

CORONAVIRUS AND WILDLIFE

Wildlife and the Real Cost of COVID-19

The lockdown and lack of tourist visitors combine to put enormous pressure on wildlife.



PHOTO BY KATHARINA RIEBESEL

BY FELIX PATTON

The lockdown of many national parks, game reserves and private wildlife sanctuaries throughout Africa has, understandably, led to a crippling of wildlife tourism and made animals vulnerable to increased poaching.

An article in the April-June 2020 issue of *Swara* referred to a Wildlife Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report that put the value of wildlife tourism globally at \$343.6 billion or 3.9 per cent of global GDP. The report estimated that the sector employed 21.8 million people.

Today, international visitors from the main source countries of the United Kingdom, Germany and United States to Africa are non-existent with little chance of 'normal service being resumed' in the main tourist season of July to September.

According to WTTC, it took an average of 19 months for visitor numbers to recover

after previous major epidemics. The depth of the current downturn in international travel means that recovery will take longer.

The lockdown and lack of tourist visitors combine to put enormous pressure on wildlife. Tourists on safari along with their experienced guides have long been known to increase the 'eyes and ears' that protect the animals they have come view. It is estimated that they provide 60 per cent of the cover in Africa's parks, with rangers providing 40 per cent of the wildlife protection.

With none or reduced income for the management of wildlife areas, staff have had to be laid off leaving fewer rangers to prevent illegal activity.

Communities around national parks and reserves are no longer receiving the economic benefits derived from tourists. Wage-earners who depended on tourism have lost their jobs and many are desperate. Engaging in illegal wildlife trade is an obvious temptation.

Within weeks of the halt in international travel that resulted from COVID-19 control

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A white rhino in the Okavango Delta. The Delta supports large concentrations of animals on both a permanent and seasonal basis. Through careful wildlife management it has become perhaps one of the best places to see animals and birds in Africa.



PHOTO BY LORD MOUNTBATTEN (WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

\$343.6

Amount in billions value of wildlife tourism globally or 3.9 per cent of global GDP according to Wildlife Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)

TOP

Hunting is one, lucrative, game ranch activity especially in South Africa.

RIGHT

A black rhino in Namibia desert. Some of the world's last remaining rhinoceros still roam free in the barren wilderness of the Namib Desert in Namibia.

Namibia's rare, free-roaming black rhinos are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, directly and indirectly.

measures, signs of an escalation in poaching were clear and the drastic measures were needed to counteract it. Where no rhino poaching had recently occurred in an unnamed, (confidential), African wildlife area, some 15 rhinos were poached in the few weeks after the coronavirus hit. In desperation, a project to dehorn some 400 rhinos in the space of 10 days was instigated.

In the Okavango Delta area of Botswana, after six rhinos were poached in March, the remaining Black rhinos are being evacuated amid floods that inundated many roads and made finding the rhinos difficult. All this before the onset of a full moon, which makes poaching that much easier. Last year, Botswana lost more than two dozen rhinos and it is reported that already that number has been surpassed in the first four months of 2020.

Namibia's rare, free-roaming black rhinos are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, directly and indirectly. Save the Rhino Trust Namibia, the guardians of these rhinos, have had to reduce rations for field teams, look for ways to cut vehicle maintenance costs and embed new health and safety protocols.



PHOTO BY ARTOFSAFARITRAVEL.COM

South Africa, home to the largest population of rhinos on the continent, had battled hard to control poaching and recently the strategy was seen to be working. Since the lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is reported that poaching has spiked across the board as people suddenly without jobs or other resources have turned to animals, fish and forests which offer a free source of food or income. Gangs believed to be from Mozambique took advantage of the lack of tourists and guards in South Africa's Kruger National Park and killed nine rhinos.

South Africa, however, also boasts a thriving game-farming industry where game



PHOTO BY CARL DE SOUZA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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 Bushmeat including pangolins, bush rats and tiger cats for sale on the roadside in Equatorial Guinea. Today, bushmeat has become big business, and it helps feed Africa's booming human population. Estimates suggest that as much as 5 million tons of bushmeat is now being harvested across the Congo Basin alone, annually.

viewing is supplemented by hunting and live sales. Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA), the main body that represents more than 1,500 ranchers in the sector, reports that the industry is “on the brink of collapse”. The private wildlife ranching industry includes not only the international hunting and tourism market, but also the domestic hunting and tourism one and other related activities, all of which are on hold.

WRSA estimates total losses for the industry will be in the order of R-9 billion (\$54 million), for the year. Over half of the people employed in the sector will lose their jobs or have their wages reduced, which could lead to poaching on the farms. Worse still, what will happen to the wildlife on a farm that goes bust considering that over half the national rhino population is in private hands?

With few exceptions, parks, reserves and conservancies in East Africa are suffering major income loss from lack of tourist visitors and are having to reduce staff numbers, rein in operating costs and cut back on community projects.

Weakening conservation enforcement measures and people desperate for income has prompted criminal poaching gangs to target and attempt to recruit vulnerable people in Kenya left unemployed by the collapse of the country's tourism industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The gangs see this desperation as an opportunity to step-up poaching efforts by taking advantage of local knowledge of the parks whose finances have plummeted resulting in less anti-poaching patrols, decreased salaries and laying off of labourers.

In Kenya, there are reports of an alarming rise in bushmeat hunting with the poaching of zebras, antelopes and buffalos on the rise. Rhinos are a target for their horns and elephants for their ivory. A 40-year-old elephant was poached for ivory in northern Kenya in April - the first case of illegal hunting in the area in more than a year.

Poaching in the pandemic is not the only threat to wildlife. Measures have been taken to shield mountain gorillas in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda



PHOTO BY PRIMEUGANDASAFARIS.COM

and Rwanda over fears that they may be vulnerable to complications if they contracted the coronavirus. Permits for gorilla safaris, now suspended, are a major source of income for national wildlife authorities.

In Uganda reports from informants and arrested poachers suggest there is a weekly trade of bushmeat heading to the DRC. On one public service vehicle (van-type taxi) alone 500kg of bushmeat was confiscated.

A small positive from the lockdown measures comes from the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC) that reported that traffickers have been experiencing challenges in transporting products and accessing markets and customers.

Border closures, increased border security, quarantine restrictions and a huge reduction in air traffic with last-minute flight diversions have impacted traditional illegal wildlife trade smuggling routes. Difficulty in transporting products into China has resulted in the stockpiling of raw ivory in neighbouring countries and pangolin scales in Vietnam.

However, the WJC understands that several prolific poaching kingpins in Africa are

actively organising poaching teams to enter parks and protected areas in these uncertain times.

The coronavirus has shown that the wildlife tourism/sustainable use model to fund conservation is not sustainable in a steep economic downturn. For the preservation of species and habitats in the long term, there will need to be a radical rethink of how funding can be sustained.

On June 6, Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta outlined a plan for the "progressive re-opening of the economy." Kenyatta, however, extended restrictions on international travel and requested the ministry in charge of transportation to "engage all key stakeholders [to] develop protocols to guide [the] resumption of local air travel."

Tanzania relies heavily on tourism, which generates about 17.2 per cent of GDP and provides the revenue for the national parks to operate. To ensure Tanzania remains a preferred choice in the minds of prospective tourists, the Tanzania Tourist Board (TTB) has partnered with wildlife conservation

BELOW

Due to the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic based on the advice of the conservationists who indicate that primates most especially the mountain gorillas are susceptible to be infected by the COVID-19 complications given the fact these apes share more than 98% DNA with the humans who are likely to pass it to them, permits for gorilla safaris have been suspended.



PHOTO BY WIKIPEDIA.ORG

TOP

Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary began in 2005, aiming to reintroduce rhinos to Uganda, following their extinction in 1982. The Sanctuary covers some 70 square kilometres, with a variety of habitats where the rhinos can wander freely. The perimeters are secured by RFU and UWA making sure that both guests and most importantly the rhinos, are safe.

authorities and key tourist players to launch a digital media platform on the wildebeest migration.

Wildlife guide, Carel Verhoef, leads the videography team through game drives in the Serengeti National Park that he would normally be taking with clients. Wildebeest, lions and elephants, for which the park is famous, will be on show.

The show will also share news from Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest point in Africa, where mountain crews will capture views from Uhuru Peak summit and of the spice island of Zanzibar.

Also collaborating with the TTB are Tanzania National Parks and Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority in partnership with the Serengeti Show Live team. While tourists are now able to fly to Tanzania without quarantine restrictions, most European and United States travel advisories suggest it is not appropriate at this stage so the show will bring wildlife to their homes to entertain and educate the viewers and keep Tanzania in the forefront as a safari destination.

A sanctuary story

Wildlife poaching is a major challenge across Africa, not least for rhino horn and bushmeat. Uganda was not immune. Then came Covid-19. In early March, in a bid to prevent the spread of the virus, the Uganda government introduced strict controls on international arrivals, including a 14-day quarantine period for people from Europe and the United States, the leading markets for wildlife tourism. While understandable, this was unacceptable to almost all of those coming for wildlife safaris. The wildlife tourism market collapsed.

Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary (ZRS) in central Uganda was fast becoming a “must-visit” destination with the only population of wild rhinos in the country. Managed by Rhino Fund Uganda (RFU), all the operating income and much of the essential capital expenditure comes from international tourism as do funds for community projects such as the on-site primary school for sanctuary and local community children.

To ensure the protection of the 30 rhinos and other resident wildlife, a minimum



PHOTOS BY RHINO FUND UGANDA



Without “boots on the ground” and the resources they need, the sanctuary could become a wildlife killing field.

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ZRS is located seven kilometres south of the town of Nakitoma. The surrounding area is mostly inhabited by subsistence farmers and a cattle keeping community amid a sparse and dwindling population of free-roaming wildlife. In the town and villages, there are few jobs, limited money, food and other resources, and many businesses that relied on tourist income have collapsed.

Desperate times lead to desperate, illegal measures of which poaching wildlife for trade is one - rhinos for their horn, pangolins, bushbuck and duiker for the bushmeat trade or traditional medicine. All these species are present on the sanctuary, making it an obvious target for the organized criminal gangs behind such trade.

RFU has applied for emergency funding from traditional donors. Even if, hopefully, some comes from the little that is available, it will take time to arrive with the organisation. To bridge the gap, (with an absolute minimum requirement of US\$35,000 per month), RFU has also reached out to individuals and businesses to come to their rescue with an online GivenGain presence.

TOP LEFT
Rangers have had to leave their homes and move into the sanctuary full-time.

BELOW RIGHT
Rhinos are in danger from poachers after their horns which are worth around US\$30,000+ per kilo. These horns weighed nearly 4.5 kilos.

BELOW
The sanctuary school has had to be closed.

number of virus-free staff were essential so the Sanctuary went into lockdown on March 25th. Thereafter, no-one was allowed in or out. With no visitor fees and dwindling financial resources, drastic measures were needed.

Some 98 staff volunteered to take half pay to protect the project and their jobs. They also agreed to live and sleep inside the sanctuary, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Regrettably some 48 employees had to be sent home on temporary unpaid leave.

As funds run dry there will be a struggle to pay and feed the ‘skeleton’ staff who have had to work longer and harder than usual, factors that have affected their health and wellbeing. It is vital to maintain the frequency and coverage of anti-poaching patrols and intelligence-gathering with multiple teams carrying out daily and nightly patrols supported by radio control, vehicle support, data collection and crime analytics, intelligence gathering, meals, uniforms and equipment supply.



The Human Side

Willy Bisaso is the most senior ranger on Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary responsible for the daily operations of all the rangers, gate and solar guards. Ten years ago, having done well at school, he left his life of small-scale cropping and goat rearing to train as a Ziwa ranger with the hope of providing more for his family.

Now 32, Willy is married to Dianah with whom he has three young children. Using his Ziwa wages wisely, he has built up a seven-acre crop production business and a cattle herd. After work and on his two days off a week, he tends to the health of his cattle and his crops while helping the children with their homework. Willy has been able to move his family into a three-bedroom brick house. He also financially supports another four members of his extended family.

Living in a small village just outside the town of Nakitoma, he moves around the communities to keep track of anything that may develop that could affect the Sanctuary while talking to residents about the importance of conservation.

Life was good for the Bisaso family until the restrictions imposed on March 25. Due to the importance of his role and his experience in protecting the rhinos, Willy had to sacrifice his comfortable home-life and move into the Sanctuary. Gone were the home comforts, now replaced by a single room with a bed and shared outdoor cold water shower and toilet.

Meanwhile, back at his home, his wife Dianah has now had to take on all his responsibilities as well as her own while coping with reduced finances and no idea of when the hardship will end.

The cattle are now looked after by the herdsman. The cost of a vet is prohibitive and branding has been put on hold.

With the schools closed, Dianah has three children to try and home-school in between



PHOTOS BY RHINO FUND UGANDA

housework and chores on the farm. With commodity prices rising daily, the crops could provide vital food for the family if the situation worsens.

Occasionally the Bisaso family are able to visit Willy at the Sanctuary but they have to stay outside the main gate and four metres away from each other – a bittersweet experience.

A few of the staff have been put under such pressure by their families that they absconded, losing their salaries in the process.

Theft is on the rise as people are going hungry. Businesses have collapsed as the Sanctuary rangers are the main spenders. They own most of the motorbikes in the area but many are on lockdown in the Sanctuary. Motorcycle garages, spare part shops and fuel sellers have all lost business and have had to close. Food shops have lost much of their main clientele.

Landlords have lost income as rangers who rent properties have moved out to be in the Sanctuary. Construction work by rangers has stopped affecting suppliers and builders. Apart from the Sanctuary, employment opportunities around Nakitoma are few and far between. ●

TOP LEFT
Willy with his wife.

TOP RIGHT
Willy (left) is a leading member of the anti-poaching team seen here with elephant tusks confiscated from poachers. Before he rose through the ranks to become the highest ranked officer in charge of deployment, Bisaso was a ranger deployed to monitor the daily activities of rhinos.



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