



REVIEW

Local Community Participation in Rhino Conservation - Key to Conservation Success

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ABSTRACT

A robust framework to guide community engagement in sustainable wildlife conservation and illegal wildlife trade is lacking. Virtually all conservation bodies and players believe that local communities are key to the success of rhino conservation but they are not equally walking their talk. Bottom-up community-based initiatives help to curb poaching especially level one poachers. The multifaceted problem of the African rhinoceros poaching on the continent is approaching calamitous proportions, with astounding, sobering statistics revealing the sheer extent of the illegal practice today. Poverty, greediness, superstition, rampant corruption, unchecked social injustice, ruthlessness, and ignorance are fuelling the interplay of rhino horn demand and supply. In order to save the remaining rhinoceros species there is need for economic transformation which will benefit both the communities and wildlife. Communities should get direct financial benefits from rhinoceros conservation, capacitate them and always engage them in rhinoceros conservation matters. Rhino protection should be incentivized, increasing the number of local people benefiting from conservation, and decreasing hostility towards wildlife will motivate local people to fully embrace conservation efforts. These conservation efforts should first target level one poachers who are vulnerable and exposed, by developing a comprehensive profitable and lucrative community participation packages in all rhino properties. Conservationists should walk their talk and genuinely work with local communities to build support for rhino conservation through education, awareness, self-sustaining business ventures and employment.

1. Local Community Engagement in Conservation

A robust framework to guide community engagement in illegal wildlife trade is lacking^[1]. Conservation should take a twist to develop and

implement models that are community centered, through supporting and promoting communities regardless of their color, race and social standing^[1-6]. Organized crime syndicates target and use the disgruntled, poor, and ignorant locals from areas around large reserves and rhino properties^[7-10] to kill the rhinos^[1]. Local people have been alien-

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ated from conservation, and there is a lot of frustration in communities, about land use benefits, poor communication, and very few people from the area are employed which is driving them to antagonize all conservation efforts^[9-12]. Law enforcement agents and policymakers have been joining their efforts focusing on ground poachers only leaving buyers, intermediaries and sponsors^[1]. Conservationists have long known that most efforts, however well-intentioned, to save endangered species are bound to fail unless members of local communities are enlisted for those efforts.

Urgent and comprehensive address of social injustice will provide opportunities to the people, living with or next to wildlife conservation area^[9]. Social injustice triggers poverty, corruption and civil unrest in communities. The rampant rhino poaching occurs strangely in low-income regions which are also impoverished and the people often turn to poaching out of economic necessity^[5,9,13-15]. Corruption is clearly prevalent when dealing with threatened high-value commodities such as rhino products especially in poverty wracked countries and it remains a major part of the challenge in addressing rhino poaching and trafficking^[16,17].

2. Key to Conservation Success

People-centered, viable and robust community-based approaches should be used in rhinoceros conservation. If wildlife business and all conservation activities worked together with local communities as much as possible, the gross effects could be turned around and level one poaching will be dealt with swiftly. However, this is only rhetoric, there are no or very few viable, profitable and self-sustaining community initiatives in Africa due to lack of adequate funding and support from relevant authorities and wildlife partners. Sustainable and profitable community-based response to the illegal rhino trade should be prioritized because, for individuals to switch from engaging in illegal rhino trade, the alternatives on offer must generate comparable income levels if they are to be attractive. However, this can be difficult to achieve but it is achievable^[18-20].

The commercial and community-based conservation enterprises should be heavily funded, audited, professionally monitored and local people being accountable^[21-23], but along business-like lines rather than as unleveraged grants. Conservation should be incentivized through viable and profitable conservation enterprises to create benefits for generations to come^[24]. Instead of recognizing local people as vital change agents in wildlife conservation, conservators are calling for more soldiers on the ground, helicopter gunships, and new advanced technologies and more money spent on security officials and private inves-

tigators^[9]. These resources should also be channeled to community development which will eventually help to reduce in illegal wildlife trade. Sustainable rhino conservation should recognize and increase incentives for wildlife stewardship, decrease costs of living with wildlife, and support livelihoods that both related and not related to wildlife^[25]. More so, efforts should be made to close illegal markets and share successful approaches for reducing demand for illegal wildlife products. Of interest, people living and working with rhinoceros should be well paid to compensate for the genuine temptations of huge price for rhino horn offers. The community of conservation practitioners, researchers and policymakers must operate with ever-changing terminologies and taxonomies of community engagement, as well as rapidly changing methods, evolving methodologies, and even new epistemologies to examine its impact. There is need to build vibrant community institutions that represent local community voices, follow proper democratic processes and support all concerned communities in acquiring project management skills so that they can effectively lead conservation projects activities on their own. Governments should create a communications framework for community engagement in conservation. Local people should be given opportunities to participate in all conservation activities, have full access to information on policies, development plans, freedom that permits the discussion of issues and their views should be also be heard and considered.

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