

# Opinion | In Africa, All Conservation Is Local

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NAIROBI, Kenya — The staggering rise in the illegal slaughter of elephants, rhinos and other protected animals across Africa and Asia has ignited widespread outrage and prompted official measures to combat poaching — efforts that are certainly well-intentioned but mostly misdirected.

In February, the Obama administration announced that it would move to ban all trade in elephant ivory in the United States. That same month, an international conference in Britain resolved to make poaching and wildlife trafficking “serious crimes” under the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Moreover, Google and the World Wide Fund for Nature announced a partnership to supply the authorities in Namibia with drones to patrol the wilds.

Meanwhile, in Africa, Kenya recently endorsed anti-trafficking laws that contain some of the harshest penalties in the world, and President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda has told game park rangers tracking illegal hunters to shoot to kill.

Some 22,000 elephants were slaughtered in 2012, according to the United Nations, and in Tanzania, an average of 30 are lost to poachers every day. The United States State Department estimates that wildlife trafficking generates profits of between \$8 billion and \$10 billion annually, feeding into other illicit activities, including the arms trade and the narcotics industry.

These stark figures have understandably spurred strong efforts. But the authorities must look beyond the law-and-order approach against poachers and invest in winning the support of local communities, which could be their greatest allies against wildlife-trafficking syndicates.

Wild animals may hold a special place in our global heritage, but all too often they threaten the livelihood of the farmers and herders who live near nature reserves and game parks. Elephants routinely trample precious crops, and carnivores sometimes ravage whole herds of livestock.

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Poachers have astutely tapped into this reserve of local grievances — made worse by high rates of poverty and unemployment — and struck up partnerships with people in communities around game parks.

One of them, David Erupe, a 27-year-old reformed poacher interviewed for a documentary on the Kenyan TV channel NTV, summarized his motivations for joining the business: “I was jobless. Our family had nothing. A friend lured me into it. He said if we killed an elephant, we could sell its tusks. I did that and got money. So I decided that would be my full-time job.”

African countries have much to learn from Nepal, which in 2013 marked a second year without any recorded incidents of poaching. Nepalese laws give special rights to communities living around major national parks. They form what are known as buffer-zone management committees that play an integral role in conservation. The groups receive royalties of 30 percent to 50 percent of the proceeds from park entry fees. To guard against misappropriation, a system of collective decision making allows villagers to direct those funds to selected projects. Once a year, the local population has a 10-day window in which they can enter parks to harvest grass, reeds and other construction materials. The result is a local community that sees the park as a treasure to be guarded against those that could undermine its long-term survival.

This is not the case in many parts of Africa. Most Kenyans support conservation efforts. But in a country where arable land is exceedingly scarce and about a tenth of the land area is reserved for national parks and reserves, the authorities should take a more sophisticated approach in winning local support for conservation initiatives.

There have been some laudable efforts to cater to the needs of local communities — most notably the construction of a 450-kilometer electrified fence around the Aberdare mountain range by the Rhino Ark Conservation trust — but more needs to be done.

In his memoirs, “Dreams From My Father,” Barack Obama records the mixed feelings of many Kenyans on this issue. When, as a young man on his first visit to Kenya, he suggested to his half-sister Auma that they should make a trip to a national park she was decidedly unenthusiastic, and her retort summed up a view of the tourism industry in Africa that’s rarely voiced outside the continent: “Why should all that land be set aside for tourists when it can be used for farming? These wazungus [white people] care more about one dead elephant than they do for a hundred black children.”

Auma’s viewpoint sums up the position of Kenyans who want to preserve their heritage but also chafe at an approach that does not take sufficient account of the plight of local communities.

The Nepalese authorities certainly use drones and armed rangers to hunt down poachers. But they often patrol side by side with villagers who are regarded as frontline stakeholders in the tourism and conservation effort.

In Kenya, the government and conservationists should take lessons from the activities of grassroots activists such as Josephine Ekiru, a courageous 27-year-old who is helping to convince poachers to join conservation efforts. Nineteen former hunters now patrol the wilds of a 3,700-acre conservation area in Eastern Kenya after giving up their guns and undergoing training as wildlife rangers.

Applied on a wider scale, this combination of community engagement with the more martial approaches adopted by governments can improve the chances of preserving the majestic treasure contained in parks such as the Masai Mara National Park, which Mr. Obama, when he finally persuaded his sister to accompany him on safari, called “as beautiful a land as I’d ever seen.”

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