



Not Beating Around the Bush: Understanding China and South Africa's Illegal Wildlife Trade

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The illegal wildlife trade is emblematic of the underlying complexities that exist in bilateral relations. There is a discrepancy between diplomatic and unofficial spaces, and between supply and demand countries (as in the case of China and South Africa), which translates into a lack of common understanding in policy spaces and societies on the intrinsic value of wildlife. This contributes to larger debates about the relationship between economic development and conservation in Africa. Moreover, there are wider concerns about the asymmetrical nature of China-Africa relations, and uneven respect for local laws and values as China's engagement increases on the continent. Underlying this are the South African public and others' perceptions of China, despite its having responded concretely to the conservation of wildlife.

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 is an important one for China–Africa relations as the sixth triennial Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) – a platform where past achievements are highlighted and the direction of relations is determined – is set to take place in December. South Africa, home to the majority of the world's remaining rhinos, will be hosting both the upcoming FOCAC and the September–October 2016 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife Fauna and Flora (CITES) meeting – an international agreement between governments that ensures that the trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.¹ These signature events take place at a time of deteriorating conditions for the preservation and protection of endangered and threatened wildlife in southern Africa. A major threat to the survival of endangered wildlife species is the absence of consensus on the causes of and solutions to their illegal trade, with this expanding trade causing increasing devastation. This emotive and multi-rooted issue is entangled in, and defined by, deep cultural, economic and custodial anxieties. The distance between Chinese and African societies in a globalising era is significant when seen through this sobering prism and necessitates understanding the various contexts operating at the demand and supply level within these societies.

Illegal wildlife trade is described as the fourth-largest illegitimate business globally, bringing in about \$19 billion a year and funding corruption and other forms of crime.² Global demand has driven the increased poaching of sub-Saharan African rhino and elephant populations, and the killing of endangered species that are receiving less public attention, such as abalone, sharks, pangolins, orchids and butterflies. A reported 1 215 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2014, while 96 elephants are killed every day across the continent.³

The issue has become more serious owing to globalisation, sparking the need for a security response. Trade in this sector is becoming more efficient and 'discreet' (in terms of the players and channels involved) despite increased media attention and information about the destination of illegally procured wildlife and the statistics on poaching. Major ivory seizures of cargo arriving by sea transport have taken place in Hong Kong, a transit and trade hub.⁴ The rise of the online marketplace (eg, eBay and Alibaba) has made wildlife trade even more difficult to regulate.⁵ Rhino horn and ivory are traded in Asian countries apart from China, such as Japan, Nepal, India, Burma, Thailand, Laos and the Philippines. The global nature of the trade is highlighted by the involvement of European organised crime groups and the fact that the US is reportedly the second-largest importer of illegal wildlife products, belying the perception that this is an exclusively Asian-originated crime.⁶

Instability and the increase in non-state, armed actors also function as conduits for the trade. These non-state actors are involved in other forms of crime such as corruption, drugs and arms trafficking, sometimes funded by wildlife trade, which elevates this matter to the level of a national security risk.⁷ As a result, the response has become increasingly militarised as states grapple with stopping multiple forms of trafficking.

THE MULTILATERAL QUESTION AND SOLUTION

At the multilateral level there appears to be agreement on the extent of illegal wildlife trade.⁸ However, for a variety of reasons, global mechanisms are only a small part of the answer. CITES embodies these complications.

There are discrepancies between CITES's recommendations and enforcement at the local level, including countries' ability to monitor legal and illegal trade in wildlife.⁹ Moreover, the lack of agreement on which species are endangered creates miscommunication on the legality of their trade. This is the case with the African elephant.

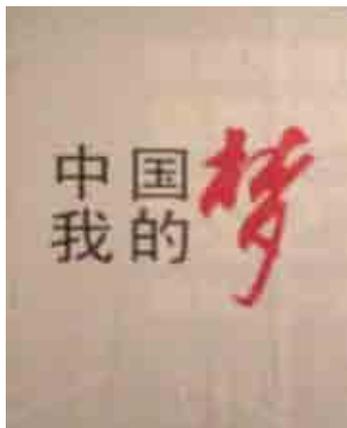
An ivory trade ban was imposed in 1990 and African elephants were categorised under Appendix 1, which bans trade in all listed species. While Kenya opposed (and still does) any sale of ivory, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and South Africa sought to down-list their elephant populations to Appendix 2, on the basis that they had healthy-enough elephant populations to support the trade.¹⁰ The prohibition on trade has also increased the value of wildlife products and illegal trade. Critics such as environmental non-governmental organisations say that allowing two one-off sales of ivory stockpiles (in 1999 and 2008, with the pressure to sell ivory coming from source countries in southern Africa, and support from Asian countries, namely Japan and later China) has stimulated the illegal trade and renewed demand with no positive impact on illegal poaching, thus compromising the effectiveness and enforceability of the ban.¹¹ Not only was Japan reintroduced to the ivory market, but China also overtook the market that was once dominated by the EU and the US.¹² Still, the legalising or banning of wildlife trade is a complex debate; one that South Africa is currently involved in regarding the trade in rhino horn.¹³

However, there are growing bilateral and multilateral country responses and collaboration. China has recognised the damage to its reputation and is reacting to international concern over the trade. During Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Kenya in May 2014, China pledged \$10 million and equipment to support the protection of wildlife.¹⁴ It had destroyed 6 tonnes of confiscated ivory earlier that year. Chinese embassies in Africa are also involved in addressing the trade in their countries of representation.

In February 2015 China announced a one-year moratorium on the trade in ivory products from countries such as Zimbabwe and Namibia, ahead of a visit by Britain's Prince William, a prominent advocate for halting illegal wildlife trade. While some saw this decision as a positive start, others noted that this measure came about in the context of the diplomatic visit and added that not only was China's domestic trade in ivory unaffected, but the temporary ban only enhanced demand.¹⁵ In May 2015 China announced plans to phase out its domestic ivory industry, which could have a major impact on demand.¹⁶ However, this development will depend on consistent implementation; and the role of transnational organised crime remains a serious challenge.

There are also examples of cross-continental collaboration such as Operation Cobra II (2014), which involved law enforcement authorities from 28 range, transit and destination states, including China, South Africa and the US.¹⁷ This joint initiative, which focused on key species subjected to illegal trade, led to over 400 arrests and the seizure of various wildlife products.

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'China's dream, my dream', a publicly displayed poster linked to the 'China Dream' campaign

Source: Translation and photograph by Yu-Shan Wu, China, September 2014

There is a growing consensus that reducing demand by targeting consumers and perceptions is an important sustainable approach to reducing the trade in ivory and rhino horn products.¹⁸ There is, however, no single solution. Deeper complexities underlie the demand-and-supply environments that further complicate the general issue.

China: Demand complexities

An important and viable long-term solution to countering demand is to create greater public awareness and change attitudes to wildlife, particularly among future generations. An example is the successful anti-shark fin campaign, which used celebrities such as Jackie Chan and enjoyed high-level government backing and law enforcement. As a result the consumption of shark fin in China dropped by an estimated 70% during 2013–14.¹⁹ This approach could be adopted towards other forms of wildlife.

In China, the main drivers behind the purchase of rhino horn and ivory are the status attached to these products as symbols of affluence among China's emerging classes, their use in traditional medicine and as components of religious objects.²⁰ The Endangered Wildlife Trust notes that while the efficacy of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac is unsubstantiated, the persistence of such denials (ironically, by critics of the illegal trade) has actually perpetuated consumption for this purpose.²¹

Meanwhile, the contemporary ivory industry, as a tradition and a profession, is part of a more general revival in Chinese society aimed at preserving China's cultural heritage and building patriotism (eg, the leadership's 'China Dream' campaign).²² The investment boom in the arts, which includes high-value input such as ivory, is also a result of these products' being perceived as having good rates of return.²³

Another significant concern for the current leadership, since 2012, has been building public trust by prioritising its anti-corruption drive across government, the military and state-owned companies. It is through this lens that the illegal wildlife trade issue could be linked and escalated. The allegation that the Chinese delegation (which included a handful of Chinese businesspeople) that accompanied President Xi Jinping on his 2013 state visit to Tanzania was involved in buying ivory, is one instance where reputation, wildlife and anti-corruption concerns overlap. Moreover, social media serves as a platform where the Chinese public is increasingly exposing corruption in various municipalities.²⁴ Using such media spaces to curb the consumption of illegal or endangered wildlife products demonstrates the positive impact of increased interconnectedness.

China's proposed '21st Century Maritime Silk Road', an ambitious economic project announced in 2013 aimed at forging closer ties between a rising Asia and African and European markets, will enhance regional connectivity through the development of ports and infrastructure projects. Yet the relationship between increased interconnectivity and the possible impacts (eg, an increase in illegal wildlife trade) should also be considered. This issue was raised in the case of the Amazon and Congo basins, where the growth in transport

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infrastructure increased market access to wildlife products and escalated damage to conservation areas.²⁵

China is evolving as a society, and in its global outreach and impact. Addressing the wildlife trade, particularly in ivory, needs to be considered in the larger socio-political and cultural context of China. It should also be linked to Chinese leadership priorities, such as combatting corruption, and the country's foreign policy objectives.

However, while much of the responsibility for the illegal wildlife trade in Africa seems to be transferred to China as Africa's largest trading partner, the issue goes beyond China. For instance, in 2012 former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton noted the increasing global nature of this trade and that the US was its second-largest destination market.²⁶ By mid-2013, Obama had committed \$10 million and established a taskforce on wildlife trafficking. Shortly afterwards, Clinton pledged \$80 million to combat the ivory trade.²⁷ Obama also announced a proposal to be implemented by the end of 2015 to restrict Americans from trading ivory across state lines.²⁸ While the EU supports national action plans for enforcement and the need for public awareness, it is also, geographically speaking, a major transit destination for illegal wildlife products.²⁹ In addition, most illegal wildlife products originating from ports in Kenya and Tanzania between 1996 and 2008 were seized in South-East Asia. South Africa's rhino horn also finds its way to Vietnam, which has its own complexities and reasons for consumption. Still, China's policy choices could have a direct influence on how other Asian societies respond to this issue.

South Africa and the rhino dilemma

While targeting the demand side is a vital component in ending the illegal wildlife trade, complexities on the supply side have an impact on the degree of successful response and implementation. The southern and South African context is illustrative of some of the difficulties prevalent on the supply side.

Illegal ivory and rhino horn trade has increased in Africa, predominantly due to the lack of more sustainable economic alternatives for local communities and a concurrent rise in corruption in countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan, Zimbabwe and South Africa.³⁰ South Africa's Kruger National Park, which also borders Mozambique, is at the epicentre of the rhino poaching issue.³¹ The dilemma is that although trade in rhino horn has been banned globally since 1976, this prohibition has coincided with an increase in trade.³² This is sparking a deeply divisive and emotive debate – even among conservation groups – on whether to legalise the rhino horn trade in South Africa.

There is also debate over the relationship between conservation and economic development. The complexities of the South African case include a lack of consensus on the most suitable response and the intrinsic value of wildlife. For example, there are different views on the long-term implications of protecting wildlife without taking into account some of the economic impacts. Some see the pro-conservation approach as an argument that is mainly fielded by those in a position of wealth.³³ They also question the financial

burden of conservation efforts when wildlife is not also viewed as a source of economic income. The counter-argument is that wildlife conservation makes a significant contribution to national revenue, and when conservation is profitable development thrives.³⁴ The world's national parks and reserves attract 8 billion visitors and generate \$600 billion in revenue a year, which shows how investment in these sectors can reap rewards. However, the top 10 most frequented reserves are located in North America and Europe.³⁵ Importantly, the economic success of ecotourism in the African context requires having various factors in place, such as adequate marketing and related infrastructure, and national and regional political stability.³⁶

The relationship between poor communities and protected areas in developing countries is also a controversial issue. It is important to include communities bordering protected areas in the management structure of protected areas and to ensure that revenue contributes to local development needs. CITES also notes the close linkages between poverty and biodiversity loss in its support for the Millennium Development Goals.³⁷ While recognition and motivation are important, so is actual implementation. An assessment of a poverty alleviation programme at the Golden Gate Highlands National Park in South Africa found a positive impact on surrounding community development.³⁸ However, the benefits were limited to a small percentage of people in the community. The meaning of wildlife also needs to be understood at the community level, where the impact of, and on, wildlife is most apparent.

Trophy hunting is another hotly debated and deeply emotive issue (as the 2015 killing of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe demonstrated), as it is viewed as an important form of conservation and an eco-tourism revenue stream.³⁹ South Africa happens to have the largest hunting industry in southern Africa.⁴⁰ The North American model (public ownership with funds from public taxes or sport hunting) and southern African model (largely private ownership with funds from eco-tourism and sport hunting) have reaped relative economic, and even some social and ecological successes, although the former model has achieved greater success in the latter respect.⁴¹ Conversely, Kenya's no-hunting policy is considered to be less economically viable because of its reliance on government subsidies and its dependence on the political environment.

Nonetheless, neither the pro- nor anti-hunting model can account for the impact that illegal poaching has on southern Africa's tourism industries. According to the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the number of rhinos killed in South Africa between 2008 and 2014 was equivalent to ZAR⁴² 1.3 billion (about \$153 million) in national assets, excluding the added security costs. In addition, the risks and costs have served to deter private rhino conservation. The importance of hunting as a revenue stream also opened a legal loophole and debate among various interest groups in the US: although wildlife products, antiques and trophies are banned, these still enter the country.⁴³ Loopholes in South Africa's legislation meant that non-traditional hunters, such as Vietnamese nationals linked to the rhino horn trade in Asia, were able to obtain hunting trophies.⁴⁴ Airlines such as South African Airways, the country's national

air carrier, had previously instituted embargos on selected hunting trophies. Yet these actions are irregular and not all airlines operating in Africa have agreed to stop shipping hunting trophies.⁴⁵

While Kenya's hunting ban is viewed as less economically sustainable, the government is better equipped to respond to illegal wildlife trade and is perceived to provide greater community empowerment than South Africa.⁴⁶ While debate is on-going in South Africa, there is a much more co-ordinated response within Kenya, as the government has been unequivocal about the ban on hunting since the 1970s and more recently on World Wildlife Day (3 March 2015), when it burnt 15 tonnes of ivory. The government's involvement allowed for increased co-operation on implementing anti-poaching laws between various law enforcement agencies – over and above the Kenyan Wildlife Service, which manages nationally protected areas – and harsher penalties handed out to poachers (the Wildlife Bill of 2014 allows for longer sentences, confiscation of property and higher fines).⁴⁷ Behind this collaboration and policy attention is the fact that tourism is ranked as the second-largest foreign currency-earning sector in Kenya, meaning the value of living elephants outweighs the value of ivory products.⁴⁸

A new dimension is the way that social media have been used to galvanise public support. Both South Africa (#iam4rhinos and #justonerhino) and Kenya (#handsoffourelephants) use social media platforms to engage users and to promote and discuss concerns. Ensuring that online commentary is translated into practical action remains a challenge. Kenyans generally seem more politically active online, partly due to the fact that policymakers are perceived to be responsive on such platforms. For instance, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, Africa's most followed president on Twitter in 2014,⁴⁹ actively engages people online and was at the forefront of Kenya's recent burning of its ivory stockpile. Kenya's first lady, Margaret Kenyatta, is also a patron of the campaign #handsoffourelephants run by the non-profit organisation Wildlife Direct. In South Africa, apart from select thought leaders, both policymakers and the public are still learning to engage in online platforms.⁵⁰ Digital spaces and reality are yet to meet. Nevertheless, social media is becoming an important space to gauge public sentiment, interest and motivations – particularly in understanding deeply emotive issues such as wildlife.

All of the above underscores the divisions within South African society – between the government, the community and the private sector – on the meaning of wildlife and how to address the illegal trade in rhino horn. An understanding of in-country complexities also needs to encompass the realisation that wildlife protection and trade have regional dimensions. For instance, neighbouring Mozambique is used as a transit point and has its own set of political and socio-economic complexities linked to the growing wildlife trade.⁵¹ South Africa and Mozambique notably signed a memorandum of understanding in 2014, largely in recognition of the poaching crisis.⁵² Yet concern has been raised about the countries' ability to consolidate the agreement in the face of the accelerating rate of poaching.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted one of the most complex development issues that is unfolding alongside the wider China–Africa emphasis on infrastructure and transport development. The very expansion of closer ties, exacerbated by unbridled globalisation, is producing unintentional consequences. As the ties between China and Africa grow with the passing of each FOCAC, so does the certainty that unofficial and informal areas are increasingly impinging on the policy space. Drawing on the internal complexities at the supply and the demand end, the following suggestions should be considered.

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China is undergoing rapid change and is continually subjected to policy shifts as it seeks to adjust to its (initially) rapid, but now decelerating, development. It is therefore worth targeting actors beyond the conservation and policy circles to include groups such as cultural foundations, the investment community and religious representatives in addressing the demand for illegal wildlife products. In targeting Chinese consumers, it is important to ensure that policy circles also buy into the process and support changing societal habits. Moreover, to secure substantive policy engagement, it is crucial that campaigns link the combatting of the illegal wildlife trade to the national priorities of the ‘demand-driven’ governance of the Chinese leadership, such as fighting corruption.

The question arises whether the African regulatory environment is sufficiently robust to meet the challenges of closer regional integration and deeper commercial ties with external partners. It is necessary to determine the limits and potential of such engagements for immediate economic development, to include policies that ensure other avenues of sustainable development such as tourism are incorporated.

For South Africa, there is the issue of managing its interests and role across a variety of multilateral platforms, such as the AU, FOCAC and CITES. This highlights the complexities in finding a common and suitable domestic response to the illegal wildlife trade. Difficult questions are raised about the extent to which maintaining sustainable wildlife populations requires not only active government involvement but also business acting as a custodian of the environment. There is a clear need for shared meaning, communication and response between parties at a regional level, as wildlife migration, trade and territories are trans-border and fluid. It is at this level where policy discussion and collaboration need to take place. Southern Africa can learn from the measures taken by other globally important trade hubs (eg, Hong Kong) as well as relatively successful cases of collaboration (eg, Nepal, in fighting wildlife crime) in order to combat unregulated trade.

The world is becoming closer in many respects. Yet, as the illegal wildlife issue illustrates, embedded narratives and perceptions that define responses to events remain largely unaltered. Udoto notes that Africa’s wildlife spectacle has been sustained by books, films and returning tourists’ perpetuating the notion of a destination of abundant exotic wealth.⁵³ Coupled to this is the view that China is unwilling to change its engagement in host countries or change cultural practices that are historically rooted. The biggest challenge is ensuring that policy action and societal perception evolve at the same pace

on this important issue, allowing collaborative processes such as FOCAC and CITES to develop effective policies to protect endangered species aligned with national development priorities.

ENDNOTES

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