

Elephant Poaching Is a Humanitarian Crisis, Too

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Most conservation efforts fail to address poverty as a primary cause of the poaching crisis. Poachers can make more money from one kill than most sub-Saharan Africans earn in an entire year.

Reading Time: 6 minutes



In April of 2019, a poacher in South Africa's Kruger National Park was killed by an elephant. A pride of lions subsequently ate his remains, leaving only a skull and pair of trousers. Many animal activists judge this turn of fate as an outcome long deserved by the poacher. The incident was documented by the media as just another human cost of the poaching crisis. Animal activists denounced him, while his daughters mourned the loss of their father. Was this man truly a villain or just one of many stricken by poverty and exploited by the ivory trade?

Elephants are on the brink of extinction, but conservation efforts focused on reducing elephant poaching are creating new conflicts between the human and non-human populations in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past 50 years, there has been a 660 percent increase in protected nature and wildlife reserves, yet the populations of major animal groups living within the reserves have still plummeted by 60 percent. In sub-Saharan Africa, wildlife reserves are continually expanding to safeguard the country's 350,000 remaining elephants, leaving much of the human population marginalized in the name of wildlife conservation. The population in sub-Saharan Africa is growing by 2.5 percent annually, double the growth rates of human populations in Asia and South America. The population surge correlates with sub-Saharan Africa's increasing levels of poverty, as well as increases in cross-species competition for natural resources. In South Africa, which houses some of the largest game reserves, 61 percent of homes have no electricity; entire villages lack indoor plumbing. Ivory dealers exploit vulnerable and disadvantaged communities by encouraging poverty-stricken breadwinners to resort to poaching as a means of income. In 2017, the Conservation and Society Journal established poverty as the primary motivator for poachers to kill animals. If households bordering large protected regions are deprived of basic necessities and lack the economic resources to procure them, then it is more likely that they will resort to illegally killing the wild animals who live nearby.

Conservationists and federal governments frequently disregard the economic and ethical hardships that poaching inflicts on impoverished communities. Officials in sub-Saharan Africa continuously draft conservation plans ordering law enforcement officers to shoot poachers on sight. The correlation between human and non-human animal suffering should be utilized to create mutually beneficial conservation plans, instead of aiming to preserve one species while demonizing the other. The divide between humans and non-human animals widens further each time a poacher is killed.

Most conservation efforts fail to address poverty as the primary cause of the poaching crisis. A 2019 study conducted by Nature Communications positively correlates the rate of illegally poached elephants with severe poverty rates in the surrounding areas. But not all poachers are the poorest of the poor. According to the same study, the largest percentage of sub-Saharan poachers admitted to using poaching as a means of supplementing their other incomes, instead of engaging in poaching as their sole revenue-generating activity. The study further identifies that the majority of poachers are within the moderate poverty frame (earning between \$1 and \$2 per day), while the next highest percentage of poachers resides within the frame of absolute poverty, earning less than \$1 per day.

Many rural regions in sub-Saharan Africa lack sufficient opportunities for education and economic advancement, making the prospect of poaching more tempting. A single pound of elephant ivory sells for over \$2,000. Poachers

typically earn only 5-10 percent of the total retail value, but that is still more money than most sub-Saharan Africans would otherwise earn in an entire year. Ninety-six percent of poachers who participated in the Conservation and Society study revealed that sufficient income from other sources would motivate them to cease poaching permanently. Any affirmative action employed to reduce poaching rates, such as increasing the circumference of protected land, is unlikely to succeed unless it also targets poverty rates. Anti-poaching legislation must combat both poaching and poverty in tandem to successfully drive down the prevailing poaching rates.

Elephant conservation efforts to date have been primarily focused on two central goals: decreasing the demand for and controlling the supply of ivory. In 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species implemented an international ban on ivory, making the trade of elephant products illegal; only domestic dealers were permitted to continue selling antique or stockpiled ivory. China, where demand for ivory is the greatest, in 2017 totally banned the sale and importation of ivory—stockpiled or otherwise—following a massive celebrity-endorsed awareness campaign. Animal advocates and conservationists celebrated China's ban as a major step toward eliminating ivory's demand.

Other Asian countries are slowly following suit, but the closing of many legal markets has led to a huge upsurge in the price of ivory on the black market; prospective buyers who still view ivory as a status symbol have not diminished in number. Regulatory bodies in and around Africa's wildlife reserves attempt to control the supply of ivory by increasing law enforcement and expanding patrols with better-resourced rangers, but law enforcement agencies still have difficulty with controlling the activities of poachers. Increasing patrols, arrests, and penalties may curb the activities of poachers who only hunt to supplement their incomes, but such tactics are unlikely to deter those who poach out of perceived necessity. The most impoverished poachers are likely to continue poaching regardless of the potential consequences, simply because they lack other or better opportunities to support themselves. No amount of law enforcement can fully halt illegal activity by desperate people, especially when that illegal activity puts much-needed food on the table.

Wildlife conservation is a "luxury" not easily afforded by the poor communities surrounding wildlife reserves. When farmers and elephants compete for the same territory, conflict inevitably arises. Angry farmers kill elephants who trample their crops and sometimes hurt or even kill community members. Villagers who cannot afford to own livestock kill elephants and other wildlife for bushmeat, which they either eat or sell; bushmeat is considered a delicacy in many African and international markets. For many poachers, procuring bushmeat is the primary incentive, and ivory is the lucrative byproduct.

Conservationists face constant criticism by many communities in sub-Saharan Africa, who view wildlife as either a dangerous burden or valuable commodity.

Both views ultimately lead to the death or exploitation of already-fragile populations. Vince Barkas, founder of the ProTrack Anti-Poaching Unit that patrols the borders of South Africa's Kruger National Park, acknowledged the cultural divide between local residents and wildlife conservationists, "If you go to Massingir, Mozambique, which is the hub of poaching, they tell you straight, 'You whites fuck off. You love animals more than people.'" Individual elephant populations, such as those in Kruger National Park, are stable and even rising following the drop in ivory demand, but elephant populations as a whole are severely endangered. The rate of poaching in sub-Saharan Africa has declined from ten percent to under four percent in the last nine years, but even at the current poaching rate, elephants face total extinction in a matter of decades. Barkas and fellow conservationists have made it their mission to educate the villagers surrounding South African nature reserves, seeking to convince locals that wildlife is infinitely more valuable alive than dead since elephants and other species preserve and maintain stable ecosystems. Robust wildlife populations also attract many international tourists, thereby offering continuous income streams to the residents of sub-Saharan Africa. Elephant populations, although stabilized, cannot fully recover until rural Africans no longer view them as enemies or economic commodities.

The welfare of humans and that of wildlife are not separate. In effort to combat the illegal ivory trade, African governments are alienating the very people who could help their conservation efforts the most. Conservation plans in developing countries have long been termed "anti-people," as they often ignore or sacrifice the needs of local communities in the name of wildlife preservation. "Anti-people" conservation does not appear to have any beneficial effect on wildlife and may, in fact, be self-defeating. The same African governments, in order to remove local communities from wildlife reserves, prosecute citizens, and burn down their homes. In the name of conservation, governments forcibly remove native tribes from their ancestral lands. But unlike poachers, native tribes generally do not hunt endangered animals, and their traditional agricultural practices are known to sustainably preserve ecological balance. Protecting wildlife reserves becomes a human rights issue when governments forcibly evict local people from their land and otherwise punish them. To effectively curb the poaching of elephant populations, conservation initiatives must deliver tangible and significant benefits to both human and non-human animals. This requires recognition of the interconnectedness of biodiversity, human wellbeing, and sustainable development. Truly sustainable biodiversity initiatives must include humans, not further widen the existing divide.

The continuous benefits of cross-species biodiversity projects are proven. In Namibia, researchers attributed the recovery of native wildlife populations to the inclusion of local farmers in the initiative's conservation plans. The plans gave private farmers and local communities the right to benefit from the wildlife on their land through hunting and agriculture. These incentives motivated the

community to safeguard the surrounding animals and helped Namibia's wildlife numbers to increase six-fold.

A practical, effective agenda for restoring degraded wildlife populations often begins simply with providing more and better information. Nonprofit organizations like the Big Life Foundation aim to decrease poaching by providing employment opportunities to local communities and educating citizens and children on the irreversible effects of poaching. Vince Barkas also founded the nonprofit organization Green Kids, which works with the communities surrounding wildlife reserves to instill an appreciation in children for the wild animals currently being poached. "Working with communities and the actual poachers," says Barkas, "[we] have saved more wildlife than any guard with a gun in the bush." Barkas believes that the solution to stopping the ongoing loss of South Africa's endangered animals lies in education, which reduces poverty and also slows the growth of the human population.

The poaching crisis will persist in the absence of effective solutions that focus squarely on the correlation between poaching rates and human poverty; one cannot be reduced without addressing the other. Humans are as much a part of biodiversity as any non-human animal; wildlife conservation will not be achieved until and unless the proposed solutions provide mutual benefit to all. With the right incentives, humans and non-human animals have proven themselves capable of peacefully coexisting together. Humans have short-term needs that must be met. Animal suffering will persist so long as human suffering continues to prosper.

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Despina Parthemos

Despina is a freelance journalist and environmental blogger focused on the interconnectedness of sustainability and animal rights.

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