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A force for good

By Michelle Baran



The elephant poaching problem has grown rapidly in recent years because of a strong demand for ivory from China and other East Asian countries.

As demand for ivory grows in East Asia, the poaching of African elephants for their tusks has reached its worst levels since the ivory craze of the 1980s. Many believe the cure for this illicit trade may be Africa's tourism economy.

"If tourism or money earned from tourism finds its way back into the local communities, and local communities are then earning a livelihood from keeping these animals alive rather than having them dead, then there is an incentive," said Joyce Poole, co-director of ElephantVoices, a research and advocacy organization.

Indeed, according to ElephantVoices and other wildlife advocacy groups that operate in Africa, the elephant poaching problem has grown rapidly in recent years because of a strong demand for ivory from China and other East Asian countries.

Cynthia Moss of the Amboseli Trust for Elephants said the poaching "does seem to be increasing. I'm afraid. There is definitely a big demand in Asia, and they're paying ... a lot of money for these things, as much as \$2,000 for one kilo."

In 1990, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora imposed a complete ban on all trade in ivory. But Moss, who is currently based in the Amboseli National Park in Kenya, said that several years later, certain countries in southern Africa got permission to sell their ivory stockpiles.

At first, they were only allowed to sell to Japan. "They were able to sell to China for the first time in 2008," Moss said, "and that seems to have been what's tipped everything. Until the China market opened, Moss said, "we hadn't seen any poaching [on this scale] for about 12 years or so."

Traffic, a wildlife trade monitoring network, reported that one of the largest ivory seizures in recent years -- 707 tusks, 32 ivory bracelets and a rhino horn -- occurred in April, during a routine inspection of a truck in Guangxi, China.

"In 2009 alone, customs agencies intercepted over 25 tons of ivory being smuggled from Africa to Asia," the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora said in a report issued on May 24. "As recently as last week, officials in Kenya seized over one ton of ivory that was about to be smuggled out of the country."

This new appetite for ivory in East Asia has made the elephant and rhino poaching problem resurface with a vengeance.

"China has got a growing middle-class population with money to spend," Poole said. "As long as there's a market, there's a value on those animals' heads. We want to make sure the value of tourism is greater [than the value of poached ivory]. If you keep an elephant alive, it has recurrent value."

Indeed, on a continent where corruption is rife and money scarce, the tourism industry gives local communities the opportunity to participate in a valid and legal economy that relies on protecting and preserving wildlife rather than killing it.

"The major contribution we can make is to try to send tourists to those places that are prone to poaching," said Jim Holden, president of African Travel.

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Elizabeth Gordon, owner of Extraordinary Journeys, who brought the issue to Travel Weekly's attention during a meeting last month, agreed with Holden: "The fantastic thing is -- and I think that's one of the reasons we haven't seen it in the Maasai Mara [a well-known wildlife area and tribal region in Kenya and Tanzania] -- is that there's a really strong tourist presence there."

The safari economy

Gordon, Holden, Moss and others provided examples of tourism enterprises throughout Africa that have been able to engage local communities in preservation efforts. Several different models of conservancy properties, which incorporate sustainable tourism and wildlife preservation, involve local communities in the revenue stream so that they have a vested interest in preservation.

Dave Herbert, CEO of Great Safaris, said, "I'm a lodge owner myself. And wherever you're operating in Africa, it's just a necessity, politically and economically, to involve the local community. You've got to be a real benefit in the community."

Herbert gave one example of a property he ran in Mozambique where he hired members from the community, more than 70% of whom had never had a job before.

"We created employment, and we never had a poaching issue," Herbert said. "You've got to, as an operator, get the local community and the chiefs and the headmen on your side and have them be part of your business plan."



Poachers are said to be getting as much as \$2,000 for one kilo of ivory.

Business models range from hiring villagers to giving them an ownership stake in the property or tools to enable them to open their own game lodges and reserves. And while numerous challenges arise from these different models of sustainable tourism, the conservancies provide one solution to the preservation issue throughout Africa, especially as poachers continue to make headway throughout the continent.

Gordon provided the example of the Singita Grumeti Reserves, an area for which the Tanzanian government once sold hunting permits and that once teemed with poachers. Paul Tudor Jones, a Wall Street fund manager, purchased 350,000 acres of the Grumeti Reserves in 2002 to transform the land into an ecofriendly safari destination and to essentially put a stop to the hunting and poaching.

That type of privately funded conservation effort "has helped protect the western side of the Serengeti," Gordon said. "An area that is much bigger than the Maasai Mara is now private concessions. They have basically doubled the size of the Maasai Mara ... that's now protected."

She said the Maasai community at times kill wildlife to protect their livestock from predators.

"The Maasai feel they've been pushed off their land and that the best land has gone to the wildlife, so they resent the wildlife," Gordon said.

That attitude is slowly changing, she said, because today the Maasai "are actually making a lot more money off tourism than they are off cattle."

Sustainable tourism

Tourists visiting Africa to experience its impressive wildlife present both an opportunity for raising awareness and improving preservation efforts and a challenge in terms of the footprint they leave.

"Tourism has to be controlled," said African Travel's Holden. "The control means not swamping the wildlife." He said that sometimes on safari, "you'll have 10 vehicles around some poor, helpless cheetah that's trying to hunt. Cheetahs [used to] hunt during the day." But because they've been so overwhelmed by safari goers, "now cheetahs hunt at night."

It's a delicate balance that tour operators and lodge owners have to grapple with: how to bring tourists into Africa to enjoy its wildlife without the tourism endangering the wildlife.

Responsible tourism efforts can help by raising awareness about threats to the wildlife and by providing funding for various wildlife initiatives, said Ken Fish, president of Absolute Travel.



Elephants walking through the Mfuwe Lodge in the South Luangwa National Park, Zambia.

"The most notable thing we can do is get involved with organizations that are doing something about it," Fish said. Absolute Travel, for example, takes clients to the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya, an organization that rescues and rehabilitates orphaned elephants and rhinos.

"There's no question that [controlled tourism] is a huge contributor to not only the preservation of wildlife but to the alleviation of poverty in Africa," Holden said.

But as far as the ivory trade goes, everyone agrees that as long as there is demand, poachers will supply illicit products.

Sadly, Herbert said, "The difficulty of fighting the economics of poaching is that a few can make a great deal of money. But the majority of the population doesn't make any money off poaching."

In that respect, he compared poaching in Africa to "drugs in America. Mexico will keep exporting them while [the U.S. has] a demand."

Since most current demand for ivory is in Asia, Herbert said, it might be time to exert economic and diplomatic pressure at the highest levels.

Indeed, Poole added, "I don't think that tourism can impact the market for ivory in China. That's got to be done in a different way."

A win for tourism and preservation

The Tanzanian government has reportedly stopped work on a \$480 million commercial highway across the northern portion of the Serengeti, a project that had sparked protests from wildlife conservationists and the travel industry since it was approved last June.

The 300-mile road was intended to link the cities of Arusha and Musoma, cutting directly across a narrow section of the northern Serengeti, which according to wildlife experts would have disrupted the migration of 1.5 million wildebeest and a half-million antelope and zebra.

Numerous tour operators, including Abercrombie & Kent and Big Five Tours & Expeditions, voiced opposition to the project. A coalition of concerned organizations joined forces to launch a website, SaveTheSerengeti.org, and thousands of companies and tour operators signed a petition to stop the project.

Apparently, their efforts paid off. Last month, the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism said that "the proposed road will not dissect the Serengeti National Park and therefore will not affect the migration and conservation values of the property," according to a statement Abercrombie & Kent emailed to Travel Weekly.

The decision was due in part to a recent study that predicted the road would have reduced the wildebeest population by more than a third and would indirectly exacerbate threatening situations such as poaching and new development.

Mahen Sanghrajka, CEO of Big Five Tours & Expeditions, who grew up in East Africa and founded Big Five in Kenya in 1973, was delighted with the decision.

"We congratulate the government of Tanzania for this important step in the right direction by halting plans for the highway to pass through the park," Sanghrajka said. "At the same time, we must continue to look for solutions that protect the Serengeti and its majestic wildlife in perpetuity, while also meeting the economic development needs of the Tanzania people." -- **MLB**.