

ENVIRONMENT

'Filthy bloody business:' Poachers kill more animals as coronavirus crushes tourism to Africa

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KEY POINTS

As the coronavirus pandemic halts tourism to Africa, poachers are encroaching on land and killing rhinos in travel hot spots now devoid of visitors and safari guides.

In Botswana, at least six rhinos have been poached since the virus shut down tourism there. In the northwest South Africa, at least nine rhinos have been killed since the virus lockdown.

"It's a bloody calamity. It's an absolute crisis," said Map Ives, founder of Rhino Conservation Botswana, a nonprofit organization.



Orphaned rhinos are seen amid the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), at a sanctuary for rhinos orphaned by poaching, in Mookgopong,



Ryan Tate is supposed to be in South Africa right now helping to fight off poachers who hack horns off rhinos and kill elephants for their ivory tusks.

But since the country announced a national lockdown in March to slow the spread of the coronavirus, Tate is stuck in the U.S. He can't join his team out in South Africa's wilderness and can't meet with private donors in the U.S. for his anti-poaching nonprofit organization, which is seeing donations dry up.

"It's a helpless feeling," said Tate, a 35-year former Marine and the founder of [VetPaw](#), a group of American military veterans who fight poachers in a remote private reserve in the far north of South Africa.

"Poaching doesn't stop just because there's a virus — if anything, it picks up," he said.

Although poaching is not uncommon in Africa, poachers during the coronavirus pandemic have encroached on land they wouldn't normally visit and killed rhinos in tourism hot spots now devoid of visitors and safari guides.

In Botswana, at least six rhinos have been poached since the virus shut down tourism. Botswana's security forces in April shot and killed five suspected poachers in two incidents. In northwest South Africa, at least nine rhinos have been killed since the virus lockdown. All the poaching took place in what were previously tourism areas that were safe for animals to roam.

"It's a bloody calamity. It's an absolute crisis," Map Ives, founder of [Rhino Conservation Botswana](#), a nonprofit organization, said of poaching across the continent.



protect these majestic, gentle giants of the African bush.

Ilan Godfrey | Getty Images

There are still rangers in the African reserves, but the loss of tourist vehicles in parks provide poachers a significant advantage.

“The poachers have been emboldened because the playing field is in their favor and they won’t have as many problems moving around,” said Ives, who has lived on the Okavango Delta in northern Botswana for four decades but is stranded in South Carolina due to travel restrictions.

Highly organized illegal poaching threatens to send black and white rhinos, elephants and other African wildlife into extinction over the next several decades. The black rhino population has plummeted 97.6% since 1960 and the lion population is down 43% in the last 21 years, according to the World Wildlife Fund. At least 35,000 African elephants are killed each year and roughly only 1,000 mountain gorillas and 2,000 Grevy’s zebras remain on the continent.

“They are professional and adept at running off with rhino horns in minutes and dodging security forces. They are masters at evading detection,” he said. “It’s a filthy bloody business.”



File photos of a cloth covering the eyes of tranquilised rhino is used by rangers to keep the animal calm during a large scale anti-poaching campaign launched in Kruger National Park in South Africa.

Gallo Images | Getty Images

Since Botswana’s booming tourism industry collapsed because of the virus lockdown, Ives has seen an anecdotal rise in rhino and bush meat poaching incidents. His company is running short of cash as donations dry up amid the global lockdown, and that may result in reduced patrols as a result.

they watch these camps closely and see tourism activity.”

Africa’s \$39.2 billion tourism industry is also vital in funding wildlife conservation efforts across the continent.

Africa received 62.5 million visitors, creating 9.1 million direct jobs in travel and tourism sectors in 2015, according to estimates from the African Development Bank.

Funding from sources like national park fees and safari rides are vital to wildlife conservation in Africa.

But now people working in tourism are being laid off because of the pandemic and national parks that provide wildlife a safe place from poachers are losing revenue. All three national parks in Rwanda have temporarily closed, along with Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kruger National Park in South Africa.

“There’s a lot of people struggling in Africa, a lot of private reserves that have helped save a few species including rhinos,” said Tate. “Now they don’t have that ecotourism they depend on, it’s gone. There’s going to be a lot of damage done from this.”

There’s also a major concern that as the coronavirus harms African economies and sharply raises unemployment levels, people will become desperate for income streams and pursue poaching to make a living.



The rangers of the dog squad search a motorcycle taxi for pangolin scales or hunting ammunition in the Dzanga-Sangha Park, in Bayanga, on March 14, 2020. The 4 species of African pangolins are present in the Central African Republic and protected by law since 2019.

Florent Vergnes | AFP | Getty Images

Disease Control and Prevention. The World Health Organization has warned that the continent of 1.3 billion people could become the next epicenter of the outbreak, potentially pushing 30 million people into poverty.

Conservationists expect that in addition to professional poachers killing more animals, countries across Africa will experience a massive surge in bush meat poaching by average people since it's cheaper to kill animals for meat than to buy it.

“Why do criminals commit acts of crime? They do it because they're desperate and it's a quick easy means for money,” Ryan said. “Poaching is no different. There's a lot of desperate people out there because of the virus and [poaching] will absolutely pick up.”

VIDEO 01:24

Locusts infesting East Africa could inflict significant economic damage

