

by Gerhard R. Damm

Keep the Passion!



Conservation Frontlines' editor-in-chief on the harm that COVID-19 may cause to conservation—and how to lessen it.

As the world grapples with COVID-19, times are tough for us all. Nevertheless, we need to stay curious about nature and continue to celebrate the life around us. All of us here at Conservation Frontlines, in the US and South Africa, hope that our free and factual news and fascinating stories will help ease the stress of the coming weeks.

But we cannot ignore the fact that virus-driven policies and restrictions will surely have devastating consequences for wildlife, wildlife companies and rural communities around the world, and especially in sub-Saharan Africa and western and central Asia.

Tourism everywhere has been swamped by a tsunami of cancellations. Photographic and hunting operations are struggling to absorb the impact of zero income and are closing operations left and right—temporarily, we hope. Conservation work and habitat restoration and management also may grind to a halt. South Africa, where I live, has announced that its anti-poaching and wildlife services will

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continue during our initial three-week lockdown, but what comes next? And what about our neighbor countries? Poaching (for bushmeat, elephant ivory and rhino horn), illegal wood-cutting and clandestine charcoal production are expected to increase across Africa.

Worse yet, the livelihoods of families, where the breadwinner depends on employment with wildlife-focused companies or community conservancies, are seriously compromised. For these vulnerable people, income lost to the pandemic translates into spikes in poverty, missed meals for children and reduced access to healthcare far beyond COVID-19.

But it goes even deeper. My good friend Malan Lindeque from Namibia recently wrote: “African rural communities do not generally benefit in any significant manner at household and livelihood levels from tourism, except those that are directly employed in tourism. [Their] households are a very small percentage of the total. Remember the statement by the President of Botswana questioning how it can be that there are barefoot people living within walking distance of luxury lodges charging \$5,000 per night? This is extreme, and should rightly make the owners squirm, but we don’t see much squirming or a real commitment to socially sustainable tourism. [These are the] same operators [who] had much to say about how they are saving Africa’s wildlife, and that hunting is irrelevant and damaging to tourism.”

It may just be possible to emerge from this pandemic with the will to right some glaring wrongs of the past—and developing economic hardships of the present. For example: Billions and even trillions of dollars are being channelled into gigantic infrastructure projects in Africa and Asia that are financed by China or private and public investors from the West. Despite their avowed good intentions, these projects often cause terrible economic and environmental damage, particularly in rural areas. Once the world has mastered COVID-19, our governments (we, the voters) could demand these public and private mega-investors direct at least a part of their funds to the mitigation of the pandemic’s effects on habitats and wildlife—and perhaps even toward helping resurrect the hundreds and thousands of small companies and rural conservancies that serve the wildlife sector.

And those who effectively condemn wildlife and wild lands by advocating against their sustainable, ethical use—again to the detriment of rural communities—should also think again. This issue of *Conservation Frontlines* presents extraordinarily compelling testimony to counter armchair conservationists’ wishful thinking. Who are the real heroes at the frontlines of conservation? The urban emotionalists who profess their (distant) love for nature, or those who live with and understand wildlife?

Wildlife, wild places and the people who live there will need even more of our support once we get through this. Now is the time to show your personal commitment to the causes we cherish—don’t cancel your trip to the wilds, just postpone it.

We present this April issue of *Conservation Frontlines* for your clicking, scrolling and reading enjoyment. Our expert authors are here to expand your knowledge—and don’t overlook our ever-growing on-line library and video archive.

We will get through this together. Hang tight with us. We’re ramping up our output to keep you informed.

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Gerhard R. Damm is the founder and editor-in-chief of Conservation Frontlines.

Banner photo: The author after 10 days in the Siberian wilderness. (With a hot shower still a week away, he had a bath in the near-freezing river the next day.)