

People, Poaching and Conservation hmj1

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In reality, this essay is not about saving the rhino in the Limpopo National Park region. The 300 rhino that were there when the park was incorporated into the Transfrontier Park were all slaughtered within a decade. What it is about is community rights, particularly those they should have under the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Right to which Mozambique, South Africa and their agents are obliged to subscribe.

I have been tracking the Mozambican Shangaan (Tonga) community living along the Olifants River just to the east of the Kruger National Park (KNP), in South Africa, for some time with concern. I grew up on a farm near Tzaneen, 80 kms to the North West and, as a child, had a Shangaan nanny from the area and my first language was Shangaan. Many of my early childhood friends were Shangaan. Unfortunately, my parents separated when I was 5 so lost touch with my Shangaan heritage when I went to school on the other side of South Africa.

When the Limpopo Park was incorporated into the Trans frontier Park in 2002 there were 300 resident rhino. By May 2013, these had all been exterminated. There has also been much concern voiced about rhino poaching in the neighbouring Kruger National Park (KNP) with suspected poachers obviously travelling at will through the Shangaan region of the Limpopo Park. I have been shaken, but not surprised by the SA Government's response to poaching. The South African minister of Environment's answer is to send in the army and sign Memoranda of Understanding with the Vietnamese and "other" eastern governments in an attempt to curtail rhino horn trade. Both these suggested solutions are unlikely to work. Sending in the army could cause social problems for the local community. Agreements with the Eastern governments about a relatively few rhino horns is questionable. These countries have far more pressing problems relating to illegal activities to show much concern about a South African request. These countries have battled unsuccessfully for decades with trafficking of arms, drugs, women and young girls to little avail. A few rhino deaths are unlikely to register on their radar. While spending money on DNA testing is admirable and academically interesting, it is only the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. Much is said about the capture and jailing of poachers and collaborators. However, for desperately poor people living in the area where they have grown up with violence and uncertainty, a few Rand in the hand at a vague risk of a jail term is an option worth taking. The South African government is faced with a runaway train and is devoid of ideas or solutions. There are a myriad of organisations spending huge amounts of money trying to prevent poaching by training countless armed game guards, yet the number of rhino deaths is rising at an unprecedented rate particularly in our iconic wildlife region.

The reason Anton Rupert promoted the Transfrontier Park idea was to enable migratory game species access to their traditional and historic routes that were disrupted by arbitrary colonial borders. One must remember that indigenous communities were similarly treated by colonial geographers and have the right to live in and benefit from their traditional environments. Both Mozambique and South Africa have signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that should give the Shangaan community rights to their ancestral homes and resources.

I believe that the primary problem is that the Shangaan community have faced decades of civil strife and war over the past 50 years and are immuned to the death and destruction of the surrounding wildlife. During the latter period (late 1900s), as many as 250000 sought refuge in South Africa. In the early 2000s about 30000 refugees were repatriated under a United Nations funded refugee return programme administered by the Wits University Rural Facility in Bushbuck Ridge. They were returned home with their meagre possessions a gift of some seeds and a few basic hand tools. Now, with peace in the region, they have been neglected to the extent that their level of poverty and socio-

economic dislocation from their environment has led them to become survivalists and exploiters of their environment at best and abusers or destroyers at worst. It is only natural that they will turn a blind eye for a few Rand to well-equipped poachers operating in the region. So their poverty continues, and so will the poaching and the destruction of their environment. In a sentence; although the community is environmentally rich, they are cash poor and will do anything to survive, including turning valuable woodlands into charcoal to provide energy for sale in the cities. This is the classic case of the Tragedy of the Commons. They live in an environment that could not only support the tribe, but also be able to enable them to be totally self-sustaining provided an institutional model is negotiated that solves the Tragedy of the Commons problem. The problem of rhino poaching and environmental degradation is a people problem that cannot be solved by bureaucrats, elected or employed and who, year after year run in circles looking for the next possible idea. The resources spent on the problem so far have been huge and with the Warren Buffett USD20 million grant, getting larger. The grand plan for the region's incorporation into the Transfrontier Park includes relocating people instead of integrating them into their traditional environment and enabling them to reconnect with their traditions. I am not sure whether the community was even consulted on this grand and noble plan or given any options. There is much talk about moving the region's population into fenced villages to prevent "human wildlife conflict". Moving the population into villages is a totally fallacious and destructive strategy for whatever reason it is intended as it will only create squatter camps and destroy whatever harmony the population had with their traditional environment. Villagisation has a tragic history in Mozambique. During the civil war the Portuguese military forced many rural populations into concentrated villages in order to better control their security situation. The recently failed bio-fuel project also intended to create worker villages which upset the community and partly resulted in their dissatisfaction and opposition to the project. Moving the population out of their traditional villages ignores the fact that many African cultures place great importance on their proximity to ancestral graves.

I believe that focusing on rhino or environment conservation is not the best option. The answer has to lie with the people. Somehow, one has to transform communities (and particularly the Shangaan nation) from passive spectators and recipients of outside aid and promises of employment on neighbouring commercial farms to active participants and "owners" who enthusiastically conserve their assets. I say transform, but in reality the community should be offered the opportunity to build on their traditions and modernise them so that they are enabled to live healthy and functional lives in harmony with their environment and able to interact with the outside world in mutually beneficial ways. The Shangaan have lived and survived in the area since the Mfecane period of the 1840s, nearly 200 years. They have endured the Rhindepst (late 1800s) and civil wars, and more recently purposeful destabilisation by the apartheid government. Most recently, they have been denied effective development initiatives by the newly democratic and under resourced Mozambican government. Their present exploitative behaviour is to be expected and is purely a normal survival response in a hostile and unnatural socio-political environment not of their making. Until their socio-economic environment is transformed in positive ways the natural environment will continue to be degraded and the population's survival dependant on aid from afar, or patronage from a struggling government.

In this very wealthy (cultural and environmental) community, one could facilitate the transformation of their socio-economic environment into one where the community is enabled to build, own, operate and sustain their economic infrastructure in ways that harnesses and modernise their old but sound traditions. If we examine our Shangaan community for example, they and their forefathers have been subsistence herders of Nguni type cattle for decades, if not hundreds of years yet they probably don't realise that one buffalo has a market value of over a thousand Nguni cattle or that a rhino is worth very many tens of thousands of Nguni. This might be on the auction floor for live animals destined for commercial game reserves. Yet, with a few more facilitative steps one could translate this unnoticed Shangaan capital asset into a cash generating one (in modern terms a Return on Assets) with tourists

paying to visit buffalo and rhino in the wild. Game reserves, both government and private, earn incomes and returns on capital many times higher than commercial agriculture and are less affected by climatic variances. In addition, Game reserves not only earn valuable foreign exchange but are efficient creators of localised employment. Estimates indicate that for every visitor to the region 8 permanent local jobs could be created. Apartheid and colonialism deliberately excluded black communities from utilising their capital assets or even gaining an appreciation of their value. If the Shangaan Community could be exposed to the option of becoming husbanders of their fauna and flora, they might well become ardent protectors and guardians of the remaining iconic animals and valuable woodlands at the expense of charcoal production and farming only Nguni cattle. With income earned through tourism, the community could, over time, take responsibility for what would be normal central government social expenditure like health and education and, in addition other capital and recurrent expenditure.

Community owned and operated wildlife conservancies are not new in Southern Africa, we have a very successful model just across our border if we bothered to look. In Namibia, community owned and operated wildlife conservancies had a dramatic reduction in poaching when the local community perceived the value of wildlife and shared in its ownership and management. Community conservancies not only allowed communities to preserve their environment, culture and traditions but also employ themselves in meaningful ways and reduce poverty and their reliance on the state.

The answer has to lie with the Shangaan being given back ownership of their historic and cultural assets. There are dozens of tried and tested examples available as close as Namibia that could provide the model to achieve this and there are people in Southern Africa who understand the mechanisms needed to achieve a far better level of protection needed for wildlife survival and the concomitant normalisation of the Shangaan socio-economic environment.

The Peace Park's Villagification programme to "reduce human wildlife conflict" mirrors the tragic and failed apartheid rural development projects like the Keiskamahoe and Qamata schemes that 30 to 40 years later are still the source of traditional and cultural disharmony and abject poverty. Fencing of communities cannot be the solution required to protecting the environment. At most, it might temporarily remove people from the problem area while the authorities attempt to track poachers, but once this human experiment fails people will cut the fences and return to their ancestral lands to survive by exploiting whatever is left of the environment. In addition, they might well sue for the return of the villages, lands and wildlife under the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Rights to which both Mozambique and South Africa are signatories. This declaration binds not only these two governments but also their peoples.

In 2001 when the Transfrontier Park was established there were 1000 elephant and 300 rhino in the LNP, 13 years later there were no rhino left. By extrapolation, the resident elephant population doesn't have much longer to live leaving the region without its next and last key most valuable asset.

South Africa now regularly loses over a thousand rhino a year. And despite all the political and bureaucratic posturing the numbers increase year on year while authorities spend millions trying to hunt and jail poachers. Less than half the Buffett grant, maybe a third, could allow the Shangaan community to transform their way of life / existence and return to the environmental harmony of their forefathers and be able to share their incredibly wealthy heritage with all of us in mutually beneficial ways. And at the same time substantially reduce the demise of South Africa's iconic Big Beasts a few kilometres away in the KNP.