

The Influence of Hidden Traps (Hammond *et al.* 1988) on the Decisions made by Animal Rights Organisations and Sustainable Use Advocates

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*In making decisions, your own mind may be your worst enemy*¹

Introduction

Hammond (*et al.* 1998: *The Hidden Traps in Decision Making*) explain a number of well-documented psychological traps that can (and do) influence the quality of decisions made by business executives. Some of these traps are sensory misperceptions, some are biases and others may be irrational anomalies in our thinking. These traps are dangerous because of their invisibility. Because they are ‘hard-wired’ into our thinking process, we fail to recognise them and fall right into them.

In this paper I explore the relevance of these traps to decisions made in wildlife conservation and management by Animal Rightists (AR) and advocates of Sustainable Use (SU). These two schools of thought are diametrically opposed. Hammond (*et al.* 1998) make it clear that they are considering hidden traps in respect of business decisions ... so that applying them to wildlife matters might be justifiably questioned.

The major animal rights organisations² in the western and northern hemisphere are, in fact, involved in “big business”. The funds that they raise from the public are used, firstly, for expensive media campaigns deliberately aimed at perpetuating a sense of crisis and, secondly, to support the livelihoods of their own employees. Social media have permitted their reach to escalate to alarming levels that include uncontrolled cyber bullying. Very little of these funds percolate down to those involved in protecting wildlife on the ground.

The Sustainable Use fraternity has the objective of making wildlife management a high-valued form of land use in the countries where it is practiced. Brown (2017) amplifies this statement –

“The greater the benefits that land owners and custodians derive from wildlife, the more secure it is as a land-use form and the more land there is under conservation. Therefore, all the various uses of wildlife, including and especially trophy hunting, must be available to wildlife businesses. These uses include the full range of tourism options, live sale of surplus wildlife, and the various forms of consumptive use – trophy and venison hunting and wildlife harvesting for meat sale, value addition and own use. It is this combination of uses that makes wildlife outcompete conventional farming. And it is the “service” component of tourism and hunting that elevates wildlife values above that of primary production and the simple financial value of protein.”

This approach flies in the face of the Animal Rights dogma which opposes trophy hunting and consumptive use of wildlife. Both camps are involved in “business” but the AR activities have a negative impact on those of the SU. Conversely if the SU were successful at eliminating illegal use of wildlife through their strategy, the AR would be out of business.

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1. John S Hammond, Ralph L Keeney & Howard Raiffa (1998), Harvard Business Review Sept-Oct 1998, Reprint No.98505.
 2. These organisations are divisible into two classes – the Pharisees (Priests) who drive them and the lumpenproletariat (Peons) who follow them slavishly. It is the Pharisees who are running the big businesses.

Beinhocker (2006) introduces complex system economics as superceding traditional economics. He sees economics as having parallels to Darwinian evolution where selection takes place based on ‘fitness functions’ that differentiate between competing business strategies and maximise the returns from investments. He describes “Big Man” economies where chiefs, kings or dictators control a nation’s productivity. In a Big Man system, the fitness function maximised is the wealth and power of the Big Man (and his cronies), rather than the overall economic wealth of the society.

“The only alternative selection system to Big Men that humans have thus far devised is markets ... The fitness function that markets attempt to satisfy is the overall welfare of the people participating in them. The complexity view of markets leads to an appreciation of the strength of markets in enabling innovation and growth. In a Big Man economy, a business lives or dies by political favour. In a market-based economy, a business lives or dies by whether its customers like and are willing to pay for its products and services” (p288).

At this stage, I am going to liken the Animal Rights NGOs to Big Men. The allegory is not as far-fetched as it might seem. The Animal Rightists advocate strong government intervention in the (wildlife) economy – to the extent of closing markets and banning trade. Despite the fact that they originate mainly from Western democracies, their behaviour is essentially that of socialism. They have a great deal in common with Big Men governments in Africa who often parade under a socialist banner. They are intolerant of views that do not coincide with their own, they meddle politically in economic affairs and follow an agenda that maximises their wealth regardless of the greater good for society – particularly societies in the developing world. Animal rightists will protest that they do what they do for the noble cause of conservation: the counter-argument is that conservation and the economy go hand-in-hand.

The influence of the CITES Treaty ³

The Animal Rightists lobby for CITES trade bans and this affects the viability of business and human livelihoods for those practising sustainable use. The AR attempt to remove the very tools available to conservation to keep wildlife on the land – the tools of economics, markets and sustainable use that create value for wildlife within a well-regulated, sustainably-managed landscape (Brown 2017). Stiles (p2 in Martin & Murphree 2015) summarises the mindset of the AR groups –

“These groups are encouraging worldwide trade bans on elephant ivory and destruction of national ivory stockpiles as a strategy to save elephants from extinction. They oppose all commercial use of wildlife, regardless of whether such uses are sustainable, positive for habitat and species conservation or contributing to human livelihoods. They maintain that no product derived from wildlife should be utilised and wild animals should be allowed to roam in idyllic peace as nature intended without the rapacious hand of man intervening. Trading ivory, under any circumstances for any reason, is evil in this new universe. Regrettably, this “Stop Ivory” approach reflects an overly simplistic, Western viewpoint founded in animal rights ideology. It inflicts questionable policies on African countries, with disastrous consequences for both Africa’s people and their wildlife.”

The preceding paragraphs allow us to establish a *persona* for the two schools of thought and, hence, to examine the vulnerability of both the AR and SU groups to hidden traps.

3. Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

The Hidden Traps⁴

1. The Anchoring Trap

When considering a decision, the mind gives disproportionate weight to the first information it receives. Initial impressions anchor subsequent thoughts and judgements. Anchors can take many guises. They might come from a press release or from a stereotype such as skin colour or nationality.

AR ... Guilty. Animal rightists are ‘anchored’ by their ideology (no killing) and any consumptive use of wildlife is labelled as cruelty to animals. Their media campaigns reflect this. This draws in susceptible minds who then simplify the ideology into dogma and mantras which, easily propagated, draw in less discerning minds. Any involvement of China in the trade in wildlife products or live animals evokes a knee-jerk reaction and casts China in the rôle of the bogeyman.

SU ... Not guilty. Practitioners of sustainable use are generally experimenters pursuing adaptive management (Martin 2014) as their *modus operandi*. They are not anchored to any predetermined conclusions.

2. The Status-Quo Trap

A strong bias towards alternatives which perpetuate the status quo.

AR ... Guilty. The animal rightist believes that all commerce in wildlife and its products should be banned.⁵ Even if trade in certain products is not banned at the moment, the aim of the animal rightist is to have it banned sooner rather than later.

SU ... Not guilty. Sustainable use practitioners are presently on the receiving end of the plethora of wildlife trade bans under CITES. The last thing they want is to perpetuate the *status quo*.

Ruitenbeek & Cartier (2001 p5) observe – “If research in complex systems has taught us anything, it is that conservatism that supports the *status quo* is likely to prevail until such time as some calamitous event occurs that shocks the system into assuming some other strategy”.

3. The Sunk-Cost Trap

A deep-seated bias to make choices in a way that justifies past choices, even when they are no longer valid.

AR ... Guilty. Trade bans on commodities such as ivory and rhino have been in place for many years and it is evident that they are not working (Conrad 2012, Stiles 2014). This does not daunt the committed animal rightist who wants the effort intensified regardless of the cost. The process is more insidious: animal rights organisations benefit from public funds raised by “crying wolf” and have no wish to see the crises disappear.

SU ... Not guilty. Believers in sustainable use are presently being prevented from applying their solutions (i.e. legal trade) that they see as the only way to resolve the crises.

4. Following each numbered trap in the text is a section in italics that gives Hammond *et al.* (1988)’s description of the “Trap”.

5. This applies particularly to trade bans against trade in ivory and rhino horn promulgated by CITES – which have arisen from the campaigning of animal rightists.

Ruitenbeek & Cartier (2001 p6), in considering the general lament that ‘the world appears to be going to hell in a handbasket’, remark that “... the difference lies in our own expectations ... we have become a culture of Control Freaks. The main problem may simply be that society has convinced itself that we can and should control what is going on. Consider whether an extreme laissez-faire ‘hands-off’ approach [by the State] may be as good a management strategy as any.” [I am not implying that there should be no management ... rather that management systems should not be imposed by the State.]

4. The Confirming Evidence Trap

Seeking information that supports our existing point of view and avoiding information which contradicts it.

AR ... Guilty. In the last few years, the AR community has taken to publishing “pseudo-scientific” papers to justify their claims for banning legal trade. Very few of these papers would survive rigorous peer-review or, where they have been reviewed, the reviewers may have been selected by the authors, e.g. –

- Hsiang & Sekar (2016). *Does Legalization Reduce Black Market Activity? Evidence from a Global Ivory Experiment and Elephant Poaching Data*. This paper is published by National Bureau of Economic Research in the USA and does not appear to have undergone external review.
- Harvey (2016). *Risks and Fallacies Associated with Promoting a Legalised Trade in Ivory*. This paper is published by the South African journal ‘Politikon’ and also appears to be an in-house work. It has been criticised by ‘t Sas-Rolfes (2016) and Murphree (*et al.* 2016).
- Lusseau & Lee (2016). *Can We Sustainably Harvest Ivory?* Published in the Elsevier journal “Current Biology” and presumably peer-reviewed. Martin (2017) challenges their findings.
- *National Geographic* adopts the stance of an impartial magazine. However, it strongly favours the AR position and may even fabricate evidence to support that position.⁶

SU ... Not guilty. The sustainable use fraternity can draw on specific examples of species use that are effective in enhancing survival and provide significant contributions to human livelihoods (*Crocodiles*: Hutton & Webb 2002; *Vicuñas*: Lichtenstein G (2011); *Ivory*: Martin & Murphree 2015, Martin 2017; *Rhino Horn*: Madders *et al.* 2014; *Land Use*: Brown 2017, Child 1989, Child 1995, Martin 2009).

6. Some years ago I was asked by National Geographic to review part of an article they intended to publish that deplored the decline in elephant populations. They had juxtaposed two photographs to make this point. The left-hand photograph, taken from the air, showed hundreds of elephants in an area less than one square kilometre – this was what Africa once looked like. The right-hand photograph was an open landscape with a small herd of elephants visible in the distance – this was the sorry state to which elephants had been reduced. The left-hand photograph taken by the famous Peter Beard (*End of the Game*) showed the Tsavo elephant population *in extremis* – it was about to crash after the drought in 1970-71. Beard’s original caption for the photograph was “756 elephants in misery – Tsavo during the die-off” ... needless to say this was not the caption used by National Geographic. The right-hand photograph showed elephants in balance with their environment. I pointed out to National Geographic the dishonesty in their depiction of the crisis. But they went ahead and published anyway.

Murphree (*pers.comm.* 2016) remarks on the faulty assumptions that underpin much of the AR pseudo-science and media campaigning. (a) They fail to take into account the declining ratio of resource availability to human population size in Africa; (b) their science is reductionist and does not take into account the surprises that arise from complex systems with social, economic, environmental and political variables; (c) they assume a stability in biological systems and human institutional behaviour that does not exist and (d) they confuse economic and emotive incentives. Effectively the Animal Rightists are living in a “post-truth world”⁷

5. The Framing Trap

People are risk-averse when a problem is posed in terms of gains but risk-seeking when the problem is framed in terms of avoiding losses. They tend to accept the frame as it is presented to them instead of rethinking the problem in their own way.

AR ... Guilty. The Precautionary Principle (Dickson 1999) is an example of the framing trap. The animal rightists argue that it is too risky to allow the gains that might arise from legal trade (Bennett 2014) and paint the spectre of the losses that will arise from species use.

SU ... Not guilty. Sustainable users argue that if a proposition such as the Precautionary Principle cannot be tested then the hypothesis cannot be falsified. This is not good science.

The Economist (2008), in discussing the hotly opposed one-off sale of ivory by CITES, makes the following observation: “For doctrinaire types, who oppose all trade in ivory, the forthcoming sale is not just a challenge to endangered animals; it could be a threat to the credibility of their best-loved arguments.”

Estimating and Forecasting Traps

6. The Overconfidence Trap

Being overconfident about our accuracy leads to errors in judgement and bad decisions.

AR ... Guilty. Animal rightists are generally guilty of exaggeration when outlining the extent of a crisis.⁸

SU ... may be guilty of exaggerating the likely benefits from any given sustainable use project. However, provided the project is underpinned by an adaptive management approach, very little damage is likely to result from the exaggeration.

7. The Prudence Trap

When faced with high-stakes decisions, we adjust our estimates or forecasts downwards just to be on the ‘safe side’. We adopt a ‘worst case analysis’ approach even though the odds of the worst case coming to pass are infinitesimal. This adds enormous costs with no practical benefit – proving that too much prudence can be as dangerous as too little.

7. Oxford Dictionaries: “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” e.g. – ‘in this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire’

8. In 2012, 92 elephants were killed by cyanide poisoning in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. The number was reported as 300 by Animal Rightists (Martin 2012).

AR ... Guilty. This is very similar to the ‘Framing Trap’ as far as Animal Rightists are concerned. They will adopt a ‘worst case analysis’ approach even when the odds of the worst case coming to pass are small.

SU ... may be guilty of designing projects that anticipate a worst case outcome and are unnecessarily expensive. This applies particularly to pro-sustainable use government agencies that require huge amounts of reductionist scientific research in order to enable any project to go ahead. They are not adaptive management practitioners and do not understand that devolution of authority is the cardinal input for successful community projects.⁹

8. The Recallability Trap

Predictions about future events are based on our memory of past events and we are overly influenced by those events which leave a strong impression on our memory.

AR ... Guilty. Animal Rights organisations use examples of particular catastrophes that occurred in the course of consumptive use without ascertaining that the circumstances pertaining to their chosen example are generally applicable.¹⁰

SU ... Not guilty. Sustainable use practitioners will usually analyse past events to ensure that whatever caused an unwanted outcome in the past will have been anticipated and rectified in any new project.

Discussion

Hammond *et al.* (1998) remark that at every stage of the decision-making process, misperceptions, biases and other tricks of the mind can influence the choices we make. The more complex and important a decision, the more it will be prone to distortion because it tends to involve the most assumptions, the most estimates and the most inputs from the most people. These traps can all work in isolation but, even more dangerously, they can work in concert amplifying one another.

The main thesis of Beinhocker (2006) is that where businesses, societies and nations possess cultural norms related to cooperative behaviour and strong reciprocity it generally leads to the generation of wealth. The players believe that life is a non-zero-sum game and that there are payoffs for cooperation.

9. Martin & Stiles (2017) analysed the Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) in the wildlife commodity trade in South Africa: abalone meat was the highest-valued commodity with a total trade annual value of \$217 million and an IFF of \$94 million (43%). South Africa has a forward-looking policy that devolves rights to local coastal communities but appears to be unable to implement it. A system of ‘Total Allowable Catch’ where the quota is set by government scientists has not worked. There is very little risk in allowing local communities to set their own harvest quotas and develop monitoring systems that will enable them to modify harvests based on the hard data derived from the catch. Should a local community be unable to enforce their exclusion rights or resist pressure from illegal underworld gangs, they must be able to call on government agencies for assistance.

10. For example, the Animal Rightists point to the large declines in the elephant populations of East, West and Central Africa and argue that ivory trade from Southern Africa must be banned because it is causing elephant losses from the rest of Africa. The fact that elephant populations are increasing in Southern Africa is deliberately ignored.

Societies that believe in a fixed pie of wealth have difficulty in engendering cooperation and tend to be low in mutual trust. They are biased to seeing the world as a zero-sum game, and their objective is to get their slice of the pie. They view someone else's gain as their loss and their incentive to cooperate is low. Rather than searching for new, more complex and wealth-creating cooperative activities, people invest their energies in finding ways to capture a greater share of existing wealth. Thievery, dishonesty and corruption is higher in such a zero-sum society.

At the start of this essay, I argued that conservation cannot be separated from the economy. They are two sides of the same coin. Conservation is about land use and will not be successful if it ignores land use values. But am I justified in drawing a parallel between Big Man economies and Animal Rights business activities? Big Man and socialist economies would appear to be at the opposite ends of poles. The former concentrates wealth in a small elite, which it distributes as patronage to maintain power, the latter gathers wealth from all to redistribute to all according to need (in theory).

Martin (1994) argues that governments in the Western hemisphere have created socialist-Marxist regimes for administering wildlife and monolithic state agencies have become the owners and gatekeepers of the resource. In all other respects, Western societies enshrine the extreme individualistic, democratic, free-market society – but not in wildlife matters. Meyer & Helfman (1993) ask the question "whether sustainable resource use can be achieved in a Western free-market economic setting." Forgive my mirth. Wildlife in the USA is far from existing in a free-market economy: rather its administration is set in a communist centralist modality – a system of governance which (one notes with wry amusement) went extinct through its inflexibility.

The system automatically gives rise to the present plethora of non-government organisations whose *raison d'être* is to lobby the state. There is no other outlet for genuinely concerned citizens and, correctly, they deduce that wildlife exploitation under a state-controlled system is likely to be unsustainable. Where the exploiters have no stake in the resource, there are no incentives for them to re-invest in conservation of the resources that make them rich. The AR organisations are tapping into a market that comprises a vast swathe of urban people that no longer have direct contact with the land or rural life and who hold strong views on animal rights. The stance of the AR organisations serves their business model very well and they are not about to change. They are concerned with their own survival and with animal rights – not with conservation. Moreover, because the dominant political lobby in these countries is now the urban majority, the situation is likely to remain locked in its present state: rural landholder minorities are unable to command sufficient political power to alter the situation.

The Animal Rightists are, by definition, socialist. Their policies advocate strong government intervention in the wildlife economy – to the extent of closing markets, banning trade and, in the extreme, endorsing human rights atrocities.¹¹

11. Scores of rainforest people including the Baka and Bayaka pygmies in Cameroon, the Central African Republic and the Congo have suffered in the war against poaching. They are accused of "poaching" when they hunt to feed their families, or even when they merely set foot inside the conservation zones created on their ancestral lands. They face harassment, beatings, torture and even death at the hands of rangers funded and equipped by WWF and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). The two organisations have been aware of this abuse for well over a decade now and still have failed to stamp it out (Hurran 2017).

Operation Tokomeza in Tanzania 2014-2015 was responsible for numerous human rights abuses including murder, rape and torture (Makoye 2017 and Masoli 2015).

The real economy is simply too complex for the central planning required by a pure socialist economy to work effectively. Hayek (1988) referred to the “fatal conceit of socialism”. He argued that human deductive rationality is not able to understand, predict and plan in a system as non-linear and dynamic as complexity economics.

Market mechanisms provide the feedback on what are good business plans versus bad business plans. The natural tendencies of Big Man power hierarchies are to do things that serve the interests of the Big Men. The fitness function in planned economies reflects the interests of the power hierarchies and not those of society more broadly. The vision of a neatly planned utopia does not square well with the messy reality of a complex adaptive system. (Beinhocker 2006, 422-423).

Beinhocker (2006 p288) observes that “The main impact of political interference in the process of selection is to slow evolution’s clock-speed. In extreme cases, chiefs, kings, dictators and other Big Men can actually stop evolution in its tracks and, as long as people are merely close to starving as opposed to actually starving, such evolutionary dead ends can last for very long periods.” ... and result in poverty traps.

In the manner in which I have constructed this debate, the pernicious influence of AR Big Men is to prevent society at large from developing an economy based on sustainable use of natural resources and to force people to adopt land use systems which are of lower economic value. Needless to say, conservation is the loser in such a process.

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