), SADC is challenged to find a way to entice China to lift the suspension. Observers say that as soon as China gets involved in legal, controlled and balanced trade in ivory and rhino products, other importing countries would predictably follow.

The citizens of African countries, particularly rural communities co-existing with wildlife, have and should continue to deliver their own loud and clear message to the world: “We treasure our rhinos, elephants, and lions; we want legal trade in these species in order to promote the balanced conservation of all wild species in our areas. Trade not aid will save African wildlife.” Critical observers locally, regionally and internationally say it’s past due time that the governments of these African citizens hear and endorse this urgent message.

Harris asks hard questions: “How many years have these authorities had to get things right by establishing the long-awaited SADC Ivory and Rhino Horn Trading Body and raise the much-needed rhino and ivory conservation funds?

Will they achieve their goal when all the animals are gone through starvation?

Are the delays really about saving the animals or saving the perks that the bureaucrats receive from or through the animal rights groups?

“Why aren’t more of the press demanding progress on this urgently needed rhino horn and ivory regional trading from their politicians?”

He suggests that instead of waiting for someone to make a “slow shuffle through the swamp of corruption that envelopes most Southern African countries,” a new and urgent approach to all forms of corruption is needed at the same time the trading platform for ivory and rhino horn is being established.

“Make the penalty for any form of corruption far harsher than the attraction of whatever reward the corrupters are offering,” suggests Harris.

“Make no exceptions and give no relief no matter the extenuating circumstances. Throw the small corrupt government officials into the same jail as the big corrupt corporate officers. Prosecute everyone who offers or accepts any kind of payment. That will end corruption in its tracks, put a UN agency like CITES on the right course, and allow the people of Southern Africa to get on a wildlife-powered economic ‘train’ to a better future for them and their wildlife.”

The SADC countries started working seriously towards the establishment of a SADC Ivory and Rhino Horn Regional Trading Body at the May 2019 Kasane Elephant Management Summit; attended by SADC presidents that share borders in the elephant overpopulated KAZA-TFCA. But nothing has happened. Nothing happened again at the August 2019 CITES CoP18, in Geneva Switzerland.

Meanwhile, Botswana, Namibia, eSwatini, South Africa and Zimbabwe said that they have never been put under pressure either by animal rights or Western superpowers not to trade in their rhino horn.

“Zambia won’t comment on the above,” said the Public Relations Manager for Zambia’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Zacks Sakabilokalembwe. He was referring to all questions on non-commercial trade in rhino.

“So what is holding them [wildlife-rich SADC countries] up from doing something?” asked Harris.

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