

by Catherine Semcer

Politicizing Conservation: The Zimbabwe Elephant Conundrum



When the United States imposed a unilateral moratorium on elephant trophy imports from Zimbabwe in 2014, conservationists were taken by surprise. The moratorium's sudden announcement in the Federal Register, the daily digest of all proposals and rule makings emanating from the United States executive branch, made it clear the ban was being imposed without the benefit of consultation with either Zimbabwe's conservation agencies or the US public, as required by law. The timing of the decision, coming during a period of both strained relations between Washington and Harare, and heightened international concern over widespread elephant poaching, stained it with suspicion of political motivations. Eight years later that stain persists, despite changes in the administration of both countries, leaving the conservation programs elephants depend on, unstable, and raising questions about the future role of science and law in US decision-making on environmental issues.

According to the African Elephant Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of

by Catherine Semcer

Nature (IUCN), Zimbabwe is home to the second largest elephant population in Africa with an estimated 82,630 animals. This success is the product of the nation's holistic approach to conservation that leverages the strengths of protected areas, like national parks, with the active engagement and investment of rural communities in the surrounding matrix via the often lauded Communal Areas Management Program For Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE).

The CAMPFIRE program arose during the 1980s and 1990s with the active support of the United States, via the US Agency for International Development (USAID), who provided financing and technical expertise. Under CAMPFIRE, rural commercial enterprises are developed and markets leveraged, to raise the standard of living in rural areas and, in turn, reduce incentives to participate in poaching while increasing the social carrying capacity of wildlife populations that are dangerous and can come into conflict with agriculture.

Enterprises developed under CAMPFIRE include hunting concessions, community fisheries and photo-tourism ventures. As noted by USAID, one hallmark of CAMPFIRE's success is the doubling of elephant numbers in program areas from 4,000 to 8,000 individuals. This success has been delivered through the program's embrace of fee based trophy hunting as a means to create jobs, encourage investment and raise revenue that can be applied to conservation, as well as the nation's conservative management of hunting itself. While the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) grants Zimbabwe an export quota of 500 elephants per annum (1000 tusks), the quota employed in practice has ranged between 240 and 400 elephants, or 0.3 percent to 0.5 percent of Zimbabwe's total elephant population. This conservatism allows hunting programs to both be sustainable and promote a high level of trophy quality. This increases the economic competitiveness of Zimbabwe's hunting trade, which in turn creates more business for hunting operations that then create more economic security in the nation's rural areas and increase the opportunity costs for engaging in poaching or habitat destruction.

Between 2010 and 2015 a total of 1,087 elephants were allocated under quota in CAMPFIRE Areas, with the majority, fifty three percent, being utilized by hunters from the United States. These hunters in turn generated almost \$7.5 million in revenue, more than ten times the amount generated by photo-tourism in CAMPFIRE Areas during the same period. A portion of this revenue helps to pay the salaries of 168 community game scouts who conduct anti-poaching patrols in CAMPFIRE areas. These scouts, who historically logged more than 3,000 patrol days over more than 2 million square kilometers, represent an important force multiplier for the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks), the country's principal anti-poaching body, who is also funded with hunting fees.

While not a panacea, the numbers show the CAMPFIRE approach to conservation has steadily delivered positive outcomes for Zimbabwe's people and wildlife and that the patronage of US hunters has played a decisive role in these successes. This track record of success was disrupted in 2014 when the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced the suspension of elephant trophy imports from Zimbabwe into the United States, saying they doubted the ability of Zimbabwe's natural resource management programs to conserve elephant populations. Because of the size of the US hunting market, this represented nothing short of a crippling blow to conservation efforts in Zimbabwe.

The agency's announcement was made under authority of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the US

by Catherine Semcer

enabling legislation for CITES. Under CITES, parties are permitted, at their discretion, to adopt more stringent barriers to wildlife trade than those in the convention. Under this provision the ESA empowers the US Fish and Wildlife Service to allow or disallow the importation of hunting trophies of CITES listed species based on their determination of whether or not the programs of the range nations “enhance” the conservation of the species. The criteria for making these determinations gives the agency a wide degree of professional latitude, but still must fall within the ESAs requirement that agency decisions be based on the “best available commercial and scientific information.”

The announcement that the US was abandoning nearly 2 decades of recognizing hunting’s value to elephant conservation in Zimbabwe was not without wider context. Elephant poaching in Africa began to spike around 2008 due to increased demand for ivory from a rising middle class in China and other Asian countries. While these increases in elephant poaching were primarily centered in East Africa and the Congo Basin, and poaching in Zimbabwe remained comparatively incidental, the international outcry for elephant conservation treated African nations as a collective, ignoring the important details and nuances between countries and their conservation programs. Animal rights activists, who represent a voting bloc in the US, utilized the global concern over elephant poaching to drive increased animosity towards trophy hunters, between whom a moral equivalency was drawn.

2014 saw increased diplomatic sparring between the US and Zimbabwe over accusations of corruption and a lack of commitment to democracy on the part of Harare. That year the US Treasury Department imposed economic sanctions on 113 Zimbabwean nationals and 70 related enterprises. The imposition of these sanctions, combined with the moratorium’s announcement in advance of the US mid-term elections, raised questions about whether the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s decision was even about elephants at all.

The impact of the sudden discontinuation of trade was felt immediately on both sides of the Atlantic. Denied the ability to comment in advance of the moratorium’s enactment, western conservationists pressed their case in the courts. Key to these challenges were claims that the USFWS should have solicited public comments before abandoning a long-standing position recognizing hunting’s value; and, that the agency’s acknowledged reliance on anecdotal information about the status of Zimbabwe’s elephant populations violated the ESAs requirement that decisions be made based on the “best available commercial and scientific information”.

In Zimbabwe the moratorium depressed safari bookings by thirty percent according to the industry’s trade association. This downturn in Zimbabwe’s hunting industry stemming from the loss of the US market correlated with increases in poaching as funding for anti-poaching activities became more restricted. Elephant poaching reportedly increased 5-fold in the Dande Safari Area as the local game scouts were put on a curtailed patrol schedule. In an incident that shocked the world, ZimParks rangers poisoned more than 60 elephants and other wildlife in Hwange National Park after they had not been paid due to reduced funding. Incidents like these were not isolated.

In time, US conservationists would prevail in court, US conservation officials would engage their Zimbabwean counterparts and new presidents would assume office in Washington and Harare, leading to the US Fish and Wildlife Service announcing the moratorium’s lifting in November of 2017.

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Like when the moratorium was first imposed, reaction was swift with animal rights activists deftly organizing political opposition to trophy hunting that had been honed in the wake of the killing of Cecil the Lion. The activists were eventually joined by populist political pundits such as Laura Ingraham, Michael Savage and Tammy Bruce who condemned lifting the moratorium, variously equating hunting with poaching, making appeals to faith and sharing petitions from animal rights groups in the process. The protest eventually caught the attention of US President Donald Trump who in a tweet called trophy hunting a “horror show” and said that the decision to lift the moratorium was being placed on hold until he had a chance to “review all conservation facts.”

The President’s intrusion into the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s rulemaking lifting the moratorium once again raises concerns that politics are replacing economics and science in the conduct of ESA decision making. Internal agency emails reported by The Hill indicate that the White House’s actions took USFWS by surprise and that a hard stop on imports was put in place in the immediate wake of the President’s tweets. In March of this year the agency began attempts to navigate the politics and the law by issuing an internal memo saying they would review elephant trophy imports from Zimbabwe on a “case by case basis.”

Seven months later however conservationists are still awaiting resolution as it increasingly appears a de-facto trophy import moratorium remains in place. Reports are emerging of US hunters who had traveled to Zimbabwe believing they would be able to bring their elephant trophies home but whose import applications now appear to be in administrative limbo. This suggests a creeping politicization of ESA decision making that should concern all who value wildlife, whether they support hunting or not. It also signals instability in the US hunting market that may continue to impact not only the conservation programs of Zimbabwe but other African nations dependent on hunting revenues as well.

As has been witnessed in Zimbabwe, this market instability can have significant local impacts that collectively create setbacks in the global effort to deter wildlife crime. As noted at the recent conference on illegal wildlife trade held in London, progress depends on a deeper engagement of rural communities that are a critical choke point in the illicit trade’s supply chain. Success in doing so requires that these communities not be alienated by placing undue restrictions and barriers on the hunting trade that incentivizes their involvement in conservation and that policies like those in place in the United States, be unambiguously abandoned.

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