

ANIMAL SMUGGLING IN AFRICA IS A GROWING PROBLEM YET AGAIN



In recent weeks, nature, without the action of man, has proved that it can recover itself. We have seen swans and rays return to the canals of Venice, the Himalayas being observed from regions of India after decades of hiding behind smog, penguins wandering freely through districts of Cape Town. However, although nature breathes more lightly as pollution breaks down across much of the planet, there is one scenario that experts have not anticipated, and which is already beginning to wreak havoc in some regions: increased hunting and animal smuggling in Africa.

Destinations that depended on tourism to protect their wildlife are in an increasingly critical situation with each passing week. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) recently stated that three of the few hundred remaining giant ibises have been poisoned. **In Cambodia, endangered bird species are also being hunted and killed.** 100 painted storks were killed in Prek Toal Ramsar, the largest waterfowl colony in Southeast Asia.

The future scenario is even more terrifying, according to environmental protection experts: without the financial return of viable tourism, it is impossible to know how long the hunting activities will continue.

The situation in some African destinations is already complicated. "Hunting will grow with the lack of tourism, because the mere presence of visitors is an important form of prevention," says Dereck Joubert, founder of Great Plains Conservation, which has camps on private concessions in three African countries: Kenya, Botswana and Zimbabwe. He adds:

"If tourism doesn't recover, and many people are fired, a cycle of poverty will begin that will provoke a need for survival, and for many people who live near parks and wildlife areas, that can provoke a return to hunting".

Joubert also stresses the possible cultural loss related to this movement. "A large portion of people at risk of losing their jobs have a deep knowledge of hunting techniques and know the regions like nobody else. We have to take this reality extremely seriously," he says.

Efforts to keep animals and communities safe

Based on the experience of those closely following the impacts of the pandemic in these regions, experts warn that hunting in places like Kruger Park in northeast South Africa may continue to be low, as during the lockdown it is more difficult to transport rhino horns, for example. However, in places with more open ecosystems, such as Botswana, this activity is already growing. By the beginning of 2020 alone, 31 rhinos have been hunted, a larger number than last year. At least the closed borders have prevented hunters from returning to Africa to kill for leisure.

The increase in wildlife hunting rates has two reasons: being a source of food for impoverished local communities, who lose income from tourism, or the illegal sale of specimens or parts of animals, which causes park rangers to face a new threat. "Professional hunters have great access to areas that were previously functional. We need urgent efforts against hunting," Joubert says. The hunt is on the rise due to rhinoceros horn smugglers and the ivory of elephant fangs.

Plan of action

The control and monitoring teams, while concerned with the progression of COVID-19 in Africa, are making increasing efforts to maintain a constant alert and protect elephants, lions, leopards and many other vulnerable animals from predatory hunting.

"At Great Plains, we ask for volunteers to join our team of guides, made up of men and women who know everything about these areas and the savannahs, to carry out regular preventive actions."

Social actions are also part of this effort. "We give donated medical supplies to the clinics and create emergency medical facilities in the village closest to each concession to ensure that our communities are safe and less prone to poverty. And this is also important: we don't fire anyone," he stresses.

In Kenya, in the conservation areas, rangers continue to patrol the land daily. And these professionals belong to the communities, which considerably increases the intelligence needed to keep the hunters away. Even so, it's always a risk.

Communities that make a living from tourism

Until the beginning of this year, before the collapse of local tourism, the activity was responsible for more than one million jobs in Kenya. According to the latest World Tourism Organization report, 67 million travelers visited Africa in 2018 - a figure that showed annual growth. In the case of wildlife reserves, tourism sometimes accounted for 100% of annual income.

As it is impossible to keep the lodges open and with teams reduced (many officials chose to return to the communities to stay with their families during quarantine), some conservation areas foresee a drop in the number of anti-hunting patrols, in addition to lower salaries for members of these groups.

The Kenyan government, through the Kenya Wildlife Service, was doing a good job in controlling hunting, along with communities, rangers and private conservation areas. Last year, the rhino birth rate in Kenya was higher than the mortality rate, and the killing of elephants was also under control. But the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse of tourism threaten all these achievements.

Currently, the government, the private sector and associations like Kenya Wildlife Conservancies and Maasai Mara Conservancies are trying to raise funds to keep the conservation areas functioning and ensure that all park rangers receive a salary. Without the income from tourism, the income from meat, ivory and rhino horns will increase, experts claim.

For example, in Kilimanjaro National Park, an essential wildlife corridor for several species - including elephants, zebras and impalas - dozens of villages depended on safari tourism. **In many private conservation areas, or managed by local communities, about 50 percent of expected tourism revenue by 2020 has already fallen to zero.** Without that income, it is increasingly difficult for communities to have food, and it is also more difficult to keep rangers' vehicles on the road. So, urgently solutions required.

Project Rhino, a non-governmental organization in Durban, South Africa, recently announced an increase in rhino hunting. In the first week of quarantine alone, seven animals were killed. The growth has been attributed to the ease with which hunters have to flee in regions where surveillance has declined due to social isolation and falling incomes to pay for surveillance services.

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