

The Question of Rhino Horn Trade: Policy Perspectives

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Summary:

The historical background to the current dilemma facing South Africa policy makers on rhino conservation through horn trade is provided along with three perspectives from environmental sociology as lenses through which to examine the issue. Relevant and recent literature from international politics, ecology, economics and criminology is reviewed. The weight of the evidence and argument falls on the side of market reduction rather than trade. Political and economic strategies are proposed as alternatives.

Historical Introduction

The most comprehensive assessment of the world's vertebrates confirms an extinction crisis with 20 per cent of species threatened. However, the situation would be much worse if not for current global conservation efforts. According to Simon Stuart, chair of the IUCN species survival commission and an author of the study, "History has shown us that conservation can achieve the impossible, as anyone who knows the story of the white rhinoceros in southern Africa is aware" (Williams 2010). As a result of early game reserve establishment around the turn of the last century and later Operation Rhino, South Africa's white rhino population grew from a handful on the edge of extinction to around 21 000 which is 93% of the world's herd. In terms of rhino generally, Namibia is the custodian of the next biggest African herd of 1800, India has 2300 while other nations count their rhino in hundreds.

The name most closely associated with Operation Rhino is Ian Player. Under his leadership at Umfolozi Game Reserve in the 1960s, live capture and translocation saved the white rhinoceros from extinction and catapulted the provincial conservationist to fame. In 1964 as chief conservator of Zululand he was invited to the United States as a guest of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to film *To Catch a Rhino*. Operation Rhino had not only succeeded in capturing and moving unprecedented numbers of these animals, but also the imagination of the world inspiring America's Operation Grizzly Bear. Conservation on the Zululand frontier was effected in a strong Anglo-Zulu alliance that succeeded with Africa's 'Big Five' despite, rather than thanks to, the efforts of officials and scientists. It was not, however, this herculean story which he wished the world to be aware of. His conviction that wilderness is essential to humanity's search for meaning found expression in the establishment of the International Wilderness Leadership Foundation [WILD] in 1974 (Draper, 1998).

Player attributes such achievements to his Zulu game guard mentor Maqubu Ntombela, a man profoundly literate in the lore of the wild, but without formal education. Nelson Mandela called their partnership 'a shining example to the spirit of the people in this country' (Player, 1997). Their work would not have been possible without the commitment of Zulu leadership such as Mangosuthu Buthelezi ensuring cooperation with neighbouring communities. Ntombela became the KwaZulu Government's consultant when they began following Zimbabwe's lead with community-based conservation programmes in the 1980s. Such political will continues to the present with reported support coming from King Goodwill Zwelithini and the Amakhosi surrounding the Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park for the campaign to stem the surge in rhino poaching. Part of the strategy led by

Bandile Mkhize, Ezemvelo's CEO, is to lobby for overturning the CITES ban on rhino horn and place legitimately acquired horn on the market. The rationale is that this would bring the price down, thereby reducing poaching incentives while generating revenue for conservation. Unexpected support has come from the United States when former Senator and Californian conservation chief Ray Arnett applauded their efforts, describing them as falling into the policy of wise use of natural resources (*Weekend Witness*, 8/9/2012).

In the US, the wilderness concept emerged as a policy dictating that designated wild nature should, apart from non-mechanical recreation, not be utilized at all. Wise use and non-utilitarian wilderness thinking are the poles around which conservation policy debates turn. Through Player, the wilderness concept took root in the iMfolozi Wilderness Area. The exception to the rule is helicopter access for relocation of surplus rhino. Clearly a policy mix is required. Sustainable use through ecotourism and trophy hunting has been part of the reason for rhino population growth in state, parastatal and private reserves. Since 1986 when the status of African rhino was deteriorating (Western & Vigne, 1985) hunting began in earnest in South Africa, demand for live rhino drove prices steeply upward. In 1989, the Natal Parks Board began to sell rhino at what became the biggest annual game auction in the world. Private owners became more motivated to manage their more professionally and the national population grew steadily at 8%. Rhino revenue streams in state and provincial parks have become vital to the maintenance of the national biodiversity and natural heritage which is found in the large territories required by rhino as habitat which, before the current poaching epidemic, cost USD 1000 p/square km (Emslie, 2004).

Faced with budgetary constraints and stockpiles of legitimately acquired stocks of rhino horn and ivory, the extension of market forces to these byproducts of their conservation work was long called for by the Natal Parks Board. Given that these calls were made during Apartheid when the world was placing trade sanctions on South Africa, they were fruitless. CITES uses the same weapon of economic opprobrium to enforce national compliance that the world used to lever South Africa away from Apartheid immorality. Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, the new provincial body, holds its predecessors view, but with a more legitimate political profile. Zulu King Zwelithini urges the nation to consider an African solution in trade (*Weekend Witness*, 8/09/12). This has become urgent in that already shrinking provincial subsidy is to be withdrawn and Ezemvelo required to become economically self-sufficient since more state funds are needed to deliver human services such as health and education, both of which are ailing in the new South Africa. CEO Mkhize said that the agency had to use unbudgeted resources to fight rhino poaching. The financial blow came in the same week that the province had lost nine rhino, some of which were in the Smangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage Site. (*The Mercury* 28/09/12).

Nationally and internationally, however, there is a strong case to err on the side of the precautionary principle before wading into rhino horn trade which is a very different matter to the export of a limited number of marked and CITES-permitted micro-chipped hunting trophies. Even at this limited level there is little supervision of the trade, leading horn traders to pose as big-game hunters for access to horn. In 2008 South Africa began issuing one rhino permit per year. Rhino poaching increased thereafter, as did the number of Vietnamese applying for trophy-hunting permits and being arrested trying to smuggle horns out of South Africa. 'This is not a crisis just for South Africa,' says Lieut. Colonel Lineo Grace Motsepe, the commander of the endangered-species desk of the South African police service. 'It's a crisis for the whole world.' (Beech et. al. 2011). CITES, since 1975 the world's attempted solution, has had an uneven impact. At the national level enforcement is 'highly variable and in some countries weak to non-existent. In many parties it is not, through lack

of political will as much as lack of financial and human resources' (Reeve, 2006: 895). Everything is matter of perspective. Sachs (1999a,b) has identified three ways of seeing global issues of environment and development. Whilst brutally abridged here, they are useful in guiding the debate and apply to our issues in southern Africa (Draper, 2011).

The Contest, Astronaut and Home Perspectives

From the point of view of the contest perspective, environmental concern comes as a force driving economic growth. Changing consumer demand drives new products that cut down resource use, lowering production costs and new environmental technology opens up new markets. Ecology and economics are seen to be working together, the marriage of the two is held up as a magic formula called a 'positive sum game'. Growth is held to be part of the solution and no longer as part of the problem. This idea has done much to drive environmentalism into mainstream thought. Prior to this it was seen as a concern of fringe 'greens'. Natural capital is viewed as grossly undervalued and therefore profligately allocated, while human resources along with technology are underutilized. Reformulating the equation is proposed to be the solution thus achieving 'eco-efficiency' as a business strategy. This familiar view flows from Adam Smith to the neoliberal present and certainly came into play in 1986 showing that the very market demand that drove the rhino the edge of extinction could be turned in the animal's favour. Given the crisis of nature, there is a strong case to be made that the *Wealth of Nations* is not simply an economic issue, but rather more one of international politics and diplomacy.

Since the 1970s, the world has increasingly become seen as a physical body sustained by complex biological and physical processes rather than a collection of countries and cultures. The biophysical view of the earth as a system also projects a transnational space where the existence of nations and community development concerns fade into irrelevance when compared to the overwhelming presence of natural earth. Especially within an international community of scientists, a discourse has developed which constructs the planet as a scientific and political project. This community thinks in planetary terms; they frame 'sustainable development' through an astronaut's perspective.

Since only a few people become astronauts, without pictures of the earth it would hardly have been possible to view the planet as an object of management. But there are other reasons, both scientific and political. Only in the course of the 1980s – with the ozone hole, acid rain and the greenhouse effect – did the ecological footprint of industrial societies become public knowledge. Also, scientists had by then made huge strides in understanding the biosphere as an ecosystem. From hence came the recognition that the developed countries, mainly in the North, spread their consumption and its effects to the less developed countries in the South. It follows that the responsibilities of the North should also embrace the entire earth. It thus recognises the limits to development in time given the fragility of the biosphere. Unlike in the contest perspective, tackling the crisis of nature also entails dealing with the crisis of justice.

Although this perspective is scientific, it realises the need to have political cooperation and a new balance of power between North and South. It recognises the need to meet some of the expectations of the less privileged global population. As a result, many environmentalists have set their hopes on some political unification of the world which would provide the structure for efficient management of global assets. While steps have been taken in this direction by the United Nations in the last decades, there remains much to be done. Such conferences of world powers are characterised by protests by those feeling marginalised from decision making.

‘Sustainable development’ in the home perspective is neither about economic excellence nor ecological integrity, but about local livelihoods with the major cause of environmental problems being overdevelopment. It is not seen to be caused by inefficient allocation of resources or overpopulation. The focus here is on the current logic of development which is identified as a force disempowering local communities in the South. In the North it is seen to be diminishing well-being by creating consuming fast-food cultures with unfulfilling lives chasing deadlines. Development is seen to be damaging to both the environment and human culture. ‘Sustainable development’ is looked at critically as the theory of the ruling classes of the world which is an oxymoron (a contradiction in terms) because from this point of view, economic development cannot be sustained in space or time.

The home perspective tends to focus on alternatives to conventional economic development. Hi-tech modernisation as a development path is not a policy that is appreciated from this point of view. The crisis of nature is seen to be a result of the crisis of justice. Wealthy developed countries interested in conserving nature are expected to make room for southern societies to grow, while in the developing countries the urban middle classes are expected to control and consume less resources, leaving more control for peasant and tribal communities over their livelihoods and the resources they depend up to survive.

Smaller NGOs, social movements and radical intellectuals tend to be the network that keeps the home perspective alive. The North is expected to stop using other people’s nature and reduce the amount of global environmental space it occupies. Rich countries tend to leave an ‘ecological footprint’ on the world which is much bigger than their own territories. This can be in the form of imported food, minerals, tourism as nature consumption and their use of the oceans and atmosphere which are all impacted upon and consumed as a much bigger slice of the pie than would be a fair share. From the home perspective ‘wealth reduction’ is called for. The North is expected to thereby reduce the environmental burden it places on southern countries and repay the ecological debt from excessive use of the biosphere over many years. Unlike the astronaut’s perspective which calls for the North helping the South, good global neighbourhood from the home perspective requires the North putting its own house in order.

Research Findings

The home perspective resonates with the argument made by leading international nature politics academic (Duffy 2010 a.). She argues that as wealthy consumers we ‘are all participants in the wildlife trade’ which is big business worth around \$160 billion a year and the illegal side between \$10 and \$20 billion—the second-largest illicit market in the world after drugs. Duffy argues that CITES has, after several decades, failed to bring the trade properly under control. This is attributed to the misconception of the driver of the trade as poverty rather than wealth. Without demand from rich countries, poorer people would not engage in poaching, smuggling and trading (2010 b). Duffys’ point is vindicated in this case since rhino poaching has evolved into a hi-tech capital-intensive operation like mining with a product as valuable as gold, so poverty is even further from the equation. Behind wealth as a driver comes organised crime chasing high dividends with relatively low risk compared to other illegal activities. Wildlife smuggling tends to be a low priority for governments more concerned with protecting their citizens against drug smuggling or people trafficking.

Skepticism of regulated trade in wildlife is underscored by data showing the discrepancies in reported levels of international wildlife trade. When wildlife trade reports for the United States, the

world's largest consumer of endangered wildlife, were compared with (CITES) data with U.S. Customs data, both U.S. imports and exports, CITES and Customs reported substantially different trade volumes for all taxa in all years. Such widely divergent data, argue Blundell and Mascia suggest 'widespread inaccuracies that may distort the perceived risk of targeted wildlife exploitation' (2005: 2020).

While conservationists and ecologists are predictably cautious about stimulating demand for rhino horn, one would expect economists to be enthusiastic about market-based policy. Traditional economic theory has it that opening trade in illicit goods should unambiguously lower prices by increasing supply, satisfying consumer demand and reducing incentives for poachers. Not so. The experiments in 1999 and 2002 with southern African ivory were associated with an increase in poaching and pointed to laundering and a complex interaction between legal and illegal markets (Fischer, 2003).

Economic modeling formalizing the interaction between poaching, enforcement and legal harvesting found a ban to be a better optimal solution 'when a government is concerned with the stock level as well as the returns from legal activity than under a profit-maximising objective' (Missios, 2004: 626). Furthermore, without the addition of non-utilitarian existence values to the equation on which the fate of wildlife and wilderness in less developed nations hinges, such populations will decline. Such non-consumptive, non-use existence value is held primarily by residents of developed nations from whom a tax must be extracted to pay for the land use required (Alexander, 2000). Instead of selling legitimate stocks of horn, they could be valued and paid for by wealthy and consumer nations, then burnt.

International institutions which would carry out the taxation transfer are not yet well developed but there is a history of debt for nature swaps going back to 1984 (Shandra et. al. 2011). CITES has a meagre budget but could point other global funds to where they are need and thus dangle a carrot in the front of the stick that trade sanctions wield. South Africa is a signatory to the World Heritage Fund which has a small budget to make symbolic recognitions of conservation effort which led to the World Bank donating (not lending) substantial sums for development of our World Heritage such as the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Park. Transnational conservation success has been held up as tangible evidence of the African Renaissance by our government and increasing range for large mammals such as the rhino will require further co-operation and world support which would spread the benefits to our neighbours in southern Africa.

With political-economic solutions comes the danger of misappropriation of funds and the continuation of unregulated domestic markets. Such unintended consequences can more easily be apprehended than out of control markets. The scourge of crime is also something that will require international co-operation. Criminological research has revealed how 'corruption among officials in the site nations facilitates the trafficking in endangered species. Corruption in South Africa is not limited to just one component of their justice system. Rather it is widespread including border guards, game rangers, police and conservation officials' (Warchol, 2004: 71). The experience with the ivory trade ban and a declining elephant population is that outlawing trade is in itself insufficient. Further criminological research could reveal patterns informing either market regulation or disruption (Lemieux and Clarke, 2009).

Corruption is an international issue which developed nations still battle internally. The ANC government has shown a willingness to combat it. However, rhino horn in the market is likely to stimulate more, rather than less, dishonesty. Criminological research, in line with the 2005 United Nations program of work on transnational and organized crime, has found the solution to illegal flora and fauna trade in market reduction rather than market expansion (Schneider: 2008: 295). International money could fund neutral ombudsmen from the NGO sector to ensure externally secured budgets are spent fairly and effectively.

Discussion:

Successful African initiatives notwithstanding, rhino conservation calls for multifaceted global solutions. Milleken and Shaw's excellent TRAFFIC report (2012) makes many recommendations which need not be repeated here. Their skepticism and ambivalence about reopening trade in rhino horn is reinforced but via a survey of peer-reviewed scholarship to shed some objectivity onto the hot and increasingly polarized debate. However, this paper has taken a step back from TRAFFIC recommendation that 'South Africa needs to rapidly address the constraints upon resources through governmental and institutional budgeting procedures so that conservation officials in all departments are empowered to take on the criminals behind rhino crime without the impediment of capacity and resource limitations'. As wars in defense of national resources tend to, the rhino crisis as emblematic of conservation has done much to raise nationalist sentiment, but the problem is not a national one.

While the literature reviewed might support an astronaut's perspective of planet management calling for trade reduction and North-South taxation, such are ideals to be striven for through international diplomacy which are slow to yield results. The realpolitik is that if the world does not want to pay South Africa to keep the global rhino population healthy, then a contest it may well have to be since rhino do not vote, and the majority of voters place their own well-being before that of rhino. As quickly as rhino horn sales might solve fiscal constraints to conservation efforts, the international sea change necessary to open trade in rhino horn is likely to be an ideologically blocked route. North-South taxation does not of course solve problems of resource transfer to local livelihoods in the poorer areas of southern Africa carrying the land-use opportunity cost of conservation. That is not the matter being debated here, but certainly the crux of the home perspective is that the poor not be overlooked and neglected, while the wealthy are targeted for market reduction. Demand for rhino horn has been dramatically reduced in many former major markets in the past and there is no reason why this could not happen again in new markets such as Viet Nam. India's success with rhino conservation is attributed to local community involvement, as well as government transparency, albeit with a small but growing rhino herd (Vigne & Martina, 2012). South African conservation agencies have been making great strides in this direction which could be greatly improved with bigger budgets since meeting their conservation mandate is difficult enough at present. A fairer future that shares the burden of world heritage custodianship, could enable the South to 'leapfrog' the North on the road to sustainability (Sachs & Santariua, 2007).

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