

Wildlife protectionists may be the problem

James Clarke

Rhino poachers are looked upon as heroes in Africa's intensifying bush war.

It is about time we wildlife conservation supporters faced reality. Like it or not, sentiment and hand-wringing are not saving the rhino or the elephant in the Africa-wide bush war against poaching.

The wildlife that roams around Africa has to have a quantifiable value – a value recognised by rural Africans – or the battle between poachers and law enforcers will continue.

Already hundreds of law enforcers and poachers are being killed annually – and thousands of elephant and rhino are killed for Far Eastern markets.

And many conservationists are part of the problem. They are, unwittingly, hastening the decline of wild animal populations.

Game hunters have a more practical and demonstratively more successful approach than those who believe they can save Africa's fauna without understanding those who live the daily lives with elephants, rhino and other vermin.

Vermin? Yes vermin. That is precisely how rural dwellers see the "Big Five".

A front line has been allowed to develop between rural Africans and wildlife. A recent study by several scientists and field workers and published by the Food and Agricultural Organisation on "Human-Wildlife conflict in Africa", stated that many in sub-Saharan Africa "fear and detest" elephants and lions.

They feel no sympathy for the current "Save the rhino" campaign. They have no reason to.

The demise of the rhino, or in fact the elephant, would mean nothing in their lives. Millions of rural dwellers who live outside game reserve fences – and this is where most wild animals live (as much as 70 percent in some regions) - look upon wildlife as either edible or dangerous.

Sentiment is not going to stop crooks from the Far East paying irresistible rewards to poverty-stricken Africans for illicit rhino horn and elephant ivory. Alive, neither of these animals has any value at all to rural people.

Too few involved in conservation recognise the real threats in wild Africa - especially those conservationists living in Europe and North America who so generously fund Africa's efforts. Sadly, because of their generosity, they have been able to wield enormous influence and many African countries are happy to adopt unworkable and naïve wildlife policies to please donor countries who know virtually nothing of Africa and its people.

Kenya was persuaded, a third of a century ago by animal lovers in Europe, to ban hunting. As a consequence it has now lost two thirds of its wildlife. There is concern about the lion population - Kenya has never had so few. Rural dwellers view them as cattle killers and man-killers yet they are not allowed to shoot them to protect their cattle.

The government, via the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), "owns" all wildlife and although the loss in revenue from big game hunting may be as high as \$40 million a year the KWS is unconcerned because Western donations have been as high as \$400 million in a year.

A lot of donors money goes towards lavish, inconsequential conferences in posh hotels. Neighbouring Tanzania still allows trophy hunting and, consequently, has not suffered such a devastating decline in game numbers because in areas where hunting safaris take place the locals view lions and elephant as assets. Safari companies assist in combating poaching in the hunting concessions.

Dr Mike Norton-Griffiths, Kenyan land-use economics researcher said in a recent conference paper that wildlife policies in Africa are "dictated from TV-watching middle class homes in Europe" – well meaning people who understand so little about the reality of living among wild animals.

Through their misunderstanding of the situation, conservationists' donations have done nothing at all to alleviate the central problem which is the hostile attitude of rural communities towards the wild animals around them.

Yet the future of Africa's wildlife, in the medium to long term, will be decided by those who share its habitat. And this is how it should be.

The challenge to all those who call themselves conservationists is to find a way to end human-wildlife conflict in Africa and to help rural dwellers perceive a reason to protect wildlife.

Namibia is now widely acknowledged as the shining example in conserving wildlife in communal areas. Since 2000, surveys have shown a steady increase in wildlife numbers in communal conservancies - the result of local communities recognising the value of wildlife. Safari hunting is regarded as the catalyst in bringing about improved wildlife management and protection. In Africa north of the Limpopo/Cunene line the only time rural communities receive tangible benefits from wildlife is where hunting safaris are allowed - or when Asian criminals pay for horn and ivory.

I am not a hunter myself, yet I have no doubt that controlled hunting can be used – and should be used – as a wildlife management tool.

Conservation – meaning the wise use of natural resources - has become simply protectionism for the sake not of Africans but of tourists.

The most practical conservationists are hunters. Outside the game reserves they represent the only lobby that has a vested interest in maintaining wildlife populations.

Controlled hunting is the antithesis of poaching for it is sustainable and is a community-enriching pursuit. It is the only way to ensure that wildlife has a value to those living on the unprotected side of the game reserve fence. A single safari, spending two weeks in a typical bush area, can bring far more benefits to the people living there than any other use. In Zambia's Southern Province a small community averaged \$70 244 a year from safari hunting, selling licenses and collecting hunting fee during 1997–1999. Yet the tourists hunters killed only 70 individual animals representing 20 species. The locals got the meat and were employed skinning and preparing trophies.

Unfortunately cattle farming declined (when the government abruptly ceased subsidizing stock disease control) and “survival poaching” for bush meat came back until today, according to a recent report, the area is regarded as a “depleted wildlife area with little capacity to sustain a hunting quota or the levels of revenues needed to encourage community compliance with laws protecting wildlife”.

Botswana has now followed Kenya in banning hunting apparently because of loss of wildlife numbers – except for the elephant population which is on the rise. The decline is because of the disruption of migratory routes; human-wildlife conflict; spread of commercial ranching and increased poaching. Then hunting ban has, overnight, devalued wildlife except as a source of illicit meat.

Pretoria University zoologist, Peter J Lindsey in publishing the results of a 2007 survey for which hundreds of hunters and safari operators were interviewed, commented: “Each (ban on hunting has) resulted in an accelerated loss of wildlife due to the removal of incentives for conservation. Avoiding future (hunting) bans is thus vital for conservation”.

I was in Kenya last year on an “educational” and was shown no national parks – only animal orphanages, day after day. I gathered this was what Kenya’s Tourist Board believes tourists like to see. I was taken to only one game reserve. It was late afternoon but we had to hurry because they wanted to show us some captive chimpanzees! (Chimps do not occur naturally in Kenya.) My guide was unable to say why we were shown no national parks nor why we were shown what amounted to little more than menageries.

I saw only one rhino – and was invited to feed it by hand.

The last third of the 20th century saw a world-wide swing in public sentiment towards a commitment to global nature conservation – albeit mainly among the educated living in the West.

There was an explosion of great intensity in natural history publications; a wonderful variety of spectacular television documentaries and a spontaneously concerted world-wide media campaign to encourage environmental awareness in which I was actively involved for 30 years. But the “green” sentiment did not take root north of Southern Africa. The people had more important concerns than looking after wild animals – survival being one.

The long term benefits - the benefits of protecting potential man-eaters and crop-wrecking marauders – are, unsurprisingly, lost on them and on their leaders.

The freshening global concern about conservation in Africa is being driven partly by world-wide sentiment, partly by TV documentaries, partly by the threat of extinctions and partly by scientific curiosity - but not enough is driven by wildlife's potential to economically uplift rural Africa.

The rhino's horn represents the animal's only value to rural Africans.

One rhino horn can set up a family for life but it takes great courage to be a rhino poacher and risk one's life. Rhino poachers in rural Africa are looked upon as heroes, not criminals - the Robin Hoods of Africa.

Simply throwing them into jail is no solution.

Protectionists, (to use Norton-Griffiths word) need to rearrange their prejudices regarding controlled hunting. It is a sustainable land use option and would immediately give wildlife a tangible value to those who live in wild Africa and a reason for them to protect wildlife.

Selling licenses, catering for hunting groups, preparing animal trophies and processing game meat would involve whole communities. Currently tens of thousands of tons of rhino and elephant meat are rotting in the veld.

It is true that a lot of the revenues from hunting – certainly in East Africa – have not trickled down; too often, because of chronic corruption at all levels, it has trickled up. The same with donors' contributions. But that is a problem only Africa can overcome.

It is my view that hunters are more practical, more sincere and more perceptive in their approach. And, pro rata, more generous.

South Africa and Namibia, both of which promote controlled hunting, represent the one region where wildlife populations are soaring. We now have more wildlife than we've had for more than a century.

Namibia is now widely acknowledged as a shining example in conserving wildlife in communal areas. Since 2000, surveys have shown a steady increase in wildlife numbers in Namibia's communal conservancies – the result of local communities' recognition of the value of wildlife. The reason for this increase has been attributed to safari hunting which is regarded as the catalyst in bringing about improved wildlife management and protection on these conservancies.

Apart from the local spin off from hunting the Professional Hunters Association of South Africa, having already given R100 000 specifically for fighting rhino poaching, has pledged a further R100 000.

Chief executive Adri Kitshoff says rhino poaching “is becoming a major disincentive for landowners to keep rhino on their properties and we estimate that about 400 000 hectares have been lost to wildlife conservation due to the additional security measures needed to protect them,” he said.

The R200 000 donations were made available by PHASA’s Conservation and Empowerment Fund which since its establishment, a mere decade ago, has contributed more than R11 million to conservation projects and organisations.

Of this amount, over R9 million was raised specifically for the South African Wildlife College which has funded the studies of more than 900 mostly disadvantaged students pursuing careers in guiding, ranging and wildlife management.

Footnote: James Clarke’s 2012 book on human-wildlife conflict, “Save Me From the Lion’s Mouth”, has just gone into a second edition.