

OP-ED

# How the Coronavirus changes poaching strategies

By Don Pinnock • 7 May 2020



 A member of the Anti Poaching Unit takes aim with his rifle at the Southern African Wildlife College, Kruger National Park. (Photo: EP...

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**Wild animals are back. Kangaroos bounding through the streets of Melbourne, elephant herds passing through Indian villages, jackals in Johannesburg, leopards in Mumbai, wild boar in Bergamo and Verreaux eagles catching thermals above a silent Cape Town. And of course, inevitable cartoons of humans in surgical masks staring forlornly at animals playing on the sidewalk. Is lockdown good news for creatures – or for poachers?**

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Smuggling of illegal wildlife in Southeast Asia hasn't stopped, but it's slowing and traders are hurting. On 1 February China closed its borders and increased security is pinching off the flow of animal products.

As a result, in Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR along the Chinese border, traders eager to offload their growing stockpiles are offering deep discounts on wildlife goods. Many shut shop when the flow of tourists dried up and batches of raw ivory are reported to be bottle-necked in Cambodia.

According to the [Wildlife Justice Commission](https://wildlifejustice.org/) (https://wildlifejustice.org/) (WJC), traffickers are becoming desperate as well-tested chains of bribery fall apart. Sudden and unpredictable aviation security measures such as last-minute flight diversions are also having an unforeseen impact on criminal dynamics. Fear of lockdown is clearly hampering movements. A trafficker told the WJC: “When you fly to another country they will quarantine you.”

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Increased border security and curfews are leading to increased arrests. There have been busts of rhino horn, ivory and pangolin scales which were shipped before pandemic lockdowns and languished in ports long enough to be detected. Live pangolins, widely suspected as being the vector of Covid-19 from bats to humans, have fallen out of favour and are hard to sell after Beijing prevented the sale of wildlife in all wet markets and banned trade in wild animals for consumption.

On 8 April a South African, Thurman Matthews, was tried and jailed in Singapore for attempting to smuggle 11 rhino horns. On 9 March, pangolin scale smugglers were arrested in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Area and on 31 March Guangzhou customs seized live reptiles and turtles destined for the illegal pet trade as well as 441kg of pangolin scales and gall bladders.

The same month, Malaysian authorities seized six tonnes of African pangolin scales and in Vietnam, the unexpected redirection of a plane from South Korea resulted in the seizure of 11 rhino horns. Four days later a Vietnamese was arrested at Ho Chi Minh City Airport with 11 horns. In the first three months of 2020, WJC agents in Vietnam were offered 22 tonnes of pangolin scales by traders unable to offload them.

## Impact on Africa

Wildlife smuggling is demand-driven, so the effect of Asian lockdowns, bans and arrests are having a knock-on effect in African source countries. It's also causing a shift from horns and tusks to meat.

In a few areas, conventional poaching has increased during the lockdown, possibly to stockpile awaiting the reopening of transport routes. In the Northern Cape, poachers have been hitting game farm livestock. Reporting in [The South African](https://amp.thesouthafrican.com/news/northern-cape-poaching-rhino-anti-poaching-unit-lockdown-2020/?__twitter_impression=true) (https://amp.thesouthafrican.com/news/northern-cape-poaching-rhino-anti-poaching-unit-lockdown-2020/?\_\_twitter\_impression=true) on 4 April, Dan Meyer said “war was raging between anti-poaching units and criminals trying to take advantage of the unprecedented lockdown's impact on conservation efforts and vulnerable farms”.

Rhino poaching was also taking place there. According to Nico Jacobs of Rhino 911, “poaching has ramped up significantly since the nationwide lockdown got underway, with poaching incidents in the Northern Cape allegedly taking place ‘every day’. Just as soon as the lockdown hit South Africa, we started having an incursion almost every single day,” he said.

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“At least nine rhinos have been poached in the North West province since the lockdown... and those are just the ones we know about.”

Rhino Conservation Botswana founder, Map Ives, said poachers there had been emboldened because the playing field is in their favour and they won't have as many problems moving around.

“They are professional and adept at running off with rhino horns in minutes and dodging security forces. They are masters at evading detection.”

Speaking about Mozambique, Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said because of Covid's vast economic impact, “people will be driven into many forms of illicit economies”.

“The virus may wind up facilitating rather than stalling illegal activity. Investigators learned that several heads of poaching gangs in Mozambique are planning to take advantage of reduced ranger patrols and the [lack of tourists](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/coronavirus-poaching-rhinos.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/coronavirus-poaching-rhinos.html) in Kruger National Park.”

Forcing people inside across the continent, however, seems to have made transport of poached wildlife products more difficult. I contacted environmental NGOs in South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, the DRC, Liberia and Central African Republic and they all said that while conventional poaching was still occurring, it had not increased and in many places had declined. Bushmeat hunting, however, was rising.

When hunting was legalised in Botswana in 2019 and its Animal Protection Units disarmed, there was a massive spike in rhino and elephant poaching. But according to Dr Oduetse Koboto of the Botswana Ministry of Environment, this has declined.

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“Reinforcement of anti-poaching surveillance and monitoring measures... has resulted in six poachers losing their lives over the last month.”

The [Kruger Park](https://rhinoreview.org/kruger-park-reports-decline-in-rhino-and-elephant-poaching-south-africa/) (https://rhinoreview.org/kruger-park-reports-decline-in-rhino-and-elephant-poaching-south-africa/) reported a few incursions across its eastern boundary with Mozambique, but no poaching during the lockdown. Anti-poaching activities continue.

“Incursions into our parks and incidents related to rhino poaching have remained stable and, in some instances, reduced during the lockdown period,” said communications director Albi Modise. “We have noticed a decrease in the number of rhinos and elephant poached in conservation areas.”

Ecologist Dr Michelle Henley, who works in the private reserves along Kruger's western boundary, said it was “wonderful to see all the creatures coming back while we're locked inside, but the dark side of this is the potential increase in poaching”. Farm Watch has reported a rise in the collection of snares in these parks.

### Hunting for the pot

The real problem now seems to be that – as lockdown disrupts earning ability and starvation threatens – poachers are responding to the needs of locals.

In many poor countries, wild meat is a safety net suspended above destitution. People with nothing can always find something to eat or sell in the forest. This is widening the types of species being targeted and massively increasing the setting of snares. It could also lead to deforestation as farmers increase slash and burn agriculture.

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According to Andrew Campbell, CEO of the Game Rangers Association (<http://www.gameranger.org/>) of Africa, bushmeat hunting is on the rise across the continent.

“We can assume that this is a result of the devastating economic impact the pandemic has had on livelihoods and that people are becoming desperate for food in these areas.”

Some African governments have responded to the threat of zoonosis – a virus jumping from wild animals to humans – by banning the consumption and sale of all bushmeat (Malawi on 20 March) and bats and pangolins (Gabon on 3 April) in acknowledgement of the risks posed by hunting and poaching.

But with many eyes and ears in lockdown, it remains difficult to get information on the ground.

“Anecdotally,” said Matthew Norval of the Wilderness Foundation, “people are confirming that bushmeat poaching in South Africa is on the rise. There are also indications that organised poaching could rise as other income opportunities for those involved become limited.”

With more than two million potentially hungry people on Kruger’s borders, it’s hard to imagine the park will escape escalating bushmeat incursions. In late 2019, park spokesman Ike Phaahla noted (<http://www.getaway.co.za/travel-news/poachers-using-snares-on-the-increase-in-kruger/>) that bushmeat poaching was increasing, possibly driven by organised groups. Park rangers collected about 200 snares in one small area. This is unlikely to decrease at a time of rising hunger.

The Humane Society International office in Liberia says the Forestry Department recently intercepted a cargo of bushmeat, including the body parts of chimpanzees, monkeys, pangolins and duikers. The meat was burnt on the spot in the presence of the local community to serve as a warning and a reminder that the trade of wildlife is an illegal and punishable activity.

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“It’s worth noting,” it reported, “that not all bushmeat trade is for subsistence purposes and much is used for TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) and trade.”

Word from Zanne Labuschagne of Africa Parks in Tanzania is that the movement of high-value illegal wildlife products like ivory seems to be becoming more difficult for trafficking networks because of road, port and airport closures. “It does seem, however, that bushmeat poaching is on the rise and will probably continue to increase as the price of imported and probably locally produced, food rises.”

At Garamba National Park in the DRC, ecologist Naftali Honig said border closures in the Congo had put a damper on the wildlife trade, but had caused food prices to rise. The outcome, he said, would be a move to cheap bushmeat protein.

Speaking from Dzanga Sangha in the Central African Republic, the project's technical adviser, Luis Arranz, said Covid-19 had not yet arrived in the CAR, but they were standing by to intercept bushmeat poachers when it did.

According to environmentalist Clive Stockil in the Save Valley Conservancy, Zimbabwe, "there's been a considerable increase in bushmeat poaching since the lockdown started on the 1st of April. We're reacting on a daily basis to multiple incursions. This is mainly for food and resale back in the communal lands".

Journalist John Grobler says that in Namibia "we seem to not have had any regular poaching during the lockdown, but poaching for meat is on the rise".

## Tourism taking a hit

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A really serious threat, says Andrew Campbell, will be the collapse of long-haul tourism. This will also lead to a possible reduction of community rangers and overseas volunteers as hunting, tourist operations and donor groups hit hard times and began cutting back.

"Conservation is going to face perilous conditions for the next few years," he said, "but we cannot afford to take a backwards step in the fight against wildlife crime."

The impact of travel restrictions was confirmed by Charles Chari of the Bushlife Support Unit at Mana Pools in Zimbabwe.

"Lack of tourism means massive funding cuts for many of our conservation and anti-poaching operations.

"Because our resorts and lodges are empty, financial support for one of Zimbabwe's most important sectors is being drastically reduced. Empty safari camps are an indication of harder times still to come with an increase in uncontrolled poaching."

The lack of tourists was also flagged as a poaching danger by Tim Davenport, who directs species conservation programmes for the Wildlife Conservation Society.

"These animals are not just protected by rangers, they're also protected by tourist presence," he told the *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/coronavirus-poaching-rhinos.html>). "If you're a poacher, you're not going to go to a place where there are lots of tourists, you're going to go to a place where there are very few of them."

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Reporting from Botswana, ecologist Dr Richard Fynn said he expected bushmeat poaching to increase, as the country's tourism industry had collapsed and staff have been sent home on half pay.

"The army, which did focus on anti-poaching, now has to also focus on the state of emergency.

"I think Covid-19 has exposed a serious flaw in conservation strategy," he said. "We have made the viability of conservation completely dependent on tourism/trophy hunting economics. Local people don't benefit enough from conservation."

Nick Jacobs of Rhino 911 agreed that reduced tourism would have devastating consequences on conservation efforts, which rely on revenue from the millions of incoming tourists to fund their initiatives. This was echoed by Vanda Felbab-Brown in Mozambique: coronavirus could “devastate much of conservation funding in Africa, further reducing rangers’ abilities to ward off poachers”.

It is clear that Covid-19 is changing the poaching landscape and increasing the dependence of poor communities on what they can hunt. Many countries have closed their national parks for now and tourism will probably flatline for the rest of the year. Hunger – and therefore bushmeat poaching – will be with communities for a long time.

In the post-pandemic world, park conservation will increasingly depend on emergency food support for mainly rural communities on their perimeters. As priorities shift and tourism dollars dry up, the viability of parks and wildlife will depend on goodwill and not fences. It would be a disaster if the only value communities found in wildlife was the supply of meat. **DM**

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