Convicted Poachers In South Africa Explain Why Heavy Policing Is Ineffective

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I write about science and international development (broadly defined).

Two white rhinoceroses, one dehorned to ward off poaching, in the Kruger private reserves of South ... [+] LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

It's clear why the illegal wildlife trade exists. Where there's consumer demand for products from endangered species, there are bound to be networks seeking to profit from that demand.

But what about the motivations of individual offenders? TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade NGO, decided to simply ask them. The researchers interviewed 73 people in South African correctional centers, who had been convicted of crimes related to rhinos, abalone, or cycads (ancient palm-like plants that have been called "the world's most endangered plants").

Over half of the interviewees were migrants, and the interviews were conducted in a range of Southern African and other languages: English, Afrikaans, Shangaan, Shona, Siswati, Xitsonga, Zulu, and Mandarin. Most interviewees were young, with less than high school

education, and reported having experienced peer pressure to engage in the illegal wildlife trade.

Financial need

Clearly, a lack of economic alternatives was a powerful motivator – reported by 2/3 of those who admitted to committing wildlife crimes. One interviewee claimed that he could earn more from the sale of two rhino horns than what most people in his community would earn in an entire year. Another explained that his legal work was seasonal:

“Orange season was over [temporary work], and I was without work for four to five months— there were no jobs available. That’s why I decided to join the other poacher when he asked me if I wanted to go with.”

Amidst the limited opportunities, and in a highly unequal society, interviewees had often noticed that the people with money were the people who had participated in the illegal wildlife trade.

A dog handler and tracking dog, whose duties include poacher detection, at the Kruger National Park ... [+] AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Weak policing

It's not just prospective wildlife criminals who are facing empty wallets. Officers tasked with enforcing conservation laws are frequently poorly paid and unmotivated – in some cases leading to corrupt cops participating in the illegal wildlife trade themselves.

While some enforcement of well-meaning laws is clearly needed, focusing on prosecuting low-level offenders is a treadmill of futility (as in the US drug war). Arresting poor teenagers who seize a few plants a year won't disrupt the transnational networks that make this trade so profitable and so pernicious.

Full information about the laws isn't even filtering down to potential poachers, so the laws are of little use as a deterrent. While most of the people interviewed in the TRAFFIC study knew that what they were doing was illegal, they didn't realize how severe the punishments were. As one interviewee said, "I was just thinking that if I were arrested, I would get maybe 6 months in jail. I was thinking that this thing [illegal hunting of rhino] is just like when you are hunting for bushmeat. But now I received ten years imprisonment."

Community attitudes

Even where it's widely acknowledged that taking certain species is illegal, social attitudes might be the equivalent of a shrug. Far from communities condemning them or urging them not to participate in poaching, many of the people interviewed by TRAFFIC had been encouraged by peers to do so. Three-quarters of them pointed out that using natural resources, for instance through fishing and hunting, was a normal and justifiable way to make a living. There wasn't a social penalty for moving into illegal use of natural resources.

And without that social penalty, there are limits to what heavy-handed law enforcement can do. Thus many conservationists have been urging for the integration of local communities in efforts to preserve threatened wildlife. For instance, in rural parts of Peru where llama-like vicuñas were under threat, residents became more supportive of vicuña protection when they benefitted from property rights on vicuña grazing land.

Ultimately, poaching is less of a threat to wildlife than habitat loss and changing land uses. These can't be reduced unless it's in the economic interests of local communities to preserve land for wildlife. And that takes much more than locking up individuals.

It could include wildlife-based tourism or the managed legal trade in wildlife (although this is controversial). And it should include simply asking local people about what solutions would work best – whether that's community involvement in law enforcement or building on cultural traditions that condemn theft.

Poverty reduction (along with curbed demand and reduced corruption) has proven essential to making the ivory trade less lethal for African elephants. And strategies that focus on socioeconomic benefits and community awareness appear to be more effective than enforcement of anti-poaching laws. In other words, fewer 10-year prison sentences,

and more community management, would ultimately help to better protect at-risk species.

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