

Sustainable use: a tool for conserving ecosystems
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Are bans on hunting and trade the best way to conserve species?

It is natural for people to jump to the conclusion that they are. After all, if no one is allowed to kill an animal, the thinking goes, surely its population will grow.

But the problem is that many more species are becoming endangered each year and very few are recovering. The IUCN “Red List” of threatened species worldwide now stands at 16,119 for all flora and fauna and includes a quarter of all mammals. Isn’t it time we found a better approach?

To understand why hunting and trade bans are not as effective they are supposed to be, it is worth considering elephant conservation programmes in Africa, where countries have adopted two diverse strategies.

Elephant tusks (ivory) are used in artifacts around the world and, whether we like it or not, they command a market value just like many precious metals. As a result, there is a constant international demand for ivory.

Unfortunately, most African economies are poor and wildlife conservation has to compete with many pressing demands for public money, such as the provision of public housing, sanitation projects, health care (particularly related to AIDS) and education.

So conservation projects are going to be most successful if they can be self-supporting – in other words, if they can generate income and provide local jobs.

In southern Africa, countries have followed the philosophy of sustainable use. They have issued permits to sport hunters to kill a limited number of elephants that are pre-selected according to factors like age and sex. They cannot shoot breeding animals, for example.

Sport hunting produces significant income through hunting fees, safari costs (guides, accommodation, trophy fees, etc.) and this is reinvested into conservation programmes. Local people support it because it provides secure employment.

The result is that in Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, elephant populations are well-stocked and healthy, while incidences of poaching have been kept to low levels.

By contrast, Kenya takes a protectionist approach. Killing elephants is prohibited and the country steadfastly argues against international trade in ivory.

An unintended consequence is that poaching is encouraged because local people receive little added value from the elephants and, instead, see a local resource going to waste.

In some areas people suffer when elephants destroy crops and homes. Habitat damage from dense populations also negatively impacts many other species.

So conservation in Kenya has become largely a law enforcement operation and, inevitably, this is a drain on limited local resources. While elephant populations have recovered, poaching remains a problem and, in stark contrast to southern Africa, people have to be paid to shoot problem animals.

In the case of sturgeon, caught for its roe, protectionists claim that a caviar trade ban would help populations to recover in their principal location, the Caspian Sea. But the real cause of depleted sturgeon populations is not the legal trade, which is carefully regulated, but the illegal one which, by definition, is not, and which is unfortunately many times larger.

If there were a ban on caviar trade, as some groups advocate, responsible producers – who have invested in hatcheries to replenish stocks – would no longer have any conservation incentives.

The result would be disastrous. Rather than lead to a recovery of sturgeon stocks, such an approach would accelerate their depletion, while fishermen would lose their livelihoods.

Aquaculture can be developed but does not itself promote conservation in the affected areas.

What we need to do instead is take steps that positively encourage conservation by providing incentives to local producers, rather than criminalizing them.

It is to be expected that people will question how conservation can be aided by allowing animals to be killed and utilized. Sustainable use still seems counter intuitive to some. But the conservation results with species like African elephants and the fully recovered and abundant Florida crocodile prove otherwise.

Sustainable use is enshrined in the Convention on Biological Diversity and is used as the basic wildlife management philosophy in countries like the United States.

And there are signs that “sensible conservation” may be creeping more into vogue as realities hit home and wildlife officials begin to critically assess realities. Recently, the BBC reported that authorities in Malaysia have decided that the best way to protect turtles is to license, rather than ban, the collection of their eggs.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency for nations to practice sustainable use at home while prescribing protectionism abroad. This is true for African elephants, seals, sturgeon, whales, tigers, rhinos and many of the so-called “charismatic” species.

Over the coming years, the fate of many animals may well depend on the extent to which the public around the world starts to accept the idea of utilizing wildlife in a sustainable way.