

by Max Abensperg-Traun

The Battle inside CITES - Southern African conservationists are at war with animal-rights NGOs.



A form of neo-colonialism by US- and UK-based animal protectionists threatens the rural communities and wildlife of Southern Africa.

Countries in Southern Africa host the majority of the continent's elephants, lions, rhinoceroses and giraffes, to mention just a few of the best-known animal species. Southern Africa overall is conserving its large herbivores and carnivores better than any other region besides North America, despite its relative lack of financial resources. Since the 1970s, countries such as Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa have increased their wildlife populations, both inside and outside their national parks. But during the same period, most East and West African countries have experienced massive declines in their wildlife populations.

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Given the global biodiversity crisis, one would think that these Southern African countries would be celebrated for their wildlife successes and that their policies would be studied and, if not copied elsewhere, at least respected. Yet international organisations that claim to protect wildlife decry Southern Africa's policies while trying to prop up others that clearly have failed. Why? The answer lies in ideology rather than evidence.

It's about hunting

A significant part of the Southern African recipe for wildlife success involves granting landowners and communities that live outside formally protected areas the right to sell regulated numbers of animals to hunters. This provides various incentives for people living on the land to tolerate wildlife that can be dangerous or difficult to live with. Wildlife thus becomes a valuable and, if managed well, renewable resource that is protected by those people.

It is this facet of conservation—scientifically managed, fee-paid hunting—that runs counter to animal-protectionist ideology. Never mind what a century of research and results have proven all over the globe.

Before COVID-19 destroyed all forms of tourism, hunting in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana (before the 2014-19 hunting suspension) and, to a lesser extent, South Africa contributed significantly to rural incomes through direct payments, meat distribution and employment. This was especially valuable in more remote areas with low income from agriculture or other forms of tourism. It also motivated local people to become wildlife custodians and to invest in their own anti-poaching efforts, thus sharing the burden of conservation with their governments. This form of hunting, therefore, not only reduces poverty (contributing to the United Nations Agenda 2030), but also provides positive conservation outcomes for iconic African species.

Furthermore, hunting tourism takes place in remote areas that are often unattractive for photographic tourism, or where the latter is still in its infancy. These areas differ markedly from the picturesque, well-known and accessible landscapes of other parts of Africa. Hunting, therefore, is the only sustainable and profitable wildlife-based use of land in many areas.

Improved livelihoods, reduced poaching and growing wildlife populations are what everyone wants, right? Apparently not, if you value individual animal rights above everything else.

NGOs @ CITES

This is the ideological position of several large, well-funded international non-governmental organisations such as the Humane Society International, the International Fund for Animal Welfare and Born Free. Their stance is made even more clear by their consistent and forceful lobbying against the legal international trade in wildlife that is regulated by CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora. Increasingly, this stance reflects Western sentiments towards the sustainable use of iconic African species.

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CITES is a multilateral mechanism that has been in force since 1975 and now includes 183 member nations, known as Parties. Its original purpose was not to prohibit the international wildlife trade, but to ensure that it is sustainable. A two-thirds-majority vote at a CoP, a CITES Conference of the Parties, is required to change the trading status of any given species (e.g., from legal to illegal or vice versa) or to restrict or de-restrict a certain wildlife trade.

In theory, these decisions must be based on clear CITES criteria and guided by the latest scientific evidence of whether a particular species is threatened by international trade. In practice, however, anti-hunting animal-rights NGOs—despite their status as “observers” with no voting rights—increasingly base their considerable influence at CITES CoPs on their protectionist dogma.

This puts them in direct conflict with the Southern African countries that, in addition to photographic tourism, use hunting tourism as part of their proven strategy to conserve wildlife while supporting rural livelihoods. Hunting by international clients involves exporting and importing animal parts, which falls under CITES jurisdiction. In recent years, some Western countries have been pressured by animal-protectionist NGOs to ban the import of African hunting trophies, which would in effect stop hunting.

Ideology vs. science

As someone involved with CITES on behalf of the government of Austria, I have watched clashes between these advocacy groups and Southern African countries with increasing frustration and dismay, particularly at the CoPs, where their opposing views are now voiced with great acrimony. The NGOs do not win votes for their side by presenting scientific evidence that meet CITES criteria, but rather by using their financial, social and political muscle.

As Parties to CITES, the European Union, the UK and the US—where nearly all international hunters come from—face sustained and increasingly effective lobbying and media pressure by animal-protectionist groups to oppose any sustainable-use (hunting) proposals brought by countries in Southern Africa. These NGOs also wield significant financial influence in countries of the AEC, the African Elephant Coalition, by bankrolling their conservation ministries (especially Kenya) and the expenses of AEC representatives travelling to CITES conferences.

The AEC vs. SADC

Thanks to these efforts, the AEC stands in opposition to the SADC, the Southern African Development Community. Ironically, it is “development”-focused countries like Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe that support hunting and have viable, even over-large populations of elephants, while the so-called Elephant Coalition countries are losing theirs. Southern Africa’s conservation successes are ignored by the animal-rights NGOs, which instead support and/or lobby governments with much poorer conservation track records—but that are, or could become, anti-hunting.

(Let me add that there are NGOs that support rational, science-based sustainable use of wildlife, but they are much smaller and their voices are typically drowned out.)

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It is also ironic that, in contrast to AEC countries that openly and very forcefully oppose Southern Africa's practices of sustainable use to conserve wildlife, countries in the South respect different conservation models practiced in other parts of Africa, irrespective of their success or failure. SADC countries merely reserve the right to implement their own strategies, which have evolved over time and proven to be largely successful.

Despite being restricted to observer status, NGOs have the right to speak on the floor at a CoP; never have verbal clashes between AEC and SADC members and their supporters been as vitriolic as at the Johannesburg Conference in 2016 and at Geneva in 2019.

Disappointingly, a proposal in 2017 to introduce a formal code of conduct for NGOs at CITES meetings was rejected. This would have included, for example, transparency of money flows such as payments for AEC members' expenses to attend CoPs where important decisions are made. Thus these NGOs' involvement with CITES and their influence over Parties remains murky.

The European Union, with its huge CITES voting power as a bloc of now 27 countries, has seen significant declines in many of its native species and struggles to accept the return of predators such as wolves and bears. Yet this large collection of states with mostly poor conservation records continues to impose its ill-informed wildlife strategies on Southern African states by easily outvoting them at CITES conferences.

The US and Canada now have perhaps the world's best record of maintaining their wildlife, thanks largely to the century-old North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which is based on hunting. However, as in Europe and the UK, their CITES delegations are under great pressure from legislators, celebrities and citizens who are against hunting.

Lack of respect for good conservation work hardly provides the conditions for constructive engagement and the mutual sharing of what works and what doesn't, in Africa or anywhere else.

Rhino horn, elephant ivory

CITES decisions with the most damaging consequences for Southern Africa include forbidding any trade in rhino horn (1977) and elephant ivory (1989). These bans led to the rapid increase in value of these commodities in Asia, which enormously incentivized illegal hunting—that is, poaching. The value of rhino horn, for example, rose to more than \$30,000 per pound (\$60,000 per kg). In turn, the costs of protecting rhinos also skyrocketed, which further burdened already cash-strapped countries that held large numbers of these animals.

CITES decisions like these ignore the basic principles of supply and demand. They also fail to consider how trade bans or restrictions may impact wildlife populations, rural communities and government conservation efforts. The losses in national income from the sanctions on the legal sale of elephant ivory and rhino horn—and the subsequent impacts on conservation budgets and rural incomes—are massive. Today, the demand that fuels this illegal trade from Africa remains very high.

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(There have been just two legal sales of ivory, i.e., tusks from natural mortality and stocks confiscated from poachers, in 1999 and 2008. No country has ever sold rhino horns. At current market values, regular, controlled, CITES-sanctioned horn sales could cover all SADC members' costs associated with wildlife conservation, including administering their national parks.)

By now, it is clear that these decades-old decisions were not only ill-advised, but they also drove the large-scale poaching of rhinos and elephants that followed. Furthermore, no compensation for income lost (or expenses incurred) to these bans has been made to African countries, despite a promise to that effect by the US in 1989 in regard to ivory.

Frustration & alienation

Given this history of unintended consequences, the frustration and alienation of SADC countries at the CoP in Switzerland in 2019 may have been the final nail in the CITES coffin. All of the proposals put forward by SADC members were rejected. These included ending ineffective and costly trade bans on elephant ivory and rhino horn, increasing wildlife-based income for rural communities and allowing representatives from rural communities to participate directly in CITES decision-making processes.

The animal-rights NGOs won the day by wielding their influence over the African Elephant Coalition and successfully lobbying Western nations, particularly the critical European Union bloc, to support their positions.

An anti-use, anti-trade platform contradicts the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the official position of the IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which all recognise the rights of Indigenous peoples to the sustainable use of their natural resources. Of what value are such declarations if the very nations that ratified them do not back them up at CITES? Never has the credibility of CITES been so battered as it was in 2019.

On behalf of the SADC, a member of Tanzania's delegation, Elisante Ombeni Leguma, made a powerful closing statement in Geneva in which he slammed the influence of the animal protectionists. He further condemned the Western-influenced approach to CITES trade proposals for depriving Southern African countries of income for their cash-strapped conservation budgets and the financial incentives for rural communities to remain partners in conserving wildlife rather than getting rid of it as a nuisance. It was the first time in at least 20 years that the countries of the SADC spoke with one voice, and now several of them are seriously questioning the benefits of remaining Parties to CITES.

Underdog no more?

The SADC might be an underdog at CITES, but the region still supports huge populations of Africa's iconic wildlife species and represents 345 million people. Shortly after CoP18, at a conference of the SADC heads of states in Arusha, Tanzania, these countries reached an agreement on a common regional policy regarding the use and management of wildlife. The message was clear: Southern Africa's conservation experience, successes and needs can no longer be taken lightly.

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Fast-forward to today, when rural African communities are being slammed by the economic impacts of COVID-19. Photographic and hunting tourism rely on international travel, which ground to a halt in early 2020.

However, this terrible cloud may yet have a silver lining. Perhaps this is an opportunity for the leaders of Southern Africa to consider ways to conserve their wildlife *without* relying entirely on international tourism. These leaders could find a way forward with AEC countries based on mutual respect for their different approaches to conservation, and free of the overbearing Western NGOs pitting them against each other.

This may be wishful thinking on my part, but African nations working together have a far better chance to find solutions for wildlife and rural communities than they do when they are operating as pawns of outside interests.

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Banner image: Living with “megafauna” can be frustrating and dangerous, yet several countries in Southern Africa are seeing some success in balancing their human and wildlife populations in relative harmony. Vincent Guillemin/Community Conservation Namibia photo