



Militarising Conservation: A Triple Fail for Security, People and Wildlife

Rosaleen Duffy

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Biodiversity conservation is becoming increasingly militarised. Conservationists are learning from the strategies of contemporary warfare, and this is highly problematic for both wildlife and global security.

Biodiversity conservation and security are becoming increasingly integrated. The recent rises in poaching, especially of high profile charismatic species such as elephants, rhinos and tigers has led to the development of more militarised approaches towards conservation. Rather than producing the claimed win-win-win outcome for wildlife, security and people, it is producing a triple fail. While we are more accustomed to debates around climate change and water wars as the main security risks related to the environment, biodiversity conservation is also increasingly being identified as a critical contributor to national and global security, and biodiversity losses constitute a critical security threat. This is especially the case in current debates about poaching and wildlife trafficking. Conservationists, it seems, are learning from the strategies of contemporary warfare. This is highly problematic for wildlife and global security.

Does wildlife trafficking produce threat finance or not?

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UNEP, recently stated ‘the scale and role of wildlife and forest crime in threat finance calls for much wider policy attention’. The argument that wildlife trafficking constitutes a significant source of ‘threat finance’ takes two forms: first, as a lucrative business for organised crime networks in Europe and Asia, and second as a source of finance for militias and terrorist networks,

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particularly Al Shabaab, Lord's Resistance Army and Janjaweed. Yet, a recent report from UNEP and INTERPOL on environmental crime questions the accuracy of the links between ivory and Al Shabaab. The [report](#) points out that ivory may be a source of income for some militia groups including Janjaweed and Lord's Resistance Army; however it also notes that claims Al Shabaab was trafficking 30.6 tonnes of ivory per annum (representing 3600 elephants per year) through southern Somalia are 'highly unreliable' and that the main sources of income for Al Shabaab remain charcoal trading and ex-pat finance. In spite of this, the argument persists that there is a link between the illegal wildlife trade and global security.

Although the value of the global illegal trade in wildlife is difficult to determine due to its clandestine nature, it has been estimated at around [US\\$7.8–\\$10 billion](#). It ranks as the third biggest global illicit activity (after trafficking drugs and weapons). Transnational environmental crimes are often not taken seriously within the broader policy and enforcement community, and so they are perceived as a low-risk and high-reward activity for organised crime networks. However, this is changing, and environmental crimes are rapidly gaining greater attention, and the increasing sophistication of wildlife trafficking networks is a reflection of their link with other serious offences, including theft, fraud, corruption, drugs and human trafficking, counterfeiting, firearms smuggling, and money laundering.

Major donors are also taking this issue seriously, and funding has been made available for anti-poaching and anti-trafficking initiatives. In 2013 the Clinton Global Initiative announced a commitment to raise [US\\$80 million](#) to combat trafficking and poaching as a security threat in Africa. Private philanthropic foundations have also become involved, as indicated by [the US\\$25 million](#)

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donation to South Africa from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation to support rhino protection efforts in Kruger National Park. The rise in poaching has also intersected with US security concerns, prompting President Obama to issue [Executive Order 13648](#) on Combating Wildlife Trafficking in July 2013, and in 2014 USAID allocated more than [US\\$55 million](#) for activities to combat wildlife trafficking, up from [US\\$13 million in 2012](#). These concerns have emerged as a major policy initiative of the UK government, beginning in May 2013 when Prince Charles convened a high level meeting to ‘kick start’ a government response to the rise in elephant and rhino poaching – followed in 2014 by the London Declaration on the Illegal Wildlife Trade, and the development of a [DfID/DEFRA £13 million](#) ‘Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund’.

Why is conservation being militarised?

Conservation practice is being increasingly militarised as a result of this new interest in the security implications of poaching and trafficking. Militarisation can be briefly defined as the extension of military approaches, equipment and techniques to wildlife protection, as well as the deployment of armed forces in conservation activity. Countries with elephant, rhino and tiger populations also regularly invoke the argument that wildlife constitutes an emblematic natural resource, which is central to national heritage. For example, on World Ranger Day in 2015 South African Minister of Environmental Affairs Edna Molewa [paid tribute](#) to park rangers by stating that they were protecting rhinos as a key part of the country’s natural heritage. Such appeals to natural or national heritage are also frequently overlain with the argument that states have a moral obligation to protect wildlife. The interesting question is: why is there an

increased interest in countering wildlife poaching and trafficking with more militarised responses?

War on Terror

First, the integration of security and biodiversity conservation has been extended by the development of a global context centred on security concerns, and this is most obvious in the US-led War on Terror. For states (especially parks and wildlife departments), conservation NGOs, and private conservation organisations, the ability to claim that their activities will contribute to national and global security has provided an important opportunity to justify their continued existence, and to leverage additional funding from donors, governments and private sector. The development of a global context in which security is a leading concern has opened new opportunities to leverage significant resources for conservation. During the 1990s, NGOs in the humanitarian relief sector were increasingly engaged in a competitive market to secure funding and contracts with donors. This dynamic was mirrored in the conservation sector, as detailed by Mac Chapin's high profile [piece for WorldWatch](#) on how the 'big three' conservation NGOs of WWF, Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy, had managed to secure the majority of available funding. Competition between NGOs and the dominance of the big three partly explains why conservation NGOs have been so keen to promote the idea that conservation is critical to security. The assumption is that by rendering conservation a security issue, it will allow them to tap in to the greater resources available for security and anti-terrorism initiatives.

Technological Innovations

Second, recent innovations in military technology, especially for surveillance purposes, have also driven a demand to find new markets to expand its use (and profitability). This includes the use of drone technology to monitor wildlife populations in areas hit by poaching. The drones can also collect important information on human activity in the area – which is especially welcome in regions where there are concerns about the activity of rebel groups and militias that threaten state (or even international) security. The growing intersections between the two are evident in the development of a new range of surveillance networks which draw together government agencies, international intelligence agencies, wildlife conservation NGOs and private sector risk analysis companies. Such surveillance techniques are used to gather data on individuals and networks suspected of engaging in illegal hunting and trafficking of wildlife products; these use the same techniques associated with counter-insurgency operations, including the extraction of mobile communications data, development of informant networks and use of covert surveillance.

The rise of private security

Third, the rise in privatised forms of security in the post-Cold War era is also reflected in biodiversity conservation: private security companies provide training for anti-poaching operations as well as direct enforcement. This can be placed in the context of the growing use of private military companies in international interventions, including Afghanistan and Iraq. This is especially significant because it heralds a new era in conservation, in which national governments permit direct contracts between conservation NGOs and private security companies, with an authorisation to use deadly force under certain circumstances. A good example is the ways WWF has turned to the private

sector to deliver security operations in protected areas that they manage on behalf of states. In Dzangha-Sanga National park in Central African Republic, funding from WWF-Netherlands, WWF-US and WWF-International is used to pay for anti-poaching operations and training under the auspices of Maisha Consulting. The company describes itself as a provider of environmental security via special investigations, training and operations in complex security situations. Numerous conservation NGOs have to grapple with complex security situations, especially if they seek to continue their projects and support when conflicts break out, or when militias move into the same area, and PMCs are regarded useful allies.

The triple fail

The rise of these approaches is deeply problematic for two reasons: they produce responses that are not effective for countering terrorism and insecurity, and equally they do not help us tackle poaching effectively. Instead they act as counterproductive distractions. The militarisation of anti-poaching including the growth of surveillance techniques and ‘intelligence-led’ approaches, fails to address the dynamics that drive poaching. These include a powerful mix of demand from wealthy communities around the world, poverty, inequality and the lack of opportunities in poorer source countries, the collusion of officials, organised crime networks and private transport companies. Simply focusing on military-style protection of wildlife from poaching is not effective: it can produce short term protection, but ultimately undermines wildlife conservation because it pits local communities against wildlife, reducing support for wildlife amongst people who live with it: the very people conservation ultimately relies on.

Image by Enough Project via [Flickr](#).

Rosaleen Duffy is professor of the political ecology of development at SOAS, University of London. In September 2016 she joins the Politics Department in the University of Sheffield and will begin a major research project 'BIOSEC: Biodiversity and Security: understanding environmental crime, illegal wildlife trade and threat finance', (EURO 1.8 million funded by an ERC Advanced Investigator Award).

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