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Wildlife Crime in Africa – A Global Challenge

Successful Countermeasures Must Involve Local Populations

Margit Hellwig-Bötte

A series of high-ranking international meetings in 2013 drew global public attention to the dramatic collapse of elephant and rhinoceros populations in Africa, and to the connections between wildlife crime, terrorist networks and organised crime. On 12 February 2014 an international conference in London again took up the question of how to combat poaching and the illegal wildlife trade.

Successful action against wildlife crime is a cross-cutting global task encompassing wildlife conservation, fighting organised crime, promotion of rule of law, and economic cooperation, as well as resolute anti-corruption and involvement of local populations along the entire supply chain. Countermeasures will function only if people in Africa enjoy economically viable livelihoods and benefit from wildlife protection. In Asia, renouncing ivory as a status symbol and dropping superstitions about the medical value of rhinoceros products demands a change of mindset.

The latest elephant census of October 2013 revealed a sharp drop in numbers in the Selous ecosystem in Tanzania, from about 109,000 in 1976 to 13,084 today. The fall was especially dramatic during the past four years, when poachers killed 67 percent of the total population. Without efficient countermeasures Tanzania could foreseeably lose its entire elephant population. The figures are particularly alarming considering that the population had recovered from 22,200 in 1991 to more than 70,000 in 2006.

Elephants are not the only species threatened by rampant poaching. In 2013

poachers killed more than 1,000 South African rhinos, an increase of more than 50 percent over 2012 and a sad national record. The horns are sold for horrendous prices in Asia. Facing this scale of problem South Africa, the country with the world's largest rhinoceros population, has reached its limits in combating wildlife crime – even though its rangers are organised and equipped in paramilitary fashion and succeeded in arresting more than 300 suspected poachers in 2013.

The previous wave of poaching in the 1970s and 1980s was triggered by strong growth in demand from Japan as its econo-

my boomed. Big game stocks recovered temporarily (although at low levels) after the signatories of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) placed the African elephant on the list of most endangered species in 1989. But for some years now demand has been growing again, with local poachers increasingly joining forces with criminal networks and terrorist organisations. Poaching is now a mainstay of international organised crime, alongside drugs, arms and people trafficking.

Wildlife Crime Funds Rebels and Terrorists

Poaching is nothing new in African countries where game herds roam free. Local hunters have always illegally hunted elephants for their meat and ivory. The classic poacher is a villager who knows the local wildlife very well. For some time now population pressure and climate change have been shrinking habitats for people and wildlife. The valuable resources of water and land must be shared, and the struggle for survival becomes tougher. Pastoralists become farmers, who regard wildlife as a threat rather than an integral part of their environment. The value placed on the life of a (wild) animal falls, to villagers its preservation appears economically unattractive.

At the same time, newly growing affluence in China (the most important traditional market alongside Thailand) has sparked an upturn in demand for ivory that can no longer be satisfied by amateur poaching. The one-off sale of ivory stocks by Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, approved by the CITES states in 2008, further stimulated demand. Chinese ivory workshops that had been forced to close in the 1990s now resumed production. Astronomic prices created an additional incentive for professional poaching, which can be conducted on a large scale only by logistically proficient criminal networks. These operate in the lawless

spaces of fragile states dominated by rebels or terrorist groups, and use transit countries with strong corruption and weak rule of law.

In early 2012 a professional Sudanese gang armed with AK47 machine-guns slaughtered more than 200 elephants in the Bouba Ndjida National Park in northern Cameroon. Rangers attributed the crime to members of the Janjawid militia. Since the 1980s poachers from Somalia have regularly crossed the Kenyan border to poach in the Tsavo National Park, and further south the Amboseli National Park. Today, their weapons and organisational structures suggest ties to Somali warlords and al-Shabaab. Transit is arranged by middlemen in Eastleigh, a Somali-populated quarter of Nairobi with a thriving black market economy. The Lord's Resistance Army, operating in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and the Central African Republic, also funds itself via the ivory trade. Local experts possess comprehensive information on connections between poachers, rebels and terrorist organisations, but their expertise is not systematically recorded and only sporadically tapped. Occasionally they are specifically bribed to refrain from sharing their knowledge.

International Interest Awakens

Last year the international community registered the dramatic drop in wildlife stocks and became aware of the close links between poaching and organised crime. At their June 2013 summit the G8 states agreed to take more resolute action against the illegal trade in endangered species. A meeting in September 2013 during the UN General Assembly, arranged by the German foreign minister and the president of Gabon, identified the new quality of poaching and illegal wildlife trade as a threat to peace and security, development, and human rights. The participants also discussed countermeasures that could be taken in the UN framework: establishing a group of friends, passing a resolution in the

General Assembly, appointing a special envoy.

The African Elephant Summit in Gaborone and a meeting during the Franco-African Summit in Paris in December 2013 maintained international scrutiny at a high level. On 15 January 2014 the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on the Council of Ministers and the European Commission to adopt “an EU plan of action against wildlife crime and trafficking”, establish “a specialised Wildlife Crime Unit within Europol”, and make the issue “a priority in the programming of the financial instruments for development aid”.

In the meantime the UN group of friends has been established, and includes China and Thailand. The group has the potential, for example in association with the proclamation of the new World Wildlife Day on 3 March 2014, to maintain UN attention on the issue, include more destination countries in the process, and permanently integrate China.

Wildlife Crime Cannot Be Defeated Without China

In May 2011 Julius Kipngetich, then Director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, stated in an interview that poaching had increased in areas where Chinese firms were conducting infrastructure projects with large numbers of Chinese construction workers. This open criticism of Chinese business interests broke a taboo and provoked sharp rebukes from the Chinese government and his own. But his statement did contribute to a slow turnaround: China began to respond to accusations that it was promoting ivory smuggling and started helping the Kenya Wildlife Service to combat poaching.

A Chinese citizen arrested in Kenya on 28 January 2014 with 3.5 kg of ivory in his luggage is now the first person to face prosecution under the country’s new anti-poaching law, which came into force 18 days earlier. He faces a fine of up to \$230,000 or life imprisonment. If China accepts such drastic sentence (which would

be in line with Chinese practice) and refrains from intervening for leniency, that could certainly create a positive precedent. Internationally it would earn China as much recognition as the spectacular destruction of part of its ivory stocks in January 2014. Chinese influence in Africa could then become a positive factor in the fight against wildlife crime.

Chinese support will also be crucial to the success of action plans in countries like Thailand and Vietnam that aim to discourage the use of ivory and rhinoceros products and step up action against criminal gangs.

Persistence Required

Germany, like many other EU member states, actively supports the fight against wildlife crime. German development cooperation has many years of experience with biodiversity projects. Since the 1970s for example, the Frankfurt Zoological Society has assisted with the preparation of systematic aerial photographs to serve as the basis for monitoring and planning instruments for national parks in Tanzania. Projects for optimising the management of nature reserves in southern Africa are also part of the German portfolio. In the Kavango-Zambezi region Germany is supporting the unification of 36 reserves and national parks across Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana into a single Transfrontier Conservation Area of 430,000 square kilometres. The objective is to enhance habitat protection for migratory herds and open up sources of income for local populations through ecological tourism.

The latest, and innovative, German initiative is for trans-sectoral, trans-national and trans-continental action to combat poaching and the illegal wildlife trade. Projects involving various ministries, policy fields and NGOs are being developed along the entire supply chain. This approach focuses above all on enhancing monitoring capacities in source countries, intensifying

cooperation between police, customs and judiciary, testing pilot projects to stifle demand, and promoting cooperation between Asia and Africa.

After a rhinoceros has been killed in South Africa, criminal networks can transport its horn to Vietnam for processing within 48 hours. The affected states must therefore be empowered to prevent or detect such crimes with equal efficiency, and to rigorously punish those responsible. That means improving the equipment and training provided to rangers, police and customs officials. Legislation is also needed to establish deterrent punishments and grant the legal system a set of instruments capable of tackling trans-national crime. But above all, a strengthening of rule of law and more rigorous action against corruption are required.

The effects of even the most sensible projects will evaporate if endemic corruption is not tackled internationally, including China. The key to successfully combatting poaching lies not least in integrating the local populations in the source countries. Those living close to national parks will only become allies of the rangers if they themselves profit from the economic stimulus of wildlife protection.

That demands a political approach that avoids land use conflicts, pays equal attention to the needs of environmental protection and agriculture, counteracts land-intensive subsistence agriculture, and prevents the invasion of national parks by people looking for land. In former times pastoralists contributed to preserving wildlife stocks. Today they are socially, politically and economically marginalised. Land policy must also find answers to their needs. For a long time Germany and Europe have concentrated their African development cooperation on agricultural projects, good governance and fighting corruption. They should now firmly anchor wildlife protection and anti-poaching in these programmes.

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