

Heritage lost

The cultural impact of wildlife crime in South Africa

Megan Griffiths*

griffithsml@telkomsa.net

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Crimes against wildlife have been in the spotlight in South Africa in the past decade – largely due to the escalation of rhino poaching. As a custodian of iconic species, South Africa is at the heart of the illicit and licit wildlife economy. Since the country's economy relies on wildlife tourism as one of its sources of income, poaching has economic consequences. The negative impact, however, extends into the cultural sphere too. Some fear that extinction will rob future generations of the chance to experience wildlife, thus depriving them of their rightful cultural heritage. This commentary piece suggests that wildlife crime may be a form of cultural victimisation for people who feel that wildlife is part of their identity. It does so while acknowledging that poverty and other structural limitations prevent many South Africans from experiencing wildlife in this way, and that some may feel indifferent or resentful towards conservation initiatives if their basic needs are not met.

The illegal wildlife trade has garnered national and international attention in the past decade. In South Africa, rates of rhino poaching have ballooned since 2007, causing alarm among both conservationists and concerned citizens.¹ Due to the fact that South Africa is a major wildlife tourist destination and is greatly dependent on tourism as a key source of income, the decimation of one of the iconic Big Five species has potentially dire consequences for the economy.² Additionally, poaching affects biodiversity, negatively impacting the whole ecosystem. This is particularly true of rhino poaching.

The adverse effects, however, go further. I have found that some South Africans believe the killing of wildlife – especially endangered species such as rhino – has a bearing on them personally and

may cause them shame.³ For those who feel that their identities intersect with the country's wildlife, wildlife crime may be experienced as a threat to their cultural identity, thus making it a form of cultural victimisation. However, for many reasons, including lack of exposure to and/or appreciation of nature and animals, many people in South Africa do not share these sentiments.

This commentary considers both views. While it acknowledges that most South Africans may never set foot in a game park and that some may view wildlife activism as a 'white' or exclusionary cause, its key contribution is to suggest that crimes against wildlife can be regarded as a form of cultural victimisation.

The illicit wildlife market

The illicit trade in wildlife (which includes living or deceased animals, plants, or products thereof) is believed to be one of the most profitable on

* Megan Griffiths is a DLitt et Phil Criminology candidate at the University of South Africa.

the global black market.⁴ Animals frequently targeted in South Africa include rhino, elephant, lion, leopard, cheetah and wild dog, and the incidents may involve 'kidnapping, smuggling, death or life in pain and/or confinement'.⁵ Rhinos are slaughtered for their horns, and elephants for their tusks, often destined for Asian markets. Lions may be farmed, killed in canned hunts, or poached for their bones, which are sometimes used as a substitute for tiger bones in traditional Chinese medicine.⁶ Leopards are poached for their skins, which some South Africans wear during important ceremonies. Although it is legal to own leopard skin, a permit is required to do so.⁷ Illegal pet traders regularly target cheetah for export to the Middle East, while wild dogs may be killed because they are seen as pests, or because it is a rite of passage for boys.⁸ These and other acts of wildlife crime may be detrimental to the environment.⁹

From an ecocentric point of view, people are part of the environment; depending on and co-existing with animals and plants. For those who regard the environment as inherently valuable, wildlife crime may be viewed as injurious not only to the targeted species but to the whole natural world (including humans).¹⁰ Crimes against wildlife may therefore be seen as destructive to the environmental heritage of all people.

In light of the above, it becomes apparent that the damage caused to South Africa's environment and biodiversity may have a severe impact on tourism, the economy and national security. It is speculated that tourists may become reluctant to visit the country due to the violence involved in poaching incidents, which may consequently exacerbate socio-economic problems, such as unemployment.¹¹ Wildlife trafficking also serves to open the door to other types of transnational organised crimes, such as weapons smuggling.¹² Understandably, rhino

poaching in South Africa has drawn worldwide attention and criticism, which has been made more notable with the advent and widespread use of social media.¹³ The violence and brutality exercised by poachers in the killing of animals has resulted in feelings of sadness, despair and anger for some South African citizens, who fear the imminent extinction of species such as the rhino.¹⁴

The case for cultural victimisation

The intense emotions experienced by some South Africans when faced with images of mutilated and/or dead rhino, lead some people to outrage. They may believe wildlife is their rightful inheritance – something to love and be proud of. For them, wildlife may be a source of national honour and history, so that its destruction is traumatic and may be experienced as cultural victimisation.¹⁵

At times, government appears to agree with my proposal. In a 2015 speech, President Jacob Zuma highlighted the cultural significance of species such as rhinos, declaring:

Rhino are the heritage of each and every South African. The fight being waged in protecting this, our heritage, is not to be waged by our law enforcement authorities alone ... In blowing the whistle on rhino poaching and wildlife crime, you are not only saving a species. You are ensuring the legacy of your grandchildren and their grandchildren. We hold all our country's natural heritage in trust for future generations ... Let us work together to promote and protect our animals. They are our heritage and our livelihood.¹⁶

Similarly, in 2016, Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi said that *ubhejane* (the isiZulu word for 'rhino') are highly revered in Zulu culture and should be protected.¹⁷ He remarked that he could not comprehend why South Africans would destroy their irreplaceable heritage.¹⁸ These

points are reinforced by the understanding that victimisation may be experienced by way of 'the loss of cultural and environmental heritage from public lands or lands set aside for conservation and preservation, such as national or nature parks'.¹⁹ The poaching of rhino and other species can therefore be viewed as destroying the cultural heritage of South Africans.

It is ultimately challenging to measure the cultural impact of crimes against wildlife, since the gravity with which these offences are perceived is highly dependent on socio-economic status, personal circumstances and individual beliefs. It is not possible to put a price on being able to view animals in their natural habitats or on the cultural consequences around dwindling wildlife populations. However, to many individuals, being in nature and experiencing wildlife is highly enjoyable, stimulating and authentic, and it would be devastating to lose this natural resource.²⁰ As such, South Africans should heed Zuma and Buthelezi's calls to take ownership of the country's wildlife (rhinos and other species) and do all they can to ensure they are preserved, in order to avoid cultural victimisation.

The case against cultural victimisation

Most South Africans likely have little or no exposure to wildlife as something to be viewed for enjoyment. This makes it challenging for them to appreciate the value and significance that others may place on wildlife, or to see the loss thereof as a form of cultural victimisation.

The position on cultural victimisation should therefore be contemplated in contrast to the experience of most South Africans, who have never seen and will never have the opportunity to see a rhino, except perhaps in a zoo. This becomes apparent when considering that South Africa has 'one of the highest inequality rates in the world, perpetuating both inequality

and exclusion'.²¹ It was ascertained by Statistics South Africa that the Gini coefficient (which determines relative wealth) rose to 0.65 based on expenditure data and 0.69 based on income data in 2014. The findings also showed that while the wealthiest 20% of the population accounted for 65% of total expenditure, the poorest 20% consumed less than 3%.²² In 2016 more than 50% of the workforce lived below the poverty line. The unemployment rate was found to be at 26.7% (although this figure rose to over 36% when the individuals who had given up on the job search were included).²³

Furthermore, by 2015 54% of South Africans were living below the poverty line and surviving on R779 per person per month or less.²⁴ As a result, 16 991 634 social grants were awarded to South Africans every month in the 2015/2016 financial year.²⁵ By comparison, the conservation levy or entrance fee to the Kruger National Park is R76 per adult and R38 per child per day.²⁶ An overnight stay at a relatively inexpensive camp in Kruger would cost from R305 for camping to R1 450 for a basic bungalow for two adults.²⁷ It is evident that even the cheapest accommodation would be completely out of reach for many South Africans. When taking these enormous disparities into consideration, it becomes clear that many South Africans are in dire financial need and that this unequal state of affairs paves the way for crime to flourish – particularly crime with a financial benefit for the offender, such as wildlife crime.²⁸

People living in such conditions may believe that a focus on wildlife issues detracts from human welfare concerns and might even think wildlife crimes defensible.²⁹ Anti-poaching campaigns may be perceived as a pastime of wealthy white people, fostering feelings of exclusion and bitterness.³⁰ This was made apparent by Julius Malema, the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), in a 2016 opinion piece:

One only needs to look at how cheap a black life truly is to white people by comparing the fact that 34 black mineworkers are massacred in broad daylight, and white people never even run a petition online.³¹ Although rhinos are poached daily, we do not see poachers poaching them like we did when the police shot and killed the workers. Yet, there is a big campaign and a huge investment in saving the rhino ... This tells you, right here in South Africa, a country with a majority of blacks, that black people are worth less than rhinos.³²

Indeed, the marginalisation of black South Africans – including those in communities neighbouring game reserves – has resulted in the belief that wildlife is prioritised over ‘black rural lives’.³³ For such communities, the only value reserves hold may be poaching for bushmeat and profit.³⁴ But Malema’s comments were criticised by Minister of Environmental Affairs Edna Molewa, who wrote that it was incorrect and prejudiced to assume that black people are not bothered about conservation issues. She said that resources were not being directed at animals instead of humans, and that both could be protected. She suggested that Malema’s comments may undermine the positive conservation strides made together with communities bordering game reserves.³⁵

Market research conducted by anti-wildlife trade organisation WildAid appears to support Molewa’s belief that concern for rhinos is a nationwide phenomenon. Although perhaps not scientifically objective, its study found that 80% of black South Africans stated they would be ‘very sad’ if rhinos became extinct, along with 83% of Indians, 84% of coloureds, and 81% of whites. Asked whether they were interested in visiting game reserves to see the wildlife, just 5% of blacks and 9% of whites said they were not interested. Notably, 18% of whites and

33% of blacks reported wanting to visit a game reserve to view wildlife but not being able to do so. These results suggest that most South Africans care about wildlife, even if they are not directly involved therewith.³⁶

Even if WildAid’s data are accurate, such attitudes may mean little in contexts of great poverty and hardship. Members of communities bordering game reserves should be provided with work opportunities, such as game ranger or craft work. Reserves could also give back to communities by giving their children opportunities to see wildlife, for example. In this way, communities would hopefully become invested in the reserves and their animals, and provide information on potential poaching incidents. However, such ventures should not result in community members being given low-paid work that reinforces their marginalisation.

An example of a successful initiative of this kind is found in the Zakouma National Park in Chad. As of 2017, a team of conservationists and rangers have reduced elephant poaching and increased the elephant population by instituting strict anti-poaching measures and involving the communities in the park’s work. Before the intervention, community members were unfamiliar with the park’s operations and had never seen wildlife such as elephant and giraffe. An arrangement was established to take 40 citizens into the park each day during the dry season, meaning that approximately 5 000 individuals are given the opportunity to see the animals each year. Chadians are also allowed to stay at one of the park’s camps without charge.³⁷ Gestures such as these are not only vital for educational purposes but are also ethically sound. South African citizens should also have the right to access local game reserves without having to spend money. In addition to this, it is critical that communities are provided with the necessities of life, such as access to water and a basic income.³⁸

Until such transformation takes place, my proposal that wildlife crime be considered a form of cultural victimisation is unlikely to find broad appeal, despite its merits. Therefore, the abovementioned perception of cultural victimisation might presently be relevant only to those who are privileged enough to see wildlife for themselves.

Conclusion

In this commentary piece, I have suggested that wildlife crime can be considered a form of cultural victimisation for people who feel that their identities intersect with wildlife. Because of the poaching of animals such as rhino, some people feel personally harmed. Yet, for many South Africans, it would appear that wildlife holds little or no value – belonging to the exclusive realm of the safari-holidaying elite rather than the average citizen. My opinion, however, is that South Africa's wildlife heritage belongs to all its citizens and that if it were accessible to everyone – as it should be – more people would feel aggrieved by wildlife crime. This issue has unfortunately become yet another glaring reminder of the inequality in our country. Nonetheless, I believe that crimes against wildlife victimise all South Africans, as they destroy cultural heritage that should be passed on to future generations. This destruction – leading to the partial or total decimation of species – will leave an ecological and cultural vacuum that will likely be impossible to fill. Not only are wildlife crimes an affront to the heritage of South Africa's middle or upper classes who already have access to wildlife, but it is a tragedy for those who do not. It is unthinkable that because of poaching, some people and their descendants may never see animals in their natural habitats, or at all. This would be an ultimate and irreparable form of cultural victimisation.



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Notes

- 1 While 13 rhino were poached in South Africa in 2007, the deaths have risen rapidly, with 1 054 rhino killed in 2016.
- 2 Tourism accounted for 3% of the total gross domestic product in 2015, and one in every 22 employed persons was found to work in the tourism industry. The Big Five are rhino, elephant, buffalo, lion and leopard.
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- 10 Wyatt, *Wildlife trafficking*, 63–64.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 66.
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- 14 *Ibid.*, 136.
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