

The illegal trade in wild fauna and flora as seen by a nature conservation law enforcer

Since November 1988 I have been involved with investigations in the illegal trade in wild fauna and flora. It started with ivory and rhino horn in South Africa, in crates so dilapidated that they practically came apart at the Johannesburg International Airport. Suspects were many and non-governmental organisations vehemently fought any legal trade. Poaching was rife. From 1990 to 1995 South Africa lost 78 rhinoceros and 80 elephants but this figure was negligible when compared to other countries. It was said by a representative of Zambia at a Cites conference that most people in Africa did not know the difference between a banana and an elephant tusk but the illegal trade was organised and very profitable. The chain from the poacher to the end-user is a long and intricate one. The almost romantic notion of smuggling syndicates, organised by a millionaire trader in an Asiatic Country, systematically poaching elephants and rhinos in Africa, is not quite true. Even less supported by fact was the idea that these mystical men were under order to kill all rhinos in Africa to increase the economical value of their ivory and rhino horn stockpiles in Hong Kong, or was it Singapore, or maybe Taiwan! Experts on poaching and smuggling of African wildlife from England, Europe and the United States visited our continent and told us, with great authority, what was happening and how we should approach our task. Theirs was to ensure that wild beasts continue to roam Africa so that they may view them whilst on dangerous safaris under constant threat of running out of cold beer.

They explained that when de-horned rhinos were killed, poachers cut off one of the rhino's ears to show to his controller that the rhino no longer possessed a horn. I am not sure whether it had to be a left or a right ear but would think that the stump, weighing more than a kilogram, would be better proof. Just think of the investment left behind in the bush. Didn't the experts tell us that a kilogram of rhino horn was worth 24 000 US dollars? These tough and effective advisors explained to us that because of the ivory ban, black market prices dropped from 50 US dollars per kilogram to 10.25 dollars in one country and 8.35 in another. We, us Africans, watched them in awe and polished our own act.

We went back to the bush and what did we discover? The old truth about Africa was still the same: time is on Africa's side, and if you cannot respect this, it will eventually destroy you. There is simply no quick solution. The first conclusion we came to was that most elephants were killed because there was simply no reason to protect them. These huge plundering beasts, who destroy crops and threaten to kill the owners, simply could not compare economical value to goats

and cattle. It has so much meat and the tusks could be buried as an investment. Our foreign experts did not concern themselves with the destruction of the environment by domestic animals. To quote my friend, Adan Dullo of the Kenya Wildlife Service, "An expert, is a bullshitter working far away from home".

Secondly, we had to square up to the fact that the market for rhino horn was not nearly as well developed and lucrative as we were told. The maximum value for rhino horn is 3 000 US dollars per kilogram and there is no difference in price between that of a black and a white rhino. This was confirmed by my own visits to the far East.

We also discovered that rhino horn was not used as an aphrodisiac. What a shock this was as we always distinguished between a fake and the genuine product by biting it and waiting for the "reaction".

Where do we stand today? New initiatives in Africa can save our African natural heritage. The Lusaka Agreement directed at the illegal trade in wild fauna and flora creates an international task force that can do cross-border investigations, coordinate joint operations and handle controlled deliveries. We can now follow a load of contraband to the end-user or trace it back to the poacher. In Africa we have the best anti-poaching men and are in the process of training more. The Interpol Subgroup on Wildlife Crime has been founded and renders invaluable assistance to us. To a certain extent the illegal trade in rhino horn and ivory has been wiped out - recovery figures are about 10% of what they were in 1992. Cooperation between range countries in Africa and end-users in the Far East is good. Yes, the scenario is one of optimism.

Apart from financial assistance, what more do we need in Africa to produce even better results? For one, our law enforcement structures will have to be updated to cope with possible increases in illegal trade. We cannot even forensically trace the source of illegal wildlife products as a database has not been fully developed and the forensic tests are too expensive for most law enforcement agencies. We certainly hope that some non-governmental agencies will financially assist us in these projects.

The controls over permit systems in Africa are not up to standard. Auditing thereof is almost nonexistent. Cites II permits are issued by traders with little intervention from official organisations, and maybe not everyone in Africa know by now the difference between an ivory tusk and a banana after all. Superintendent P Lategan: Endangered Species Protection Unit: South African Police Service