

Guardians of the wild: The reality of wildlife conservation on the ground

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Opinion

Emma Stokes tells us about the dangers from poachers, how demand for ivory and bushmeat is threatening species, and the effectiveness of EU policy on the ground.



Over the years you have worked in Africa, how was the problem of wildlife trafficking grown?

I first came to northern Congo in 1999. Since this time the situation with respect to global wildlife trafficking has changed dramatically. For example, in and around the Nouabale-Ndoki National

Park in northern Congo we noticed a massive surge in elephant poaching (and a parallel rise in the local price of illegal ivory) from around 2010 onwards. The scale and nature of this trafficking in ivory was felt across the continent - not just Congo. Elephant poaching was already high in this area in the 1980s before the 1989 ban on ivory trade, it then declined immediately after but what we are seeing now has likely reached never before scales in terms of its organisation, the involvement of criminal networks, and the quantities of ivory being shipped out of the continent.

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Where are the biggest markets for illegally trafficked wildlife products, and who is carrying out the poaching?

This depends on the species. For ivory products, the market is currently China, although with the announcement of the closure of their domestic market this may shift to other emerging markets in Asia, such as Laos. For many other species, there are large and unsustainable markets within the continent.

For example, many wildlife species are consumed as food or wild meat. Massive markets for bushmeat exist in African cities and exported to the African diaspora living in Europe.

Rapidly increasing urbanisation in Africa means demand is unsustainable, and given the presence of cheaper meat alternatives like chicken, they are often considered a 'luxury.' They risk siphoning food away from local communities that depend upon it for nutrition and income, thus threatening both biodiversity and risk a food security crisis.

The background of the poachers also depends on the wildlife species and the factors driving demand.

For ivory, we typically find in northern Congo that poachers are often not from local communities but outsiders from neighbouring communities. They are selling to 'patrons' who are based in urban centres around national parks who have international connections. Local communities are sometimes co-opted into these networks either as local poachers or guides.

For bushmeat, these are often local communities who hunt, but who are hired through 'patrons' or middlemen who control their commerce to big cities, and who largely profit from the proceeds.

The local communities are typically not the primary beneficiaries of this trafficking.

What kind of dangers do conservationists and park rangers face and what measures can be taken to counter the poachers?

With increasing prices for ivory and rhino horn over the last five to ten years the situation has become more dangerous for park rangers and protectors of wildlife. Poachers and traffickers are willing to take greater risks to hunt and sell wildlife products.

Over the past few years we have witnessed an increasing number of direct gun battles in the parks between park rangers and poachers. Rangers need to be provided with the necessary training and equipment with which to address these threats.

Recently I visited the families of five rangers who were killed in July this year, by a group of unidentified bandits. These are very difficult situations.

I also met the husband of a ranger whose wife was killed by a group of armed militias, who were known to be elephant poachers. These are real threats and reflect the nexus between security and wildlife conservation.

Counter measures are multiple in nature, and operational support comes hand in hand with engagement of governments, local communities and the transportation industry, who all have a key role to play.

How has conservationism changed?

Increasingly we are looking at the criminal justice system, if we become more successful at arresting poachers. Our efforts are undermined if the courts are not implementing the right sentences, and not acting like a strong deterrent.

In last couple of years, we have focused on strengthening the judiciary process, working with ministries of justice, court officials and prosecutors.

Also ensuring independent monitoring of the legal process to highlight corruption or bribes, and even visiting offenders in prison to make sure they are carrying out their jail time. So rather than sending out patrols out into the park, we are now trying to identify who are in these poaching networks.

Can you give any example of EU-funded projects that help in the protection of animals, and what more can the EU do to help against wildlife trafficking?

The European Commission's DEVCO-funded 'Larger than Elephants' study laid out a clear blueprint for wildlife conservation in Africa. This received the support and contribution of many conservation practitioners working on these issues across Africa based on case studies and successful models. Implementation of this blueprint would go a long way in addressing the trafficking and poaching of wildlife across the continent and I would urge the European Union to dedicate resources to this end.

My organisation, the Wildlife Conservation Society, is also part of a global consortium to implement a new EU-funded sustainable wildlife management program, that will address the massive commercial wild meat trade, and look at innovative approaches and partnerships to address the biodiversity and food security issues that this presents.

Do you believe an EU-wide ban on ivory trade can have a positive impact on protecting wildlife?

I do. Many countries like China, that have been heavily implicated in the illegal ivory trade, have taken bold steps in banning the trade and closing domestic ivory markets. China has pointed at the

EU, and asked why Europe does not have a domestic ban too, which is a very good point.

It's very difficult to lobby at a governmental level with emerging markets to implement an ivory ban when you don't have your own house in order. It's important that the European Union is a leader in this sense and sets a strong example for other nations to follow.

Are you positive or pessimistic that there is enough global political effort to counter

animal trafficking to ensure the long-term future of endangered species?

I am always optimistic and I believe that our children and grandchildren's generation will see elephants and rhinos, along with other species living in the wild.

It will take a lot of effort and resources to get there and perhaps we will not see this everywhere where it exists now.

But above all, this needs political will at the highest level to achieve this.

About the author

Emma Stokes is regional director for the Wildlife Conservation Society - Central Africa

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