

WILDLIFE TRADE

BY PRECIOUS BIRI

As much as we may not realise it as humans, we are losing more and more wildlife species at an alarming rate. Even the King of the jungle can testify as his roar cries foul to the uncertain future of his offspring. Wildlife trade is the commerce of products derived from non-domesticated animals such as horns, skins, bones, meat among others. Extinction of species is still inevitable despite widespread awareness for millennia. Wildlife trade is a foreign currency generation mechanism but has tremendous bad effects for the economy. In countries like Zimbabwe, where wildlife is an important feature in tourism, wildlife trade should not be an option in its entirety. The pros and cons should be taken into account. The ecosystem, biodiversity, global warming, extinction of species have to be of consideration.

A demarcation has to be drawn between legal wildlife trade and illegal wildlife trade. Legal wildlife trade is a beneficial initiative that ensures sustainable means to trade for the benefit of human livelihoods. There exist animals that are caught or harvested from the wild and sold legitimately as food, pets, leather and medicine. It proves a benefit to economies as there is quick supply of raw materials for local use and some available for export. Ivory for instance has many uses in the commercial sector such as manufacturing of electrical appliances, manufacturing of pianos, door handles among others.

Despite the benefits that come with wildlife trade, our wildlife has not been spared from threats. Illegal wildlife trade is at the epitome of this article. It is indeed a poignant site of the escalating numbers of our species that are at the verge of extinction. Illegal wildlife trade is costing our economies multi-billion dollars each year. This has become a global crisis because the larger proportion is illegal and unsustainable in turn threatening decades of conservation gains. Definitely this calls for unity in conserving our wildlife because our economies depend on it.

The very existence of some of our wildlife species is about to become history. Many species harvested for international trade are extracted unsustainably (at rates faster than biological recovery). Over exploitation (including for trade) is a major driver of global biodiversity decline.¹Tigers are amongst the critically endangered with a population which is now way under 5 000. The pangolin has become the most poached mammal in the world. According to the Global Animal Agency, more than 195 000 pangolins were trafficked in 2019 alone. Poaching is driving many wildlife species to the brink of extinction. According to the United Nations Environment Programme report, illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife derivatives is worth between US\$7 Billion and US\$23 Billion annually. The most targeted species are the elephant and the rhino, which are the main victims of illegal poaching for their ivory and horns. Illegal poaching has a tremendous effect as it handicaps our future development.

The illicit trade in animal products cripples economies not only by depriving nations of the maximum benefits from sustainable protection of their wildlife heritage but also by causing the spread of viruses. Currently, the world is struggling with the novel corona virus, a global pandemic believed to have emanated from animals. Indeed, illegal wildlife trade paves way for the widespread of the virus. Wildlife trade has over the years been linked to the spread of Ebola and SARS. This calls for quick

¹ International Trade Centre (ITC) "The trade of wildlife: A framework to improve biodiversity and livelihood" (2015)

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action to ban wildlife trade on health grounds. Banning all wildlife trade is a potential self-defeating measure to lower the risk of future animal to human disease outbreaks.

Africa is home to the majority of species facing threats of extinction. Wildlife is one of the keystone economic benefits Africa carries. This is treasure that the continent cannot allow to perish because it would spell doom for an economy already engulfed by many challenges. Wildlife has proved to provide several benefits for economies in various countries inter alia, food security, public health and opportunity creation. Despite the value placed on wildlife, “wildlife trade” has become the order of the day.

Indeed it is the unconscious decisions and selfish ways of thinking that is contributing to the extinction of our wildlife. Communities should come together to exert a team effort in protecting and nurturing the wildlife for the benefit of our economy and the future generation. There is need for measures to be tightened to stamp out wildlife trade. Consumer awareness campaigns will go a long way in improving wildlife conservation. Consumers should be well educated on making informed choices when buying wildlife based products. The private sector should also be encouraged to come on board in the conservation scheme.

To further curb the rise in illegal wildlife trade, there is need to back the enforcement of appropriate wildlife trade laws. In Vietnam, law is being drafted to stop illegal trade and consumption of wildlife over fears it spreads diseases. Currently, Vietnamese law prohibits the tracking of protected wildlife products such as pangolins or rhinos, and the illegal trading or killing of wildlife.²Based on World Wise data from 2006 to 2015 over 70% of rhino horns were destined for Vietnam or China.³China banned wildlife trade whilst the United States of America also enacted laws to ban importation of wildlife trophies.

In a bid to control illegal wildlife trade Zimbabwe has taken a positive step by promulgating new regulations to fight against illegal wildlife trade in animals and animal products. The government recently gazetted the Parks and Wildlife (Specifically Protected Animals) Regulations of 2020 as part of efforts to strengthen the Parks and Wildlife Act. Species included are the Cheetah, pangolin, rhinos, wild dog just to mention a few. On the other hand South Africa does not intent to back down on banning wildlife consumption. Despite the pandemic and despite the causes of the current corona virus crisis, South Africa is preparing to expand and intensify captive breeding of wild species and sell their meat in the food markets. The intention is to market the use of all kinds of wild species, including giraffes, zebra, and duikers, in order to produce cheap meat.⁴

Conservation is the cornerstone in allowing us to get the most of the precious asset. A move of change will see our economies blossom with transformation as investment and wildlife will ensure fruitful benefits. Let’s protect our wildlife, extinction is forever

² C Humphrey, The billion-dollar wildlife industry in Vietnam under assault as law drafted to halt trading, (The Guardian, 2020)

³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Wildlife Crime Status Update (2017)

⁴ African Conservation Foundation, South Africa wants to promote wildlife consumption (2020)