

by Dr. Chris Brown

Open Letter To Ambassador Xin Shunkang Of The People's Republic Of China To Namibia

CEO, Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE)

Chris Brown, the NEC CEO wrote a letter to the Chinese Ambassador in Namibia dated 21st December, 2016. The letter reflects the opinion of NEC members and supporters

Dear Ambassador Xin Shunkang,

During the past few weeks, several Chinese nationals have been apprehended and charged with wildlife crimes, including illegal possession of rhino horn, ivory and pangolin skins and scales. Your embassy is on record stating that "it will not allow a few of its nationals who have been arrested in connection with poaching to tarnish its country's image". While we recognize that not all Chinese nationals are involved in wildlife crimes, Namibia's environmental community believes that the situation regarding Chinese nationals committing wildlife crimes in Namibia is far more serious and broad-based than you have acknowledged. The fact is, unless effective action is taken now to halt wildlife crime, your country will get an increasingly bad name. And you and your country are best placed to address the problem.

Until the arrival of Chinese nationals in significant numbers in Namibia, commercial wildlife crime was extremely low. As Chinese nationals moved into all regions of Namibia, setting up businesses, networks, acquiring mineral prospecting licenses and offering payment for wildlife products, the incidence of poaching, illegal wildlife capture, collection, killing and export has increased exponentially. Chinese nationals have been involved in, and/or are the commercial drivers behind:

- the escalating poaching of rhinos and elephants in Namibia and the illegal export of rhino horn and ivory,
- the capture, trade and export of pangolins,
- the import of Chinese monofilament nets in industrial quantities via Zambia to the northeast of Namibia, which are destroying the fisheries of the Zambezi, Chobe, Kwando and Okavango Rivers,
- the unsustainable commercialization of fisheries in these north-eastern rivers and wetland systems for export to cities and towns in neighbouring countries,
- the capture and killing of Carmine Bee-eaters at their breeding colonies by means of nets, the rise in bush-meat poaching wherever Chinese nationals are working on road construction and other infrastructure, including tortoises, monitor lizards, pythons and any other form of wild meat, including from protected and endangered species,
- the illegal collection of shellfish on the Namibian coast,
- the illegal transit through Namibia and attempted export of poached abalone from Cape waters through Namibian ports.

We are also aware of long-standing interests by some Chinese nationals to start a shark fin industry in

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Namibia, a practice that has caused widespread damage to shark populations in many parts of the world, including in South Africa. And more recently, Chinese nationals have proposed to capture marine mammals and seabirds for the Asian aquarium market. The Namibian scientific and environmental communities have strongly rejected this proposal on sound conservation and ethical grounds, as has the Namibian public.

We are concerned by an apparent total disregard by some Chinese nationals for Namibia's wildlife, conservation, and animal welfare laws and values. Namibians are proud of their environmental heritage, their rich wildlife resources and the institutional mechanisms that are in place to sustainably manage them. Namibia as a nation has worked hard to protect and nurture these natural assets. Namibia's wildlife management provides an international example for good conservation and sustainable use. We have not made these investments so that some Chinese nationals, or anyone else, can pillage them.

The illegal commercial interests of some Chinese nationals towards Namibia's protected wildlife has exploited the vulnerability of poor Namibians and divided societies. It undermines local ownership of natural resources and the empowerment of communities to managing their wildlife wisely, for long-term communal benefits. It undermines Namibia's globally acclaimed Community-based Conservancy programme, and it does considerable damage to Namibia's international conservation and sustainable development reputation.

The recent announcement by the Chinese business community that it is contributing N\$30,000 to counter rhino poaching, while acknowledging that Namibians are deeply concerned about the situation caused by some Chinese nationals, totally fails to understand the economic scale of the problem. Indeed, it is an insult to the environmental sector in Namibia and to Namibia's environment. An initial very conservative estimate of the extent of the losses to Namibia's wildlife and ecosystems caused by Chinese nationals is about N\$811 million. And this does not include the significant additional resources that Namibia's government, donors, communities, private sector, and NGOs have had to commit to combat escalating wildlife crimes. These funds should rather have been spent on more productive activities such as continuing to develop the wildlife and tourism sectors to improve the lives and livelihoods of rural communities.

We do not claim to fully understand the relationship between Chinese nationals and the Chinese state. It appears that Chinese nationals are not at liberty to obtain passports and travel independently around the world, bringing their personal capital and starting businesses in their own names in whatever country would have them, independent of the Chinese state. As such, Chinese nationals in Namibia appear to be part of a state supported system. So, as the highest ranking Chinese official in Namibia, we would expect all Chinese nationals in Namibia to fall under your authority. As such, we now call on you to put an immediate stop to the illegal wildlife crimes perpetrated, encouraged, funded, incentivized or otherwise committed and supported, by some Chinese nationals in Namibia. Further, we call on the Chinese government to make good, by investing in Namibia's environment sector in a transparent and internationally recognized manner, and in proportion to the damage caused, to help rebuild Namibia's wildlife populations, ecosystems, management systems and reputation.

This letter does not represent only the views of the 40 environmental organisations listed below, but

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also represents the views of countless members of the Namibian public and our international friends. The sentiments expressed in social media over the past months, from across a broad spectrum of Namibian society, and their outrage at the leading role that Chinese nationals play in wildlife crime have surely been noted by you and members of your embassy. You will also be aware of the sentiments expressed by our President, by the Minister of Environment and Tourism, and by the Namibian Police Inspector General as reported in the local media.

The time for inaction is over. China has a policy of non-intervention and yet these actions by some Chinese nationals, and the apparent inaction of your embassy to address the problem, are direct and indirect interventions that have disastrous impacts on our policy and legal framework, on our environmental culture and ethics, on our natural heritage and on our national conservation and development programmes. They also have huge negative impacts on our people and their livelihoods, and on our international reputation.

In late 2014 the out-going US President Barack Obama, in an interview with the New York Times, accused China of being a “free rider” for the last 30 years in not taking on more of its international obligations. In the last couple of years, particularly under the leadership of your President Xi Jinping, China has taken a decidedly more active leadership role in global issues. It is time to extend that leadership to natural resources and in particular, to wildlife conservation

Indeed, the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, almost 2,000 years ago, may have been amongst the first to advocate for ecological sustainability within a philosophy of coexistence between man and nature. If China is to live up to its stated aims of having positive interactions between peoples and countries then this, for us in Namibia, is a critical issue.

We support our government’s policy of attracting foreign investment to stimulate growth, employment and development. And we counter all forms of xenophobia and profiling. However, we expect foreign investors and their nationals to abide by Namibia’s laws, and to embrace Namibia’s cultures, ethics, and values. Too many Chinese nationals have abused Namibia’s environmental laws, and this is causing growing resentment and anger amongst Namibians. By their criminal actions, some Chinese nationals have drawn attention to themselves and their nationality through their blatant disregard of Namibia’s legal and environmental values. We are also concerned at how little action the Chinese embassy in Namibia appears to be taking to address the problem.

We as concerned Namibian Environmental NGOs and businesses, who it should be stated, are pro-sustainable use, stand ready to work with a China that willingly takes on greater responsibility and leadership in addressing the illegal trade in wildlife and, in particular, commits to putting an immediate stop to all wildlife crimes in Namibia by its Chinese nationals.