

# A LAYMAN'S CASE FOR SAVING ELEPHANTS AND RHINOS

BY PETER LOW

Ivory, rhino horn, and heroin are unlikely bed-fellows, but all are united in the fact that they have become hugely valuable commodities. Some will say even more valuable than gold.

Intrinsically the three commodities are of varying value. Ivory is a hard, enduring and attractive material; Rhino horn is purported to have medicinal and performance enhancing qualities; whilst heroin can bend the minds of those who feel the need; but, intrinsically, none come anywhere near the qualitative value of gold.

In all cases trading values are established by clever marketing. The example of De Beers and diamonds springs to mind. However, the single unifying factor which has made the value of ivory, rhino horn, and heroin escalate out of all reasonable proportion

is not so much clever marketing as the illegality of trading in these commodities.

The harder conservationists and legislators push for total bans in the trade of ivory and rhino horn, the closer they come to condemning elephants and rhinos to early extinction, and to providing criminal elements with ever increasing wealth and resources with which to successfully compromise conservation and legislation initiatives aimed at protecting wildlife.

Through international cooperation – and without the writer knowing a lot about it, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) might be developed into an appropriate forum for the purpose – a commodity exchange for ivory and rhino horn could be established. Clever marketing could then ensure a legitimate value for ivory and horn, which would confer an additional legitimate realisable value for the breeding, husbandry, and protection of elephant and rhino based

on the consumptive utilisation of their products.

The realisable value of wildlife generally, through consumptive utilisation, could extend to include products such as meat, hides & skins, bone meal and even trophies for those who wish to spend thousands of dollars per day for the opportunity of shooting a trophy animal. This value compounds the more traditional and acceptable returns derived from viewing and photographing. An animal with enhanced value becomes increasingly worth protecting at a greater cost and with greater success, thereby ensuring its survival.

The land resource upon which wildlife must compete for survival is not infinite and thus legitimate management methods in order to maintain balanced ecosystems are necessary regardless of whether these are within national parks, reserves, or on private land.

**‘Consumptive utilisation’** are words seemingly abhorred and feared by ‘arm-chair’ conservationists. The reasons for this remain unclear.

The present status and published figures speak for themselves. We are closer to a total ban on the trade in ivory and rhino horn than we have ever been, thanks to the conservation lobby, and yet the rate at which elephants and rhinos are heading for extinction is ever increasing. A newspaper headline tells us that **‘25,000 African elephants were killed last year’** and that faced with such killing the projected extinction of both elephant and rhino is only a matter of years away. The Director of Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) tells us that Kenya earned Ksh98 billion from tourism during 2012 of which some 69 billion was from wildlife tourism – now under terminal threat. It can be presumed that these revenue earnings are not adequate to support the necessary measures to curb poaching. It is also clear that the



PHOTO BY NICOLAS GRANIER

sentences passed by our courts of law against convicted poachers are hopelessly inadequate.

How much greater could the earnings be if the same wildlife populations were able to be used in ways other than for just viewing? How much greater could the returns be through the legitimate consumptive use of the products obtained through the sustainable and controlled culling necessary in order to maintain wildlife populations in balanced ecosystems?

We are told that 80% of our wildlife numbers currently exist outside national parks on private land. We are also told that one of the threats to wildlife is that “many people are buying land in areas that should be reserved for wildlife”. With the new (Kenyan) Land Act it is clear that one of the major issues that will inform the National Land Commission (NLC) and policy is that of the most appropriate land-use. One of the major determinants of appropriate land-use is economics, and that means the opportunity cost or the net return per unit of land (acres or hectares) compared with other alternative uses of that same unit of land.

The Wildlife Conservation Strategy for Laikipia County 2012 – 2030 published by the Laikipia Wildlife Forum, is particularly relevant to the case for saving elephants and rhinos. One of the principle strategies articulated in this document is to **‘secure and increase space for wildlife’**. In order for this to be achievable it is essential that the economic returns to be derived from wildlife are demonstrably greater than any other land-use.

It seems unlikely that exclusive use of the land for wildlife, even with consumptive use of their products obtained by sustainable off-take to maintain populations at optimum eco-friendly numbers, would compete with integrated livestock rearing – cattle, sheep, goats & camels at year-round carrying capacities. It is even more unlikely that exclusive wildlife use only for purposes of viewing only could compete. It is apparent from the 3,650 km<sup>2</sup> within Laikipia County currently

PHOTO BY: MUNIB CHAUDRY



existing under conservation-compatible land use, and this implies wildlife integrated with livestock breeding and rearing, that this could be the most appropriate land-use. However, it is equally apparent that the returns to be derived from eco-tourism for wildlife viewing only are not sufficient to sustainably cover the costs of adequately protecting wildlife populations against poaching. If land-owners were able to derive additional revenues from consumptive utilisation of wildlife, it is a near certainty that measures would be taken to ensure protection of income-generating wildlife populations and, this, together with adequate supporting legislation to deter illegal poaching should guarantee survival.

#### **SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTIVE UTILISATION = SURVIVAL**

This has been well demonstrated by our ancestors through the domestication and consumptive utilisation of animal species which we now call ‘livestock’.

And a final thought on wildlife/human conflicts which lead to loss of life and other economic losses: These mainly occur where wildlife is not the most appropriate land use and where wildlife should be excluded by appropriate measures. However, failure to control wildlife populations in areas where wildlife is the most appropriate land use can also lead to irreparable damage to the land resource. ●

**Peter M. Low,  
P. O. Box 362, Naivasha 20117**

**The views expressed in the opinion section are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views or policies of the East African Wild Life Society.**