

Briefing

Biodiversity

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Policy pointers

Fighting wildlife crime, including illegal trade in wildlife commodities, is high on the political agenda and has attracted hundreds of millions of dollars of investment because of its implications for conservation, local economic development and national security.

The role of local communities that live alongside wildlife has largely been overlooked or neglected in international efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade.

Law enforcement has intensified and militarised in response to poaching and illegal trade. The unintended side effects include negative social impacts on communities and proliferation of small arms.

Neither law enforcement nor community conservation is likely to be a sufficient solution on its own. Respectful partnerships between both groups are key to halting the unsustainable and illegal trade in wildlife saving species while securing human livelihoods into the future.

Beyond enforcement: engaging communities in tackling wildlife crime

Alarming rises in illegal wildlife trade over the last decade show that tougher law enforcement is not enough to stop poachers from devastating populations of iconic or endangered species. However, the trend towards increasingly militarised law enforcement can harm communities who live alongside wildlife and have real power to protect it. A recent symposium led by IUCN's Sustainable Use and Livelihoods (SULi) Specialist Group, along with IIED and other partners, discussed the incentives and governance structures needed to effectively engage local people in wildlife conservation. Local people must be allowed to benefit from conservation efforts and be supported by responsive, efficient law enforcement agencies as equal partners in the fight against wildlife crime.

Illegal wildlife trade is at the top of the international conservation agenda. A surge in poaching is now ravaging populations of iconic animals such as rhinos and elephants — for example, poaching of rhinos in South Africa increased from 13 in 2007 to over 1,200 in 2014.¹ A host of lesser-known species of wildlife² are also being hard hit, such as pangolins, turtles, fish, birds, reptiles, primates, medicinal plants and timber species. The global policy response has emphasised three broad strategies: increase law enforcement, reduce demand and engage local communities.³

Governments and international agencies have increasingly recognised the role of indigenous peoples and local communities⁴ in the governance of natural resources, including illegally traded species. Yet this role has largely been overlooked in discussions of how to respond urgently to the current spate of poaching

and illegal wildlife trade. Interventions in countries where wildlife is poached have, to date, placed far greater emphasis on intensified law enforcement than on community-based approaches.⁵ Even where community-based programmes have attracted support, they have often focused on developing alternative livelihoods and in some cases reducing the cost of living with wildlife. Rarely have initiatives engaged directly and effectively with communities to address wildlife crime, or increased the incentives for local people to steward and sustainably manage wildlife.

What's wrong with enforcement?

Law enforcement⁶ is a critical ingredient of successful conservation. Indeed, beyond formal legal systems, local people themselves have a wide range of social and cultural norms and values by which they regulate their own natural resource use. Current enforcement approaches

Local people are uniquely placed to support and participate in law enforcement efforts

have mainly focused on state- or private sector-led policing, and these efforts are increasingly militarised. Attention was drawn to this tendency at a recent international

symposium titled Beyond Enforcement, organised by IUCN's specialist group on Sustainable Use and Livelihoods (SULi), together with IIED, the University of Queensland's Centre of Excellence for

Environmental Decisions (CEED), the Austrian Ministry of Environment, and TRAFFIC.

The symposium highlighted the concern that strategies overly focused on enforcement may have limited effectiveness, particularly in the longer term. The continued depletion of high-value species such as elephants and rhinos, despite great increases in enforcement, affirm the limitations of such approaches.

Not only have enforcement-dominated approaches proven ineffective for conservation, they also have had worrying social consequences. Participants in the symposium discussed some of these. In the worst such cases, enforcers have reportedly perpetrated human rights abuses: deliberate destruction of property, killing, rape and torture.⁷ In less extreme cases, poorly targeted enforcement activities have undermined local confidence in conservation authorities

and, indeed, the perceived legitimacy of the legal system, resulting in further disincentives for communities to conserve wildlife.

Even when enforcement is successful at the level of a specific site, it may have the effect of displacing the poaching threat to other areas where enforcement is weaker and local communities are poor or disenfranchised enough to have an incentive to engage in wildlife crime. As many populations of high-value species coincide with areas of high poverty, and heavy enforcement cannot be applied everywhere at all times, the illegal wildlife trade will likely continue to move along the path of least resistance.

Furthermore, addressing the illegal wildlife trade does not simply mean punishing non-compliance with wildlife laws. In some cases, the laws and policies surrounding land tenure and use of land and wildlife resources can themselves be part of the problem. In many places, for example, conservation policies prevent local people from deriving any economic benefit from protecting wildlife, thus removing a major motivation to safeguard and sustainably manage the wild species they live with. When wildlife stewardship offers no economic value to compete with other local land use opportunities, wildlife habitat is often converted rapidly to those other, more lucrative uses. This dynamic accelerates habitat loss, which is the foremost direct driver of wildlife decline globally.

Box 1. Case study: a tale of two elephants

In Mali in West Africa and Tanzania in East Africa, very different approaches have been used to engage local communities in protecting elephants from poachers. The Ruvuma Elephant Project in Tanzania, supported by the PAMS Foundation, operates in an area where the poaching challenge has been significant. Game scouts recruited from the local villages are trained to work alongside government rangers, and they receive performance-related rewards. Local villagers also inform law enforcement efforts, reporting poaching and other suspicious activities to rangers. But this kind of engagement comes with risks to individuals and sometimes the community — not least the fear of reprisals by poachers who have been known to shoot innocent people. The project requires good relationships and trust, so it has reciprocally taken on issues of concern to the local communities, particularly conflicts between humans and elephants. Chili fencing has been used very effectively to deter elephants from farmers' fields while producing a cash crop. The net effect has been a dramatic reduction in poaching together with better-protected crops.

The Mali Elephant Project also employs local people as guards and informants, or 'brigades de surveillance'. The members of the brigades are only paid in food. In this case, the critical ingredients have proven to be ownership, pride, self-esteem and an improved natural resource base where livestock can co-exist with the elephants. Here elephants are culturally valued and seen as an indicator of broader ecosystem health, a foundation for sustaining local pastoralist livelihoods. Thanks to these values, there had been no poaching in the project area until the political coup in January 2012, and since that time the involvement of local people has become even more critical to controlling poaching. The emphasis on locally developed solutions will likely remain central to success.

Source: Beyond Enforcement Symposium Report (<http://pubs.iied.org/G03903.html>)

Box 2. Case study: the value of sustainable use

Trophy hunting is used as a key tool for conservation, economic development and countering poaching in Namibia. It is estimated that if trophy hunting in Namibia were to stop, revenue losses to communities would be on the order of US\$1 million per year. It would also profoundly impact the financial viability of most of Namibia's conservancies (areas of communal land set aside for conservation), which earn up to 80 per cent of their income from trophy hunting. Although trophy hunting may be unpalatable to some, it has provided the incentive for communities to choose to conserve and manage wildlife. In Namibia, there are now 82 communal conservancies accounting for 20 per cent of the country's land area. Protecting individual animals by banning hunting of a species could potentially undermine the conservation of the entire population.

Source: Beyond Enforcement Symposium Report (<http://pubs.iied.org/G03903.html>)

Is community engagement the answer?

Globally, beyond the context of illegal trade, there are decades of experience with successful community-based conservation. The numerous examples run from forest management in India and Nepal to wildlife management in southern Africa. But just as sole reliance on law enforcement is unlikely to be effective in curtailing the illegal wildlife trade, so it is with community conservation efforts. On their own, they are generally inadequate to stem the tide of wildlife-related crime — especially given escalating wildlife commodity values, militarisation of poaching and the infiltration of communities by sophisticated trafficking networks.⁹

Members of communities that share land with wildlife may well be involved with illegal wildlife trade in some way. Some are poachers themselves, while others may participate more indirectly by helping outsiders locate wildlife, sharing information on patrol locations or providing poachers with accommodation, food, means to transport illegal wildlife products and so on. Efforts to combat wildlife crime need to understand and address the incentives and motivations of all the major players, including local community members. Local people's motives for contributing to illegal wildlife trade can be diverse, ranging from poverty to redressing former injustices to thrill-seeking or revenge for damage done by wildlife — for example, property damage, injury and even loss of life caused by elephants. Likewise, the counter-balancing incentives for wildlife stewardship and conservation are also varied, including financial rewards, the recognition of cultural values, and moral or ethical considerations. The nature and scale of the illegal wildlife trade today poses fundamental challenges on both fronts: to state and privately run law enforcement efforts and to community-based conservation approaches.

Synergies from pairing effective enforcement with community engagement

To step up the efficacy of enforcement, interventions against illegal wildlife trade need to develop partnerships with local communities. Local people are well placed to engage in poaching because of their proximity to wildlife and their local knowledge. But for these same reasons they are also uniquely placed to support and participate in law enforcement efforts. They can provide first lines of defence, and become the eyes and ears of enforcement agencies as scouts, informants and guides.

Community engagement cannot be delivered on demand or through intimidation, however. It must be based on listening, building trust, respecting traditional authority and developing shared, co-created solutions. It also has to be backed up by efficient and responsive arresting authorities. Local people do not have the power of arrest and are at risk of reprisals from poachers if law enforcement responses are not rapid and well executed.

Recognising the rights of communities to use and benefit from wildlife is fundamental to engaging them in tackling the illegal wildlife trade. Where local people have developed a collective sense of ownership over wildlife, they have come to view poaching as stealing from the community rather than stealing from the state. They are then likely to become just as protective of their wildlife as their cattle, goats, fish or other assets. Such ownership is built through policies that enable communities to exercise their options and opportunities to benefit from wildlife, and that build their motivation and capacity to steward wildlife.

This principle applies not just to domestic policy and legislation in countries that harbour wildlife populations under threat from illegal trade, but also to other countries that influence what happens in

the home ranges of these species. For example, unilateral domestic (and indeed multilateral international) bans on the import of some wildlife products can effectively shut down important markets for what might have been a sustainably produced product. Such bans may unintentionally block benefits that could accrue to local people and provide them with an incentive to conserve.

The way forward

International deliberations on how to curb the illegal wildlife trade should not continue to disregard or underplay community-led approaches. The findings from the Beyond Enforcement symposium⁹ show that communities often hold the key to finding a lasting solution to this illicit trade. In March 2015 the inter-governmental Kasane Conference on illegal wildlife trade reiterated the importance of balancing the focus on enforcement with attention to community engagement and recognition of the importance of sustainable use.¹⁰ To make further progress against wildlife crime, a step change is needed in the way governments, NGOs and other stakeholders work with the local people who live alongside wildlife and, ultimately, hold its future in their hands. This includes:

- Supporting and upholding community rights and responsibilities for managing wildlife and addressing illegal wildlife trade (including recognition of the distinction between illegal, unsustainable trade and the legitimate, sustainable use of wild resources);

- Strengthening community voices in the international debate on the illegal wildlife trade;
- Strengthening partnerships between communities, state and private law enforcement agencies, and conservation NGOs; and
- Increasing knowledge and understanding of the wide range of motivations and drivers behind the illegal wildlife trade, and evaluating the effectiveness of different types of responses across diverse contexts.

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Knowledge Products

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Notes

¹ Save the Rhino, 2014. Poaching Statistics. Available at: www.savetherhino.org/rhino_info/poaching_statistics / ² 'Wildlife' here is understood as including all wild biological resources: flora, fauna and fungi. / ³ The terms 'communities' and 'local people' are used here to comprise 'Indigenous Peoples and local communities' as per the agreement of the 12th Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. / ⁴ For example, see the Declaration from the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade (www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/281289/london-wildlife-conference-declaration-140213.pdf). / ⁵ Roe et al. 2014. The elephant in the room: sustainable use in the illegal wildlife trade. IIED, London (pubs.iied.org/17205IIED.html); and Challender, D.W.S. and MacMillan, D.C. 2014. Poaching is more than an enforcement problem. Conservation Letters 7(5):484-494 / ⁶ We define enforcement as monitoring compliance and sanctioning noncompliance with norms and laws, traditional or formal, that regulate access to and use of wildlife resources. / ⁷ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201401080092.html>. / ⁸ www.justconservation.org/are-we-hearing-a-call-to-arms / ⁹ See the meeting report of the Beyond Enforcement Symposium, available at <http://pubs.iied.org/G03903.html> / ¹⁰ www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-wildlife-trade-kasane-statement.