

Why military and market responses are no way to save species from extinction

October 3 2016, by Libby Lunstrum And Patrick Bond



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The arrival of climate change brings with it large-scale [habitat loss](#) and unprecedented [species extinctions](#). The booming black and grey markets in already-threatened animals, including the [rhino](#), [elephant](#), and [pangolin](#), are worsening matters.

Responding to the threats, the world relies on the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, better known as [CITES](#). Based on an agreement between 182 countries, CITES' [aim](#) is to:

ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

At CITES COP17, which will meet in South Africa, delegates are likely to retain bans on cross-border trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory. But CITES faces requests by South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe to [allow](#) elephant ivory trade. Lifting that ban is [opposed](#) by Botswana, Kenya and Tanzania. There is an even more controversial [proposal](#) by Swaziland's King Mswati to sell his feudal monarchy's rhino horn stock.

A second danger to CITES' integrity and its ability to protect wildlife is the [militarisation of conservation](#) through an anti-poaching arms race.

Markets and militarisation as responses to wildlife threats are dangerous. This is because they often fail. In addition, they rarely lead to alliances with the forces in society - especially neighbours of [conservation](#) sites - who are vital to defending threatened species.

Militarisation is not the answer

In the pursuit of conservation, southern Africa is witnessing new platoons of [soldiers](#) and [paramilitary-trained rangers](#), with [military leaders](#) heading anti-poaching efforts. New technologies including [drones](#) and [military-grade helicopters](#) along with [new partnerships with military firms](#) are all entering the region's parklands, ostensibly to save them.

There is little public discussion about the merits of militarisation within

CITES or mainstream conservation. This is despite the fact that NGOs such as [Conservation International](#), the [Nature Conservancy](#) and [World Wildlife Fund](#) were [exposed](#) by WorldWatch researcher Mac Chapin a dozen years ago for disastrous adventures in military conservation. These included what he described as

a disturbing neglect of the indigenous peoples whose land they are in business to protect.

Though many poachers are indeed armed, dangerous and participants in global organised crime, we disagree that more firepower is needed to stop commercial poaching. Green militarisation is a short-sighted response with severe long-term implications.

In recent years several hundred suspected poaches have been killed [in South Africa](#) and [dozens in Botswana](#). Many of these deaths result from controversial shoot-on-sight policies and practices (whether official or unofficial), where suspected poachers are killed without the opportunity to surrender.

This not only violates human rights but [generates hostility to conservation](#) in economically-marginalised border communities. These are the very areas from which conservation needs local ownership if it is to be effective.

Worse, green militarisation has opened the doors of conservation to private defence corporations. The most caricatured must be Ivor Ichikovitz's [Paramount Group](#), thanks in part to his [celebrated Mbombe Parabot](#), the CGI African "superhero" cyborg-robot.

These firms seek to create new markets for their hardware and services, markets they actively work to enlarge by exploiting conservation to showcase their hardware at [military tradeshow](#)s.

This also amounts to a perverse form of "greenwashing". As the firms bedazzle us with their well-advertised commitment to environmental protection, we are left blind to the destruction they leave in their wake in conflict zones around the world.

Putting a price on conservation

Likewise, the ideology known as the [financialisation of nature](#) is based on the view that a market problem, like the threat of extinction posed by poachers, can be treated best with a market solution. Trade in wildlife is especially [vulnerable](#) to this logic.

Swaziland's proposed international rhino horn marketing strategy is still firmly [opposed](#) by leading environmental experts. South Africa still ostensibly supports the ban. But it is under pressure from rhino-horn factory-farming ranchers like [John Hume](#) who owns 1400 rhino. This is more than Kenya's entire rhino population. If Swaziland is allowed an exemption, Hume and other rhino breeders are likely to move animals across the border for horn harvesting and lucrative sales.

Neither green militarisation nor legalisation of cross-border trade in rhino horn and ivory are just or sustainable responses to wildlife loss. We must do better than this. And we can in several ways.

Historic moment to rethink conservation

The only surefire strategy to stop commercial poaching is drastically reducing demand. Wildlife [fetches](#) staggering prices. A kilogram of rhino horn, for example, fetches US\$60,000 – more than gold, diamonds and cocaine. Until buyers lose interest or shift to a new fad (as [happened](#) a century ago to ostrich feathers), there will never be a shortage of people willing to procure wildlife, even risking their lives to do so.

CITES, to its credit, has done a great deal to prioritise demand reduction especially in Asia, where the largest markets exist. And to their credit, South African and Namibian authorities are finally naming and shaming smugglers they catch. Even proponents of green militarisation often agree that reducing demand is the single most important response. But it is vital to do so with cultural sensitivity to avoid the appearance of yet another western imposition.

Just as necessary is the need to address commercial poaching through more productive, respectful relations with communities surrounding parks. After all, these are the very communities that can help make conservation efforts successful over the long haul.

We have an historic opportunity to rethink conservation. There is an opportunity to make it less exploitative and more inclusive of the needs and perspectives of communities that often suffered injustice when parks were carved from indigenous lands.

More broadly, because [poverty is routinely a driver of poaching on the supply side](#), we are reminded once more of the need to address global inequality.

There are precedents. Successful campaigning by local social movements and their global allies - including sanctions against corporations profiteering from racism - brought an end to apartheid 25 years ago. A decade ago, non-violent protests by civil society [ended](#) the patent control by big pharmaceutical companies over AIDS medicines, resulting in a subsequent rise in life expectancy from 52 to 62 in South Africa alone.

Saving the rhino and elephant could be just as feasible, if popular movements are built - movements that avoid militarised and market paths.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Why military and market responses are no way to save species from extinction (2016, October 3) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-10-military-responses-species-fromextinction.html>

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