

In South Sudan, hunger complicates plans to end wildlife poaching

Conservationists urge the protection of wildlife, but in the absence of food, many communities say they are forced to hunt to survive.



Tiang, a type of the antelope, hide under a tree in a national park in South Sudan [Brian Inganga/AP]

Mading, South Sudan – On a hot morning in July, Michael Alier grabbed his assault rifle and headed out on a motorcycle taxi, known locally as a boda boda, to the bush in search of food.

It was the wet season in Mading, some 200km from Juba, the capital of South Sudan.

At that time of year, the grassy wetland is lush and teeming with antelope who have made their way down from the Boma plateau in search of fresh water and greens to graze on.

Conservationists and the government say this is part of the world's largest land mammal migration, and highlight the collective responsibility to ensure its future preservation. As part of that, they want to end rampant poaching of the antelope.

But in South Sudan, the world's youngest country racked by decades of conflict, extreme poverty and [catastrophic levels of hunger](#), the mammal makes for a hearty meal for many in need of food.

Alier, 28, says he has no choice but to hunt the animals. The beef and goat meat for sale at nearby shops is far too expensive on his 100,000 Sudan pound (\$166) monthly salary, which he earns working as a security guard on local farms.

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“Life forces us to go and hunt,” he said.

The bushmeat he hauls back has to feed nine people – five siblings, two parents, and two cousins. If he doesn’t bring back a fresh kill, they usually have to skip meals. So he makes the trip at least three times a week.

But it is a treacherous outing, as the antelope also attracts the attention of heavily armed gangs who poach them for profit. The hunting trips are a deadly game for people like Alier, but he feels he has no other choice.

“It’s better to be killed by the armed criminals than to die of hunger at home,” he said.

Alier’s rugged self-reliance is admirable, but it presents a major quandary for South Sudan’s cash-strapped government, which is under pressure from environmentalists to stamp out poaching even as it can barely feed its population of 11 million.

In June, President Salva Kiir urged security forces and the Ministry of Wildlife and its partners to “prioritise the training and equipping of wildlife rangers to combat poaching and trafficking” of wildlife, saying those caught should be brought to court and punished.

The president was speaking in Juba at an event announcing the country’s first-ever comprehensive aerial survey on the land mammal migration, which [counted six million antelope](#) on the move.



Hunters kill animals for food in Jonglei State's Akobo county in 2022 [Courtesy of Lino Majier, Conservation Society of South Sudan]

Great Nile Migration

The landlocked east African country situated in the Nile basin is home to one of the animal kingdom's most wondrous spectacles: a twice-yearly procession of antelopes known as the Great Nile Migration.

During the migration, the antelopes follow the water. When the swampy, low-lying floodplains of the Sudd start to dry out in December, the antelopes begin hurtling up to the Boma plateau in search of fresh water and

vegetation. In May, when the White Nile overflows and revitalises the Sudd's vegetation, they glide back down to their preferred habitat.

Conservationists say the mass migration is crucial to the region's ecosystem. As they graze across a 200-300km migratory corridor, white-eared kob and tiang antelopes chew up a diverse range of plant species, excreting the different seeds far and wide. This enriches the soil and promotes biodiversity.

While environmentalists want to crack down on poaching, it's a formidable challenge.

"The problem is two-way," explained Abraham Garang Bol, the executive director of the independent Environment Protection Agency, and a researcher and master's student in natural resource management at the University of Juba.

"One is the economic aspect: we are in an economic crisis where poverty levels affect everybody. Wildlife becomes an alternative source of food to local people, which is very hard for the government to stop.

"But at the same time the government needs to create an alternative," he added, saying the government "should bring services also to the community so that the community will be paid back" for helping protect wildlife.

"As the government and partners are trying to preserve these wildlife, locals or maybe communities living in the same area where those animals [are] should be given some money, some support, so that they will know they have other alternative benefits [besides having] wildlife as food," he said.

Meanwhile, John Lwong, an activist in Malakal working with the nonprofit Royal Aid for Development (ROAD), said asking South Sudanese to give up hunting without providing alternatives is completely unreasonable – especially when people go months without receiving salaries.

"How many months now have [civil servants not received their salaries](#) – almost a year or so? So how do you expect people to live?" said Lwong.

‘Animals protected, people are not’

More than 82 percent of South Sudanese live on less than \$1.90 per day, according to World Bank data. And the UN says more than 1.6 million children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition, partly the result of flooding.

War in neighbouring Sudan has meanwhile brought an influx of refugees, putting even [more pressure](#) on scarce food resources.



Many displaced families in South Sudan have to survive on little more than boiled maize grains, without a balanced diet [Mamer Abraham/Al Jazeera]

The plight of Alier's family is illustrative. In January 2022, they were [driven out of their home](#) in Baidit division by an armed gang that ransacked their village.

The gang killed 33 villagers, stole their livestock and crops, and torched their homes.

Alier and his nine relatives were displaced 30km south, to Mading, where they share a two-bedroom thatched roof home built of plastic sheets. They have no electricity and share two narrow boreholes for water with 1,140 other displaced families.

Most villagers don't have work and depend on the largesse of family members to survive.

Subject to years of violence and displacement, Alier and others are critical of government warnings not to poach animal meat, especially when it's keeping them alive: "Why is it that animals are protected and people's lives are not?" asked Alier.

"If you give us what to eat, we shall not complain," he said. "But for now, we say give us a chance. We are feeding our families with it."

Although displaced people are assisted with food rations on a monthly basis, they say this is not enough. When Alier doesn't go hunting, his family can go for two to three days without food unless they get support from relatives, he said.

Commercial poaching, community conservation

South Sudan's embattled government hopes its rich wildlife population could one day be a source of badly needed tourism revenue.

"If we manage to control the level of poaching, then tourists will come to the country and it is the way we can actually get the income," David Deng Adol, the government's director for wildlife in Jonglei State, told Al Jazeera.

"The government is not getting the income at the moment, but it is trying to invite investors [in] natural resources to establish a way of getting the revenue."

The government's anti-poaching efforts are tied to building up its six national parks and 12 game reserves that cover about 13 percent of the country.

South Sudan's populations of Grevy's zebra, Nubian giraffe and rhinoceros are just a few of the many [on the brink of extinction](#).



A woman carries antelope skin outside her house in Otallo village, South Sudan [Brian Inganga/AP]

For its unarmed [wildlife forces](#), cracking down on armed poachers is no easy task.

In the past, South Sudan's poachers hunted with dogs and spears. That's no longer the case. Owing to years of armed conflict, today's poachers zip around on motorbikes armed with machineguns, letting them hit far-away targets and pursue animals 30-40km into the bush, said Adol.

Commercial poaching of wildlife in South Sudan is "at a scale that we have never witnessed before", Peter Fearnhead, the CEO of conservation nonprofit African Parks, noted in June when the land mammal survey was released.

"This wildlife and larger ecosystem is the basis for survival for multiple ethnic groupings which are often in conflict with each other over resources. Successful management of this landscape will only be possible through building trust with and amongst these ethnic groupings," he added in a statement.

South Sudan's government has been working with conservation NGO Fauna & Flora International (FFI) to get local communities more invested in the wildlife around them, hoping to encourage people to preserve animals for future generations, said Adol from the wildlife ministry.

"We have what is called community conservation. The FFI is doing community conservation awareness. So the communities are the ambassadors of wildlife," he added.

However, Bol from the Environment Protection Agency points out that even beyond the need for food, hunting and killing animals is something deeply rooted in culture, that will not lose its importance overnight.

"Some of them now if you stop them [from hunting], they get surprised. They will say 'No, our grandfathers used to kill this animal,'" said Bol, referring to the practice of killing beasts for food, but also as a show of strength and bravery among village men.

"It is a source of pride," he added. "Like those who kill lions, they are named [for that], and they can feel proud that they are brave people."

To balance the priorities of conservation and culture going forward, Bol said, "People need to be informed, educated and shown that wildlife is important in other aspects and ways."

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