

Rhino versus Ape Conservation.

I have researched the story (page ..) on the rhino horn trade in Vietnam and Laos for two years now, having made four different trips to the region. As part of this research, I regularly Google “Rhino Poaching News” on the internet . Not a day seems to go by without two or three news items showing up, including weekly headline stories in some of the national papers that document that the killing of rhinos for their horns has become a serious conservation crisis. The fact is the level of awareness, mostly created via the traditional media but also the social networking sites is such that policy makers now take the issue seriously.

But what about some of the other charismatic flag ship species—such as our closest relatives, the African great apes (chimps, bonobos, and gorillas). When I Google “Chimp Poaching News” the top item seems to be from a web page that is no longer active. The next item goes back to 2011 and then comes an item from 2008 and next 2007.

This complete lack of news about ape conservation is deeply disturbing. Someone is asleep at the wheel. Maybe a lot of people. The reality is that while the Rhino population , despite the poaching, is still on the increase in South Africa and even in East Africa, the African great ape populations are declining daily, and at a faster rate than ever before. (The only exception in this trend seems to be the mountain gorillas, where a lot of money is being made by tourism. The image of countries like Rwanda and Uganda is directly linked to the conservation status of mountain gorillas, and the conservation community wants to be part of this success story. They are falling over themselves to be somehow associated with mountain gorilla conservation.)

Early last year, I became aware of a very active and completely illegal trade in live baby chimps being traded from Guinea, in West Africa, to China (and also, to a lesser extent, to private collectors in the Middle East). The latest information tells me that some 130 chimps and 10 gorillas were smuggled out of Guinea during the last three years. To some extent under the nose of ape conservation establishment players with projects in the country. That’s a horrific number, considering how many adults were most likely killed to generate the orphans for trade. The CITES export permits listed them as “C,” meaning captive born. In truth, not a single one was captive born. Most would have been smuggled over several international borders in the region before being shipped out under those falsified permits to China and some of the private collections in the Middle East.

When the CITES Secretariat finally investigated this out-of-control-trade, their public statement did mention Guinea was not in compliance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, but it did not dare to mention China as an equal player when it comes in infringing on the treaty. In their confidential report, the Secretariat outlined some of the corrupt practices in Guinea that could not have gone unnoticed by the importing country. Double standards on that level as well.

Meanwhile, the most effective enforcement tool , besides suspending the offending countries (not an option CITES ordinarily considers), would be to repatriate those ape orphans back to Africa and thus keep the importer from being able to use them commercially. This has not happened. As usual, representatives of the CITES Secretariat hide behind the supposed lack of capacity in African sanctuaries.

However, a Kenya based chimpanzee sanctuary associated with PASA recently added new housing and enclosures and offered the CITES secretariat the space to push for real enforcement at the China end. Their offer has not even been acknowledged.

This continuing trade in highly endangered apes out of Africa—to rich people in China and the Middle East—is a major scandal. So why would nearly every reader of this magazine know about the rhinos poached in South Africa in the last year, while very few—possibly none—would be familiar with the Guinea case?

Is it because the chimps live mostly in Central and West Africa, which many players dismiss as a lost cause for conservation anyway? Is it because rhinos live on ranches owned by influential individuals who can get the story to the media? Is it because rhinos (at least white rhinos) are easy to photograph on any safari? Is it because they live in countries that have a wildlife tourism industry, which helps create some of the political will absent in places like Guinea, with no tourists to speak of. Is it because we only start getting alarmed when the number of a species are down to levels where every individual can be accounted for - or not as seems the now be the case.

Whatever the reason, or reasons, the ape conservation community could learn a lot from the rhino community, in terms of lobbying campaigning and activism. While I have no problem getting my own rhino horn stories placed in various publications, the Guinea Ape trafficking story has not made it even to primate blog sites.

These double standards in reporting are more than matched by a double standard in the efforts to protect. Some people are now talking about deploying drones over sensitive rhino habitat. Helicopters are already being used, while the South African army has been deployed in Kruger national park. I have seen figures of up to U\$ 1200 as the estimated monthly cost to protect one rhino on private land. Meanwhile, there are still areas in northern Congo where, according to my own estimates, there are still many thousands of chimps—being hunted with an increasingly relentlessness. We know what the density of chimps is in this area. We know the size of the representative ecosystem. We know human density and the hunting pressure associated with it. We know they are being actively hunted as a food item.

This would be an obvious area to put down some conservation money; and yet to the best of my knowledge, not a cent is being spent on active conservation in this whole range. However in a latest twist a conservation NGO not familiar with the region has retained more scientists to yet do another survey. Why another survey? From my perspective, the reason seems to be that lots of would-be conservationists really consider themselves field scientists that are still looking to spend as much a time as possible in the bush and have their chosen life style financed by donor money. Plus of course surveying is the easy part and with more surveys on top of surveys there will never be a need to address the real issues which are a lot harder to get to grips with then cutting transects through the bush - which the poachers then happily use to do even more damage.

It is far easier to get a detailed scientific research proposal from academics looking to have some more fun than it is to find scientists who are willing to deal with the main conservation problem – humans and the increasing numbers of them. We need conservationists who are willing to sit down with village chiefs, corrupt government officials, and ill-disciplined army units, to put an emphasis on the enforcement of national laws. We need conservationists travelling with back packs full of condoms instead of GPSs. Willing to set up family planning units in even remote areas. That can be hard work and frustrating and it is not something candidates line up to do “research” in. Studying the behavior of the last members of a species is a lot sexier.

The fact is that when it comes to wildlife conservation the animals are not the problem. The humans are. Dealing with the problem would logically mean dealing with humans. Yes, dealing with humans can be a hard work and a real uphill struggle . . . and most wildlife conservation “experts” did not go into this business to deal with the frustration that comes with human interaction. In my opinion, what we need is a new type of conservationist: one who is interested in humans and human nature. Maybe that means psychologists or even psychiatrists—or, as I have argued in the past, real ‘ Eco-missionaries’ willing to live with the people and work with them on a daily basis - even on a Sunday.