**Inclusive Anti-poaching? Exploring the Potential and Challenges of Community-based Anti-Poaching**

**Abstract**

In acknowledgement that the largely (para)militarized approach to anti-poaching has its limitations, alternative approaches to conservation law enforcement are being sought. One alternative focuses on including people from local communities in anti-poaching, what we call inclusive anti-poaching. Using a case study of a community scout programme from southern Mozambique, located adjacent South Africa’s Kruger National Park, we examine the potential of a community scout initiative to move towards a more inclusive and sustainable approach to anti-poaching and conservation. While highlighting its challenges and potential drawbacks, we argue that including local people into conservation law enforcement efforts can help address poaching and problematic aspects of current anti-poaching measures. However, to be a genuine and sustainable alternative, community ranger programmes must be part of a broader shift towards developing local wildlife economies that benefits local communities as opposed to supporting pre-existing anti-poaching interventions.

**1. Introduction**

The large majority of resources for combatting the illegal wildlife trade focus on front-line enforcement efforts, and to a lesser extent, demand reduction, with relatively little going towards community-focused initiatives.[[1]](#endnote-1) Critics posit that much more needs to be directed towards local communities, with some arguing conservation law enforcement and local people need not be at odds. Indeed, given the severity of the poaching crisis and acknowledgment that the largely (para)militarized approach to anti-poaching has its limitations and further entrenches divides between conservation and communities, alternative approaches to conservation law enforcement are being sought. Yet, much of this remains in institutional or grey literature, receiving little empirical academic focus. These alternatives seek to include the participation of people within and adjacent to protected areas in combatting the illicit wildlife trade. One example of incorporating local people into anti-poaching and conservation law enforcement, what we call “inclusive anti-poaching,” is the Mangalane Community Scout Programme (MCSP) in southern Mozambique adjacent to South Africa’s Kruger National Park, where rhino poaching is at its highest. Part of a broader vision of developing a locally-owned wildlife economy, the programme employs people from villages in the Mangalane area as community scouts. Using the MCSP as a case study, this article explores the potential of a community scout initiative to move towards a more inclusive and sustainable approach to conservation and anti-poaching, and hopes to bring related discussions into academic circles. We argue that inclusive anti-poaching can help address poaching and problematic aspects of current anti-poaching measures and provide broader benefits to communities. However, to meet its full potential, local people need to benefit from the wildlife they are protecting, and from the scouts themselves. Hence, community scouts must be accountable to their community as opposed to an existing, top-down anti-poaching intervention. We posit this as an organizing framework, for re-thinking the role of community-based anti-poaching.

**2. Background to inclusive anti-poaching**

While much has been written on community-based conservation, garnering more attention is the specific issue of having communities participate in anti-poaching. Proponents of inclusive anti-poaching cite the problematic aspects of top-down, often (para)militarized anti-poaching as reason for looking for alternative models of enforcement.[[2]](#endnote-2) There are increasing concerns that green militarization, defined as “the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation”,[[3]](#endnote-3) leads to human rights violations, the (often violent) perpetuation of exclusionary practices of conservation, and the further marginalization of already vulnerable people.[[4]](#endnote-4) Green militarization thus risks further entrenching park-community divides, threatening both the social and ecological aims and foundations of conservation. Hence, a common theme of these critiques is the fear that top-down, paramilitarized anti-poaching is unlikely to succeed long-term.[[5]](#endnote-5)

These critiques extend to Kruger National Park, and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA) more broadly. There is increasing recognition that current anti-poaching efforts risk widening the gap and increasing hostilities between Kruger, neighboring reserves, and adjacent communities.[[6]](#endnote-6) For the above reasons, attention is being given to alternative models of conservation law enforcement and anti-poaching in the area.[[7]](#endnote-7) Building on insights from community-based conservation and community policing more broadly, proponents of inclusive anti-poaching argue that anti-poaching is likely to be more effective and sustainable in the long-term if it includes the support and participation of people within and adjacent protected areas.

While recent empirical examples highlight the successes of inclusive anti-poaching throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, they also demonstrate the myriad challenges and implications of involving communities.[[8]](#endnote-8) Such challenges include violent reprisals against community rangers, threats to the social cohesion of communities, a lack of support for rangers, and a failure to compete with the high monetary value of certain wildlife products, among others.[[9]](#endnote-9) Drawing on the MCSP we draw attention to another challenge, namely that community-based anti-poaching must primarily support the rights and priorities of local people as opposed to supporting pre-existing anti-poaching interventions, which proves difficult in contexts where poaching is a pressing and immediate priority.

**3. The Mangalane Community Scouts Programme**

Research for this article was conducted by the primary author and involved extensive

participation observation over six months at Sabie Game Park (SGP) and the Mangalane area,

interviews with anti-poaching unit (APU) and SGP personnel, local leaders and law enforcement,

and focus groups with community scouts. This research is combined with insights from the other

authors who designed, implemented, and manage the programme. The Mangalane area is located

in Sabié District of Mozambique in the province of Maputo, butting up against the border with

South Africa and the famed Kruger National Park. The area consists of five communities

(Mucacasa, Mavungwana, Baptine, Ndindiza, and Costine) with a combined population of

approximately 900 people in 300 households. Households are largely subsistence oriented with a

focus on livestock raising, particularly cattle, and subsistence agriculture. Employment

opportunities and wage labour in the area are scarce and basic infrastructure and social services

are sorely lacking. Historically, labour migration to South Africa has been a key source of

employment with remittances being sent back to families. Labour migration does continue but its

prominence as a source of cash income has decreased as young men have turned to the rhino

poaching economy.

The villages are located adjacent Sabie Game Park (SGP), a 28,000-hectare private

hunting reserve that is part of a larger conservancy of private reserves in Mozambique, the

Greater Lebombo Conservancy, which is itself part of the GLTFCA. Like many protected

areas in the region, the creation of SGP in 2000 entailed various forms of displacement,

including the compensated removal of these communities to what is now east of the reserve’s

boundary fence.

SGP has gained attention as it occupies a strategic position directly adjacent Kruger’s most concentrated area of rhinos. It also has rhinos of its own, possibly the only population in Mozambique. Moreover, the Mangalane area is a hub of rhino poachers. While some local people are poachers, most poaching groups come from outside of the Mangalane area and use the communities as a primary transit point in and out of SGP and Kruger. Many people from Mangalane thus work in support roles by providing information to poachers and/or working in the rhino-horn supply chain. The intensification of rhino poaching has brought about devastating social and economic consequences, including the arrest and death of hundreds of young males leaving behind widows and fatherless households. [[10]](#endnote-10) The get rich fast lifestyle that accompanies poaching and the presence of external poaching gangs has also generated a rise in criminality accompanied by social tensions and breakdown within the villages.

To combat rhino poaching amidst limited resources, SGP’s anti-poaching is led by an anti-poaching NGO that largely follows trends of green militarization. Given the critiques of green militarization and acknowledging that efforts must be made to incorporate local communities into conservation and combatting the wildlife trade, SGP formed a partnership with the Southern African Wildlife College (SAWC) and WWF-South Africa to organize the communities of Mangalane and build a locally owned wildlife economy. Part of this initiative included developing an alternative model of anti-poaching. Initiated in 2015, the MCSP employs twenty-one local residents as community scouts, with each community having its respective group of 4-5 Scouts. With the exception of one, all Scouts are male. Scouts range from 21-39 years of age with an average age of 28, and all scouts except four have children.

A repeated motivation for becoming a scouts is the salary received, which is just above minimum wage. Beyond the salary, the other primary motivation for people to become scouts, and for communities to support them, are the benefits to be derived from wildlife and conservation. [[11]](#endnote-11) Other sources of support and motivation for the scouts relate to their broader policing roles. Indeed, the scouts are meant to have many policing duties, with protecting SGP being just one of them. Scouts undertake conflict resolution within their respective communities, acting as a link between communities and local law enforcement. Scouts are also credited with eliminating cattle theft in the Mangalane area and have an active role in managing problem animals and human-wildlife conflict. While we do not have the space to detail all the non-anti-poaching benefits, what is important is that such benefits are the primary source of support for the scouts within their communities, and are part of an overall approach of seeing rhino protection as a by-product of conservation-related benefits.[[12]](#endnote-12) Drawing from the MCSP, the remainder of this article focuses on the anti-poaching aspect of the community scouts, highlighting some of the benefits and challenges.

**4. Community Scouts and Anti-Poaching**

There are two primary ways in which the Scouts contribute to anti-poaching and thus protect SGP, Kruger National Park, and their rhino populations. First, they monitor and patrol portions of the outer side of the reserve’s approximately 40 km fence line on a daily basis, reporting signs of entries or exits by poachers in their designated area. Scouts also perform other patrol duties as requested by APU management. Second, scouts provide intelligence to the APU on potential poaching incursions or past poaching activity, as gathered within their respective communities.

Until recently, the majority of rhino poachers came from or transited through the Mozambican borderlands. The modus operandi of poachers has shifted so the large majority now enter Kruger from its western boundary[[13]](#endnote-13). SGP itself has also seen a reduction in rhino killings from approximately 25 per year in the previous few years to 3 in 2016. It is not possible to credit this shift to the MCSP, but it should be seen as part of the broader efforts undertaken in the Mozambican borderlands to address rhino poaching. Indeed, whether the MCSP has contributed to a net decrease in poaching is difficult to quantify. We thus examine the MCSP from a qualitative perspective focusing on the benefits and challenges of the programme thus far, providing a foundation for lessons learned and ways forward in the Mangalane area and beyond.

There is widespread agreement from reserve and anti-poaching management that the community scouts have assisted in curbing poaching incidents. Observation and interviews highlight the important role of scouts in providing intelligence to the APU which has led to arrests, seizures, and the frustration of poaching attempts.[[14]](#endnote-14) Community scouts provide eyes and ears for law enforcement outside of reserve boundaries and in communities. As poaching groups are largely from outside of the Mangalane area, the scouts provide information on the movement and arrival of vehicles and people from elsewhere, and likely connected to poaching syndicates. The MCSP also increases the visual policing component of anti-poaching efforts as they routinely patrol outside the reserve’s boundaries. Community scouts thus discourage poaching attempts as it is known that poaching tracks and incursions are more likely to be found and reported. Scouts thus contribute to preventative or pro-active anti-poaching.

Bringing local people into anti-poaching efforts serves to increase the credibility and legitimacy of anti-poaching and conservation efforts among adjacent communities. There is still tension between communities and SGP, and especially the APU. But, community members, scouts, and reserve management see an inclusive approach to anti-poaching as a step towards addressing the antagonistic park vs. people relationship and demonstrates a willingness on the part of the reserve to work with communities. Importantly, employing people as community scouts offers an alternative source of income, especially for young men, who are likely to be involved in the wildlife trade. The salary itself cannot compete with the money from rhino poaching, but it does offer an income in an area where the economy is largely subsistence oriented, and based on migrant labour to South Africa, or more recently, rhino poaching. The ability to discourage people from entering the wildlife trade can become even stronger if scouts have an upward mobility to become rangers or guides and if community-based anti-poaching is part of a broader development of a local wildlife economy as originally intended. This latter part, however, is proving difficult, ushering in a suite of challenges for the sustainability and original intentions of the scout programme.

**5. Co-opting scouts: whose wildlife is protected, and who benefits?**

The MCSP was not designed primarily as an anti-poaching intervention, but was intended to be an integral part of broader development of a community governance system that ensures local ownership and decision-making over wildlife through delegated rights and management responsibilities, including those related to anti-poaching. One of the main challenges with the community scouts is that it has largely shifted away from this broad mandate towards a more narrow role of rhino protection, acting as a support or appendage to the reserve’s existing anti-poaching unit, and not a vehicle for community decision-making and management of wildlife.

There is immense political pressure on both Mozambique and the private reserves, including SGP, to combat rhino poaching. This pressure comes from altruistic motives of wanting to save rhinos, but also from the reality that if SGP and the neighbouring concessions do not succeed in stemming poaching incursions into their respective concessions and Kruger, they risk losing access to the land and wildlife their businesses depend on.[[15]](#endnote-15) Thus, SGP and its APU is primarily focused on rhino protection, and the community scouts are perceived as a logical way to support this, and have been brought under the umbrella of the APU, even if not originally intended. This greatly influences how the community scouts work on a day-to-day basis as they fall under the guidance of SGP’s anti-poaching unit, supported by an anti-poaching NGO, and work primarily with the reserve’s rangers and Mozambican law enforcement authorities, not their communities. The Scouts, put simply, take their daily orders from APU management. Contrary to the original intentions, community scouts have been co-opted by the existing anti-poaching unit which is top-down, led by external actors, which largely takes a paramilitary approach, and whose priorities may not reflect those of local people, nor benefit them. This is a significant issue that frames the challenge of the long-term sustainability and community support of inclusive anti-poaching. In a context where the protection of a particular specie, like the rhino, has become politically charged and the focus of attention and resources, this becomes a genuine challenge.

This broader challenge draws attention to the importance of conservation-related benefits as a source of sustainable support for community-supported anti-poaching. The re-direction of scouts’ duties towards protecting the wildlife of private reserve and a neighbouring country’s national park is problematic in that it has also meant moving attention away from their other community-centred policing roles and the development a local wildlife economy. Put simply, scouts are not protecting the wildlife of their communities as they have yet to gain any ownership rights, nor is there an adequate framework in place for communities to benefit from conservation and protecting rhinos. This presents a challenge for the ongoing motivation of scouts and community support for them.

Apart from the few jobs created by the reserve, the benefits received by communities from the wildlife economy under the current government framework is their share of 20% of the SGP’s hunting license fees. This money is distributed between the five communities of Mangalane by the Government. In 2015, this amounted to do just shy of US$ 50 per household, well short of viable motivation to support the reserve and anti-poaching efforts. While SGP does invest in communities in terms of water access, the building of a school and community centre, and a dozen houses, such benefits do not reflect a systematic or organized way for communities to benefit from wildlife through ownership or decision-making, but are reflective of the actions of an individual reserve and its owners. In addition, these community investments existed before the MCSP, so beyond the 20% mentioned above, there is little added wildlife-related benefit to communities since the programme’s initiation. Most important here is the lack of direct benefit from wildlife and from supporting anti-poaching. The lack of ownership over wildlife means that poaching is not seen as stealing from communities, but rather the most lucrative way to use wildlife, with scouts getting in the way of this. In describing his anti-poaching duties, one scout, for example, explained how fellow community members accuse scouts of disrupting their livelihoods by making it more difficult to hunt (rhino), and that they are responsible for community members being arrested and put in jail.[[16]](#endnote-16) As such, community support for the anti-poaching work of scouts is tenuous at best, leading to a host of problems.

With the benefits of conservation and community participation in anti-poaching largely accruing to a private reserve, and not communities, incentives for becoming involved in anti-poaching simply do not compete with the incentives offered by the wildlife trade. Scouts, like rangers and police, are routinely offered money to cooperate with poachers or turn a blind eye. Corruptionamong community scouts and law enforcement is a major challenge. Numerous scouts, rangers and police have collaborated with poachers through information sharing or in more direct ways, leading to their arrest. In a context where the monetary gains from the wildlife trade are so high, wages earned by community scouts, rangers and police simply cannot compete. In addition, focus groups with Scouts revealed how their patrol duties means they have less time for farming, which is needed to feed their families. The Scouts’ salaries are argued to not be enough to make up for the reduction in time spent on farming. Indeed, Scouts, rangers, and environmental police all described how they are denigrated by community members involved in poaching, and are insulted for being “poor”, having “no future” and being “unable to properly support their families” because of the money they are foregoing by not involving themselves in poaching.[[17]](#endnote-17) Such perceptions (and the reality) of scouts and rangers make it difficult to convince young males to look at them as role models when they are surrounded by those in the poaching economy who reflect the lifestyle and wealth they aspire to.[[18]](#endnote-18) This highlights the importance of ensuring Scouts (and community members) derive adequate benefits from protecting wildlife. Such benefits and incentives must look beyond salaries to those directly related to wildlife, like ownership of wildlife or related benefits derived from protecting a private reserve and neighbouring national park.

Pressure to work with poachers also comes in the form of violence. Like anti-poaching rangers across Sub-Saharan Africa, community scouts are at risk from poachers and the syndicates they are a part of. All Mangalane scouts confirm they are routinely subject to threats of violence, and even death. In the first week of June 2016, for example, several scouts were attacked in their homes by men linked to poaching groups. One Scout showed a scar on his face, and explained that he received it when a known poacher in the community accused him of being a traitor and got into a physical confrontation with him.[[19]](#endnote-19) This draws attention to concerns of the applicability of inclusive anti-poaching models in certain contexts. Indeed, the concerns of violence and engagement with armed poachers, who are themselves militarized in some contexts, raises an important question of how far community-based anti-poaching can go, and where it may or may not be appropriate, especially when substantial and direct wildlife-related benefits are not yet be materializing.

Violence against scouts is also indicative of the lack of support they have from community members as related to their anti-poaching duties. Indeed, Scouts unanimously spoke of the alienation they face because of being labelled “traitors” or “working with the white men” since anti-poaching is not seen to benefit communities, but a private reserve or even South Africa.[[20]](#endnote-20) One APU manager re-counted a story of how, while on patrol with Scouts outside of the reserve, the Scouts were threatened. A resident of the area yelled at the Scouts “watch out, your time is going to come for working with the white men.”[[21]](#endnote-21) When asked to expand on the violence against scouts and their support amongst community members, one member explained communities support their broad policing duties in the community as related to cattle theft, conflict resolution, and problem animal management.[[22]](#endnote-22) But, and as highlighted above, in terms of their anti-poaching work, he, and his fellow scouts, argued that fellow community members see scouts’ anti-poaching work as impeding a potentially lucrative livelihood.[[23]](#endnote-23) Not only does this present a problematic lack of support for Scouts and their anti-poaching work, but it has the potential to divide people within villages into groups aligned with poachers or those combatting them, and risks forming intra-community tensions, if not outright violence against scouts as examined above.

It is widely agreed that the tensions within communities are very much driven by outsiders (working for syndicates) and those aligned with them. The reality is that those associated with poaching are seen as enriching the community, at least in monetary terms, while anti-poaching forces (Scouts or otherwise) are seen as impeding a source of wealth and income. This is exacerbated as the Scouts have become primarily accountable to an external anti-poaching unit. As reported by others, divisions in communities are exacerbated when scouts are “perceived as part of external law enforcement agents rather than members of the community.”[[24]](#endnote-24) This once again highlights the importance of having scouts primarily accountable to their communities, and not external anti-poaching interventions. Following the original intentions of the MCSP, one way of achieving this accountability is to ensure communities have ownership over wildlife, or at minimum derive substantial benefits from the wildlife and space that scouts are tasked with protecting. This can also be combined with emphasizing the non anti-poaching responsibilities of scouts such as those that contribute to broader community well-being, thereby orienting Scouts to be more in line with community needs. Indeed, scouts, reserve management and local residents agree that community members do support the scouts in terms of their non anti-poaching work. In this way, and much in line with the original intentions of the MCSP, rhino protection and broader support for conservation (and even anti-poaching) might emerge as a by-product of broader conservation or wildlife-economy where communities directly benefit from species protection and conservation. It is here where the motivation needed to support anti-poaching and community scouts is to be found.

**7. Conclusion – Moving forward with inclusive anti-poaching**

Drawing on the MCSP, we highlight the potential of inclusive anti-poaching. We also highlight important challenges facing such an approach. We put forward these challenges not to undermine efforts at inclusive anti-poaching, but to begin a discussion of the need for community participation in combatting the illicit wildlife trade and the challenges and potential implications that come with it. One of the main challenges is to ensure that community-based anti-poaching directly benefits local communities and is not co-opted by existing anti-poaching interventions. This is paramount if scouts are going to have the much-needed support of their fellow community members, a support that is needed for the long-term viability of inclusive anti-poaching. Hence, we hope to stimulate discussion about how models of inclusive anti-poaching might overcome this challenge, remain bottom-up and accountable to their communities, and be an integral aspect of increasing local decision-making and ownership over the resources that they are helping to protect. We see this as a key framing for thinking about community participation in anti-poaching and how to move forwards.

Notes

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