

SAINT-HUBERT CLUB DE FRANCE

Colloque au Palais du Luxembourg

à Paris, le lundi 18 mai 2015

Poaching in Africa: Farewell to the Elephant and the Rhino?

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Africa is presently facing its biggest poaching crisis ever: For the first time in history the real danger exists that rhinos and elephants in the wild might disappear from most of their ranges in Africa.

Massive slaughter of game is by no means new to the continent. In Roman times big game disappeared from Northern Africa. In the 19th century the ivory trade made the elephant a rare species in many parts of the continent. This is understandable, as the 100 tons of ivory, which the continent exported in the Middle Ages, had increased to over 800 tons, or 50,000 animals, per year. Between 1879 and 1880 the British explorer Keith Thomson walked from Zanzibar to Lake Nyasa, Lake Tanganyika and back via Maasailand. And you know where he saw his first elephant? In a zoo in England!

Fortunately, the ideas of wildlife conservation and sustainability of wildlife use were introduced to Africa at the end of the 19th century; by the way, earlier than in most parts of Europe. Wildlife laws were enacted. Protected areas were created. Tourism and eco-tourism in the form of controlled trophy hunting became major foreign exchange earners. Elephants recovered.

The major threat to wildlife in Africa during the last century was not poaching, but the loss of game habitats due to population growth, agriculture and livestock. This started to change in the 1980ies with the first major poaching crisis. However, somehow anti-poaching on the ground and international cooperation against illegal trade could contain that crisis. This time it is different. We do not see much success of anti-poaching. If illegal killings decrease at some places, it is rather because there are less elephants and rhinos left to slaughter than because of anti-poaching effort. Optimism was yesterday!

Just a few figures: More than 5,000 rhinos have been poached since 2006. And the trend is still going up. One rhino killed every 6 days in Africa in the year 2006. Over four rhinos killed per day this year.

Between 100 and 200,000 elephants have been killed in Africa in the last ten years. There was a steady increase in the illegal killings since 2008, peaking in 2011 and thereafter levelling off. Poaching was clearly higher than elephant births in the last five years. Population presently shrinks at a rate of 3 % per year, at least. If this cannot be stopped the day of extinction is only a matter of arithmetic.

This crisis has become a major worldwide topic. We have seen more than ten high level international conferences, not counting the dozens of regional and technical meetings. And more international meetings are in the pipeline. Parliaments and the UN-Security Council passed resolutions against poaching and the illegal trafficking of wildlife. African governments vowed to stop it. The EU has developed a strategic approach, and bi- and multi-lateral development agencies as well as NGOs and philanthropic billionaires provide assistance. The world's oldest representation of hunters, the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) campaigns "Stop Wildlife Crime". Presidents and royalties commit themselves personally. The usual suspects from the world of glamour have also jumped on the bandwagon.

However, no light at the end of the tunnel yet.

Let us look now at the many faces of poaching and the causes of the misery. Thereafter I shall try to identify some solutions and some promising actions needed.

But before I do that I should explain what entitles me to talk about this topic. I could say that I have closely followed these matters for many years, first in different functions in the German Government, later in an advisory and honorary position for the CIC. I could also enumerate publications. However, my real first-hand experience stems from working for 13 years as government advisor and counterpart of the Chief Warden of Africa's oldest and largest protected area, the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania. With 50,000 km² it is more than four times the size of the Ile-de-France.

In those years I have not only polished office chairs, but also collected first-hand experience with poaching and with poachers. I have walked a couple of thousand kilometres with the scouts on patrol, and I have examined many evil-smelling elephant carcasses. I have observed village boys hunting buffaloes on foot with spears, and I have been present during encounters with criminals who used muzzle-loaders, hunting rifles or Kalashnikovs. During that time in the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, Africa's oldest and largest protected area, my Tanzanian partners and friends and I have proven: Poaching can be stopped.

5,000 dead elephants per year when the Tanzanian-German cooperation started in 1987. Less than fifty poached elephants six years later. In 2002 we had only one confirmed poached elephant. In the 17 or 18 years that followed

after the start of the project the elephant population in the Selous more than doubled from 30,000 to circa 70,000. So I have a pretty solid basis to talk from.

Let me describe shortly what is happening in most African game ranges today.

All game ranges are affected. The poachers look for meat, ivory, rhinoceros horn and animal parts for traditional Asian medicine.

Largely overlooked is the fact that everywhere in Africa, but especially West and Central Africa, game continues to represent cheap abundant food, so called "viande de brousse". Official protective laws and hunting bans are completely ignored there in everyday practice. Millions of poor people depend on this cheap source of animal protein. Even African immigrants in Europe are supplied each year with hundreds of tons of bush meat from protected and endangered species of their homelands, including the great apes: five tons per week through Charles-de-Gaulle airport alone.

The prices for ivory and rhino horns have exploded. In my young days a pound was a pound. A pound of ivory was a British pound. Last year a researcher found wholesale prices of 1,500 Euros for a kg of raw ivory in China. And raw rhino horn has in China pretty much the same price like gold.

The poachers come from many sectors of society. There are villagers who put out snares, or head out to hunt "nyama", meat, with bow and arrow or an inherited antique muzzleloader. This vision is often romanticized in Europe. However, in reality even this kind of hunting is nowadays purely commercial. In countries with a desolate government administration the military and police also poach regularly. Even many rangers themselves are involved, especially if discipline is lost within the respective Wildlife Authority. They have access to weapons and vehicles and know the local terrain. They represent the law and can consequently poach with little risk involved. In civil war zones all sides poach. Terrorists have paid their weaponry with blood ivory and still do so. Poaching is interwoven with other forms of crime, and criminal gangs run the trade and exports.

The causes are complex. Poaching provides income, and given the widespread poverty and unemployment it is easy to find sufficient manpower for this flourishing industry. The theory that increasing wealth and welfare reduce poaching has not been empirically confirmed. Higher purchasing power often only increases the demand for more.

The chronic under-funding of game management and protection in Africa is another major reason for the misery. Wildlife Agencies and National Parks have high financial requirements that are not even remotely met by the state. Ninety percent of all protected areas are not able to finance themselves. Because of the lack in government funding they often become "paper parks", i.e. protected areas that exist only on paper. Some protectionist organizations irresponsibly continue to create national parks that will never break even. At the same time they force out sustainable and lucrative hunting tourism for purely ideological reasons. Animal welfare groups even call for laws to prohibit the importation of all legal hunting trophies into the European Union, allegedly to fight poaching. In the nearly 40 years of its hunting ban, Kenya has lost around three quarters of its wildlife. Unable to learn from this bad example set by Kenya, Botswana has recently prohibited hunting, based solely on foreign ideological and political grounds and not on facts. The losers in this situation are the game and the local people, including the San ("bushmen"). Poor villagers are denied a source of income and thus lose any incentive to protect wildlife.

A last explanation for the misery we are observing. Actually this is the ultimate cause agent for poaching in the range states: corruption and bad governance. Poaching and illegal trafficking of wildlife products would be easier controlled in societies with a functioning civil service, a non-corrupt judiciary and reasonably clean law enforcement agencies. However, this is not the situation in most range states. Take country X as an example: 60 to 70,000 elephants killed in the last years, 600 or 700 tons of ivory moved, half a billion Euros earned. And nothing witnessed by the officials, nothing reported while it happened, nobody arrested above the rank of game scout. This reminds me of the three wise monkeys: "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil!" And in the main recipient country in Asia there are also three wise monkeys sitting.

Now, the donors provide many millions of aid money to contain the situation in country X, and – ironically - the same people, who did not see the 70,000 elephants disappear, will get their hands on this money.

Corruption and bad governance were my two major enemies during the 13 years while I was involved in the on-the-ground-combat against poaching. Catching the poachers in the field, winning the "hearts and the minds" of the local people and managing and self-financing the protected areas was relatively "easy". Overcoming the plague of corruption, however, was like Hercules fighting with the Hydra in Greek mythology: For each head cut off it grew two more. My Tanzanian counterpart paid the price: he was shot at point-blank

range. The same happened to a good friend of mine, a senior warden in Mozambique. The ongoing battle is bloody. It will not be won by clicking "like" buttons on facebook.

The solutions to poaching are just as complex as the causes.

Anyone who promises a standard formula for success is either naive or a liar. By sending in emergency "green troops" it is perhaps possible to stop or reduce poaching for a few months. That may even be useful if all else fails. However, the structures of conservation must be improved simultaneously: management of protected areas, finance, leadership, accountability of public servants, deregulating state control etc. This all takes time.

Lasting solutions are therefore only attainable in the long term. They require simultaneous action on both sides of the chain of supply and demand. The issue must be addressed both internationally and nationally, in Africa as well as in all consumer countries - and in the wealthy countries that can afford to help. Completely stopping all illegal hunting will never be achieved. Realistically speaking, it can only be reduced to the extent that the growth of game stocks exceeds natural and non-natural deaths.

Only international cooperation can combat illicit trade on a global level. Transnational police cooperation in Africa is extremely important. The Washington Convention (CITES) plays a crucial role in the regulation of international trade with endangered species. It should not be abused by some parties for meaningless, purely ideologically justified prohibitions on wildlife use, in particular on sustainable hunting.

On the national level appropriate legislation and effective law enforcement are essential, as well as functioning authorities. Without effective rangers in wildlife areas ("boots on the ground") there can be no success in combating illegal use. They must be trained, equipped and well guided. Widespread corruption, as I have said, promotes poaching decisively. Reducing corruption is particularly difficult, but indispensable. Deregulating game as state property and transferring ownership and/or use to the private sector and civil society in a market based way can help.

Without adequate funding one can write off the national parks, wildlife conservation, and poaching prevention in Africa. The national parks alone need on average between 200 to 500 Euros funding per square kilometre per year to stay afloat. It is an illusion to believe that long term funding can come alone

from external sources such as government subsidies, private donations, or international aid alone. Sustainable financing must come from the resources themselves, at least partly. The principle of conservation through sustainable use (“Use it or lose it”) is essential. Practical experience shows that this is the only way to finance wildlife conservation in Africa in the long run. Particularly, hunting tourism generates high yields and is sustainable, if, - I repeat: if - it is properly regulated.

Last but not least: Successful wildlife conservation requires the involvement of the local people. They must be involved in decision-making and they should receive benefits from the game at household level. Well-intentioned conservation efforts can be counterproductive, if they prohibit sustainable wildlife use by the local inhabitants. CITES should therefore consider the impact of regulations on the lives of local people in the future. One-sided animal protection or welfare concepts are often nothing more than modern forms of neo-colonialism, as they seek to impose ideological concepts from the rich nations upon local rural people. “Conservation against the people” is a concept of the past. It has failed. Only “Conservation with the people” can render success.

Wildlife is a resource that could provide magnificent benefits for the rural poor in Africa, if sustainably used. Instead it disappears because of overexploitation, as most recent research proves. There is still time to reverse the course. However this needs committed action of all of us, and it needs it quickly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I return to my own personal experience, the Selous. Our success story fuelled my optimism: What we had done others could repeat! However when I returned to the Selous last year, 80 % of the elephants, which were there when I left in 2005, had disappeared. Numbers had dwindled from 70,000 to 14,000.

What had happened?

First: We had negotiated with the government that the Selous was allowed to retain half of its revenues for management and conservation. When we left the Selous, it therefore had a solid financial basis of 2,5 million Euros, and it mainly came from hunting tourism. The administration in its wisdom fell back to its former habit to channel all the revenues back into the state budget. They wanted to milk the cow once again without feeding it.

Second: A new phenomenon has occurred in Africa: Organized crime has taken over. Today there are syndicates networking internationally in the range states, along the transport routes and probably also in the consumer countries. Wildlife trafficking can be mentioned in the same breath with human trafficking, illegal narcotics trade and gun running. Even the profits seem to be comparable. UNEP estimated 150 billion Euros annually.

Third: The market demand in Asian consumer countries has multiplied. The prices have equally multiplied. Apart from some talking and window dressing the respective Governments have done nothing efficient against all the illegal imports. Nobody can convince me that a government, which holds its country in an iron grip could not control the ivory and rhino trade, if it only wished.

I end, therefore, with a pessimistic overtone. Conferences and resolutions are not enough. If nothing happens on the ground, we may lose the battle against poaching in Africa.

Do I propose to resign? No. A good number of reforms have been initiated, better international cooperation is starting. There are committed citizens and professionals in the range states who want to conserve this heritage of mankind for generations to come. The question is, whether the political and economic elites and the governments in the producer and consumer countries of ivory and rhino horn have the will to put an end to poaching and trafficking. And whether we in Europe are prepared to assist.

Wildlife is a renewable natural resource that has the capacity to proliferate, if its habitat remains and if its illegal and unsustainable use can once again be brought down.

If we achieve this, then we do not have to worry. What remains to be done, natural reproduction, the elephants and the rhinos are glad to do it themselves.