

Sustainable Use of Wild Species: A Foundation for Conservation and for Local Livelihoods



The IUCN Policy Statement on Sustainable Use of Wild Living Resources asserts that “use of living resources, if sustainable, is an important conservation tool because the social and economic benefits derived from such use provide incentives for people to conserve them” (IUCN, 2000). As humans, we are inclined - under favourable governance conditions - to protect and maintain that which has value to us. There are clear linkages between conservation success and benefits deriving to people from the use of wildlife. This statement does not mean use of all species is desirable, or that all use is sustainable -

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far from it. Often governance conditions are not favourable – for example, lack of any local rights to use wildlife legally often leads to unmanaged and highly destructive illegal use. Legal and illegal unsustainable use – from industrial fisheries and tropical timbers to orchids and African forest elephants – is one of the major causes of species decline and wider ecosystem degradation. But this means that sustainable use is a powerful tool in the conservation toolbox – including for addressing unsustainable use itself. There are robust examples from around the world of enduring models of long-term sustainable use of wild resources, and of destructive patterns of poaching and overexploitation transformed through supporting legal, equitable and sustainable stewardship and use of wild species.

This policy and this experience sets the direction for the work of IUCN Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, a volunteer expert network of over 300 people from all around the world, with expertise in a broad range of topics relevant to sustainable use of wild species and its contribution to local livelihoods. SULi is a joint initiative of two IUCN Commissions – the Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP), and the Species Survival Commission (SSC). In other words, it brings together biological/ecological and social/governance knowledge to understand and provide advice on the interaction between humans and wild species in its conservation and livelihood dimensions.

One major focus of work in recent years has been the illegal wildlife trade. A surge in poaching for IWT continues to devastate populations of many species globally – not just the high profile elephants, rhinos and pangolins, but also many less attention-grabbing taxa – orchids, timber, fish, medicinal plants. SULi has worked in partnership with IIED and TRAFFIC for several years to highlight the necessity of seeing the indigenous peoples and local communities that live with wildlife as key stakeholders and actors in effective and equitable responses to IWT, and the critical need to enhance community rights to land and resources and benefits from wildlife. Sustainable use is a key part of these benefit flows (both consumptive and non-consumptive), although other approaches can be very effective in some contexts (e.g. gate park fees, Payments for Ecosystem Service approaches).

Enhancing the voices of communities themselves in deliberations on IWT has become a key approach for us, and our most recent event was a “Community Voices” session in London held immediately before the fourth intergovernment IWT Conference hosted by the UK. Around 40 community representatives were present (as well as many more NGO, academic and government representatives working to support community-based approaches) and a closed community session crafted messages for the IWT Conference. The messages were clear – community-led conservation is important in reducing IWT and it needs far greater practical and policy support at national and international levels. Communities need strong rights to their traditional lands, rights to make decisions about the wildlife they live with, and rights to benefit from conservation and wildlife. As stewards of around 25% of the world’s habitable lands, they need a recognized and formal seat at the table in these discussions.

A further key priority for us in recent years is hunting – from subsistence all the way to high-value trophy hunting. Well-managed hunting is a form of sustainable wildlife use that provides incentives and revenue for government, as well as private and community landowners, to maintain and restore wildlife as a viable land use in many parts of the world. It can (again, only where well-managed) provide much needed income, jobs, and related economic and social benefits to indigenous and local communities,

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places where such commodities are often scarce. Hunting also contributes significantly to food security for individuals, families, and communities, positively affecting individual health and nutrition, and general social wellbeing for millions of people worldwide. As a traditional activity, hunting helps maintain the identity of indigenous and local peoples, thereby supporting human cultural diversity globally and helping safeguard the many ecological insights these communities have developed over long periods of nature engagement. Peoples and communities impacted by these benefits are, in turn, motivated to practice good environmental stewardship and implement conservation initiatives to protect wildlife and its habitat, thus ensuring the continuation of these benefits.

This is not just a theoretical framework. While it may seem counterintuitive to many people, evidence does show that legal and regulated hunting can, and does, play an important role in delivering benefits for wildlife conservation and the livelihoods and welfare of indigenous and local communities. SULi therefore supports scientifically well-managed hunting, including international (trophy) hunting, as an integral and legitimate component of sustainable wildlife management and, in the wider conservation context, and as a tool for creating incentives for wildlife tolerance, as a mechanism for reducing human-wildlife conflict, and as a legitimate form of sustainable wildlife use.

However, the specialist group also acknowledges that hunting (regardless of motivation), if poorly managed, can not only fail to deliver social and conservation benefits, but can have negative ecological impacts, including altered age/sex structures, social disruption, harmful genetic effects, and even declines in wildlife populations. In short, illegal or insufficiently regulated hunting can become a detriment to conservation priorities and impair livelihoods of local and indigenous communities. Indeed, some forms of hunting indeed compete with and undermine community-based models of hunting.

SULi recognizes that achieving successful and sustainable wildlife use requires the application of diverse insights gathered far beyond the realm of traditional conservation biology. These include knowledge platforms related to effective governance, economics and benefits sharing, and political ecology. This is also why SULi members work to mobilize and integrate global conservation expertise across the science, policy, and practice sectors. Such multi-disciplinary approaches are critical, if robust, equitable models of sustainable use, including hunting-based models, are to be developed and maintained. As global impacts on natural diversity make clear, meeting human needs and priorities without compromising conservation imperatives is not an easy task.

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