To save the African elephant, focus must turn to poverty and corruption

May 29 2019, by Colin Beale And Severin Hauenstein

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

African elephants are threatened with extinction. With numbers shrinking by a third in just seven years, there are now fewer than 350,000 left in the wild. And their dwindling numbers are not just the concern of nature documentaries—they play vital roles in helping plant life prosper, digging water holes and improving foraging conditions for

other animals.

In 2011, poaching rates hit an all-time high, with 10% of all [elephants](#) on the continent killed in a single year. Thankfully, our new research, published in [Nature Communications](#), reveals that the poaching rate has since declined, hovering at around 4% in 2017.

However, this drop is not enough—at current levels of poaching, the African elephant could still become near extinct in a few decades. This is despite [substantial law enforcement efforts](#), and [legislation](#) to outlaw the trade of ivory. Our results suggest that if we are to save the African elephant, we should begin to direct resources towards less traditional approaches.

Slow economy, lower poaching

The drop in poaching from 2011 levels was likely due to a decrease in demand for ivory in [China and South-East Asia](#) – but the reasons for this decrease are not obvious. It would be easy to assume that [China's ivory trade ban](#) and [prominent supportive campaigns led by celebrities](#) were responsible, but the dates don't match up—the trade ban wasn't announced until 2015 and didn't take effect [until 2017](#).

In 2016, Kenya burnt 105 tonnes of ivory to demonstrate its commitment to tackle poaching. Credit: Dai Kurokawa/EPA

The ban may have had some positive effect on more recent poaching numbers, and it certainly sends the right political messages. But as demonstrated by the recent growth in rhino poaching despite a comprehensive ban, history tells us that making a coveted animal product illegal doesn't always curb trade.

Instead, it seems that China's slowing economy may have been the main driver behind the fall in poaching. And while the subsequent economic squeeze probably reduced ivory demand among the rich in Asia, poaching could easily rise again should China's economy change.

A new approach

The most important thing we can do to reduce poaching is to stop people setting out to poach in the first place. Traditionally, law enforcement has been seen as the cornerstone of strategies to cut supply, driving a push for increasingly militarised anti-poaching operations. But while law enforcement did explain some of the large variation in poaching rates across sites, a much bigger correlate of poaching rates was the level of poverty and corruption in the area.

For many involved in poaching in Africa, the ivory from a single large elephant could be sold for much more than they have any chance of earning in an entire year. And given that elephants regularly raid crops and kill community members, even those not involved are often understandably ambivalent about tackling poaching.

Kenyan rangers have received patrol and field training from the British army to fight rising poaching in the country. Credit: Dai Kurokawa/EPA

That's not to say that we should stop investing in law enforcement. The mere presence of a few rangers deters many poachers, and is an extremely useful strategy. But the most professional poachers will only be deterred by a large, well-trained, and well-equipped field team, which simply isn't practical in sites that cover ground areas in excess of small European countries. Our results suggest that some of the vast sum of money spent on these types of operations may be better spent on poverty and corruption-related interventions.

Of course, reducing poverty and corruption is no simple task either. Some conservation organisations have tried offering financial incentives to communities for taking an active role in conservation efforts, but these schemes have had mixed results as cash benefits are often small, or not shared equally.

Our results suggest that conservation benefits may result from any reduction in poverty, not just from development schemes that are directly tied to biodiversity. So conservation organisations might seek to invest in, say, the provision of factories that offer appropriate employment to community members, or make grants to community members for new business ideas.

The important bonus of this approach is that in addition to being an effective method of reducing poaching, it would place improving the lives of thousands of Africans as a central priority. The well-being of humans and wildlife are not isolated issues. The plight of all species on

this planet are intertwined, and the sooner we act accordingly, the better.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: To save the African elephant, focus must turn to poverty and corruption (2019, May 29) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2019-05-african-elephant-focus-poverty-corruption.html