

open skies

HELLO TOMORROW

NOW YOU
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SOON YOU
WON'T

BE UNITED FOR WILDLIFE

HUNTED TO



EXT



INCTION

THE ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE HAS NOT ONLY SEEN THE WORLD'S ELEPHANT AND RHINO POPULATION DECIMATED, BUT ALSO THOUSANDS OF RANGERS KILLED, GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION, AND THE RISE OF CRIMINAL GANGS. THE TIME HAS COME FOR IT TO STOP... AND WE ALL NEED TO HELP

WORDS: **BRIAN CLARK HOWARD**

On a routine surveillance mission over Chad's Zakouma National Park on August 11, a pilot noticed a herd of about 30 elephants squared off in a defensive position against two men and their horses. An anti-poaching team was scrambled, but by the time they got there, two adult females had been killed. One of them had her tusks hacked off. The men were nowhere in sight.

The rangers also found two terrified orphan calves. They rushed the youngest one, likely only two months old, to headquarters, where they tried to hand feed him. But the ordeal proved too much and he died.

Zakouma was home to some 4,000 elephants as recently as 2006, before rampant poaching dropped the number to about 450. What's happened in the park has been playing out across much of Africa, where elephants and rhinos are being wiped out at unprecedented rates. The wholesale, high-powered slaughter has drawn a growing response from governments and advocates in recent months.

Perhaps an unlikely coalition in the fight to save Africa's wildlife is the UK's Prince William and some of the world's top athletes, who have joined together in a campaign asking #WhoseSideAreYouOn? Only instead of rooting for a favourite sports team, stars such as Andy Murray, David Beckham and Yao Ming are asking fans to choose between endangered wildlife and the networks of international criminals that are pushing them towards extinction.

The social media campaign is particularly aimed at young people, "who have the most ability to encourage widespread change in public opinion", says Nick Loughran, a spokesperson for United For Wildlife, the nonprofit umbrella group behind the effort.

The stakes couldn't be higher, says Loughran, because if the world isn't successful in stemming the recent slaughter of elephants and rhinos in Africa, young people "will become the

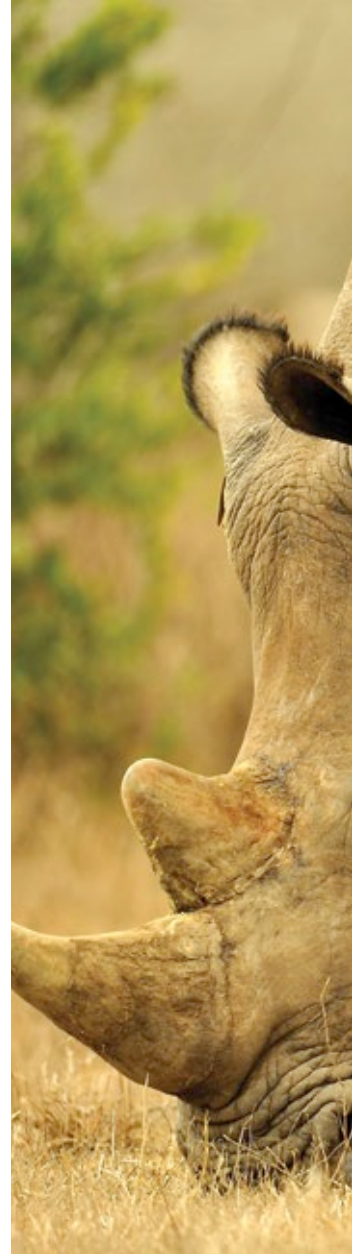
first generation not able to experience them in the wild".

Roughly 30,000 African elephants are killed each year, more than one hundred per day. That rate far exceeds what the species can replace through births. As a result, since 1989, the population of African elephants has fallen by half, to only about 500,000.

The situation is particularly dire in Tanzania, where the government announced in June that the country has lost 60 per cent of its elephants in just the past five years, down from 110,000 to fewer than 44,000. Neighbouring Mozambique has lost 48 per cent of its elephants in the same period, while central Africa has lost about 65 per cent of its forest elephants over the past decade and a half.

Although international trade in newly harvested elephant ivory has been banned by treaties since 1989, a thriving black market continues in China, Vietnam, Thailand, the US, and other countries. The biggest market is the Far East, where an ivory bangle can sell for US\$200 and ornately carved tusks can fetch several hundred thousand dollars.

The situation for Africa's rhinos is "just as desperate", says Dereck Joubert, a wildlife filmmaker and conservationist based in Botswana. There are only 4,000 to 5,000 black rhinos and 20,000 white rhinos left on the continent, says Joubert.



It takes just 48 hours for poached rhino horn to get from the site of the kill to market



One of the multi-ton animals is killed by poachers every seven-and-a-half hours, for a total of more than a thousand a year. In 2014, 1,215 rhinos were killed in South Africa alone.

The rhinos are being killed not for meat, but so their horns can be hacked off and sold on the black market, primarily to China and Vietnam. There, the horn fetches about US\$65,000 per kilogram and is marketed as a traditional cure for various wounds and illnesses. Western scientists say the cures don't work, since rhino horn is made out of the same material as human fingernails. "It's smoke and mirrors; it does nothing," says Joubert.

FEEDING DEMAND

"One of the biggest drivers of the African poaching crisis over the past few years has been the rapid rise of the middle class in China," says Simon Hedges, the Elephant Coordinator and Ivory Trade Policy Analyst for the Wildlife Conservation Society. "With more disposable income, people have been increasingly looking to buy items that were traditionally viewed as status

symbols. And because the price of ivory and rhino horn has risen, speculators have begun stockpiling the materials, driving prices even higher."

That demand has been met by increasingly sophisticated networks of criminals operating on the ground in Africa and across international borders. Many of those criminals are the same people who run drugs and guns, says Hedges, and they use the same supply lines and bribe the same customs officials. Although a poacher can make the equivalent of a few years' wages with one kill, it's not always poor villagers who are pulling the triggers.

"Increasingly, we see the involvement of organised gangs and armed militias," says Hedges, such as Joseph Kony's notorious Lord's Resistance Army, which has been terrorising central Africa for years.

In 2013, Khamis Kagasheki, then Tanzania's minister of natural resources and tourism, warned that wildlife poaching "involves rich people and politicians who have formed a very sophisticated



Rhinos are often dehorned in a bid to deter poaching. The horn will grow back in two to three years

WORLD LEADERS NEED TO WIELD THE STICKS OF DIPLOMACY AND POSSIBLY SANCTIONS TO MAKE SURE COUNTRIES ARE MEETING THEIR OBLIGATIONS WHEN IT COMES TO WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

network.” To illustrate the point, he accused four members of Tanzania’s parliament of being involved in the crime.

Illicit wildlife products are the world’s fourth biggest black market commodity, behind drugs, arms, and enslaved people, says Elisabeth McLellan, the head of the World Wildlife Fund’s Wildlife Crime Initiative. Wildlife trafficking is worth US\$8 to \$10 billion annually, says Senator Jeff Flake (R-AZ), who is working on legislation that would increase US law enforcement presence and provide more information and financial support to foreign game rangers and officials, many of whom are ill-equipped and outgunned. Poachers have killed thousands of rangers in the field in recent years.

The illegal trade routes for wildlife products are constantly shifting, says McLellan, although countries that have recently been particularly porous include Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, with Mombasa and Dar es Salaam being particular hotspots. In response to international pressure, all three countries have recently issued plans on how they intend to root out corruption and increase surveillance at airports and check points. Similar efforts have been taking place in Asian ports, where the majority of illegal wildlife products end up.

Airlines and shipping companies need to become more vigilant [Emirates has banned all trophy shipments] about potential smugglers and law enforcement agencies have to do more to follow the money through its entire chain, where it is often laundered, adds McLellan. “If you don’t address trafficking in a concerted fashion, it’s like closing one hole while another one pops up somewhere else,” she says.

But it’s not all about the supply side, warns Hedges. “We also have to disrupt the demand by reducing consumption of wildlife products,” he says.

A RAFT OF SOLUTIONS

Prince William is among those who are working on both sides of that equation. In February 2014, William and his brother Prince Harry helped bring together seven of the world’s largest conservation organisations to form the umbrella campaign United For Wildlife, in order to pool resources and share information on the global poaching crisis. William has convened thought leaders at conferences, launched a royal task force, and made a much publicised visit to China to put pressure on the country that is responsible for an estimated



70 per cent of the global demand in illegal wildlife products.

In the past few years, both the European Union and the United Nations have issued nonbinding resolutions against wildlife poaching, calling on nations to step up their efforts to stem the slaughter. It's difficult to assess the impact of such high-level declarations, but Hedges says the political attention has been helpful in raising the profile of the issue.

In July 2013, the Obama administration created a cabinet-level task force to deal with the wildlife poaching crisis. Among the results have been new restrictions on the legal trade in wildlife products in the US, which is home to the world's second biggest market after China. The US has also stepped up enforcement against smugglers, starting with a 30-month sentence for Philadelphia art dealer

Over a dozen countries have crushed or burned their ivory stockpiles, taking the material out of the market

Victor Gordon, who was convicted of selling illegal ivory in June 2014. There has also been high-profile destructions of several tons of seized ivory in Denver and Times Square while numerous state bills have also been launched, with bans on the sale of ivory passing in New York and New Jersey.

Over the past few years, more than a dozen countries have burned or crushed their ivory stockpiles, in order to take the material out of the market permanently and to send a message to poachers that the world is taking their crimes seriously. Nearly 90 tons of ivory has since been destroyed, from the US to Europe, Africa, the Philippines, and even in China and Thailand.

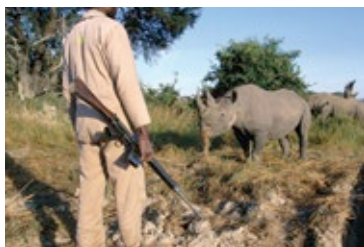
Perhaps most significantly, in May, the Chinese government announced that it intends to phase out its legal ivory market, the largest in the world. The timeline and details surrounding that decision have yet to emerge, but Hedges calls the announcement a "game changer that could tremendously reduce the pressure on Africa's wildlife".

In addition to international pressure, conservationists credit the efforts of Chinese celebrity and retired NBA basketball star Yao Ming, who has spoken out against wildlife products. "There are some signs that the average Chinese citizen is getting less interested in buying ivory," says Hedges, who notes that a cooling Chinese economy may also mean people have less disposable income.

In Hong Kong, several department stores stopped selling ivory products after protests from local schoolchildren, who formed the grassroots group Elephant Angels in September 2013. McLellan and others have been working to convince online markets like Craigslist, eBay, and Ali Baba to prohibit the sale of illegal wildlife products. "But as soon as we turn around we find a lot for sale on social media," she says. "Changing consumer behaviour is critical but it's a long-term process."



POACHING IS NOT JUST A WILDLIFE ISSUE, IT'S ALSO A NATIONAL SECURITY PROBLEM THAT CAN DESTABILISE FRAGILE REGIONS AND ENCOURAGE CORRUPTION



It's also critical to keep the pressure on, says Hedges, so all the recent talk translates into real results for endangered animals. World leaders need to wield the sticks of diplomacy and possibly sanctions to make sure countries are meeting their obligations under international treaties when it comes to wildlife trafficking, he notes. At the same time, developed countries need to provide carrots in the form of financing

and technical support to nations that are struggling to get poachers under control.

Poaching is not just a wildlife issue, says Senator Flake. It's also a national security issue that can destabilise fragile regions, encourage corruption, and get money in the hands of terrorists. That's exactly what happened in the Central African Republic, where a recent coup was partially financed with the sale of poached elephant tusks.

"The people losing out the most are often those living side by side with the animals," says Hedges. To make gains against poachers permanent, local people often need some sustainable way to benefit from the presence of the animals, such as ecotourism or photo safaris.

Rangers also need insurance programmes to protect their families

and better compensation, says McLellan, who notes that many game wardens go months without receiving a paycheck. Rangers also need more ammo, new vehicles, and advanced technology like drones and GPS trackers, something United For Wildlife is working on.



TURNING THE TIDE?

Proving that the animals can bounce back, Botswana has seen rising elephant and rhino populations over the past few years. The success has been so marked that game managers have started moving animals into the country from embattled ranges in South Africa and elsewhere where they can no longer be protected.

Botswana's secret? About five years ago, the country put the army in charge of protecting wildlife. Heavily armed patrols made life too dangerous and difficult for poachers, so they moved to

less protected areas in other countries.

Ordinary citizens, meanwhile, can help endangered wildlife by refusing to buy any products made from their body parts and by telling others that it's not OK, say Hedges and McLellan. To help get the word out, people can share their decision on social media with #WhoseSideAreYouOn.

People can also donate to conservation organisations and sign up for ecotourism safaris in Africa that make part of their mission the protection of wildlife and support of local

communities. Voters can tell their elected officials to get tough on wildlife crime.

"With all the recent momentum, there has never been a better time to get this problem under control," says McLellan. "We know what we need to do, and as a global community we need to stick to it."

"Our children should not live in a world without elephants, tigers, lions and rhinos," as Prince William said in his statement, "Enough is enough."

Brian Clark Howard is a writer for National Geographic



UNITED FOR WILDLIFE

Global charities working to halt the illegal wildlife trade

Created by the Royal Foundation of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry, United For Wildlife is the combined efforts of the world's leading wildlife charities. Conservation International, Fauna And Flora International, IUCN, The Nature Conservancy Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF and ZSL have all joined forces to both raise awareness of the poaching crisis and help bring about its end.

The President of Emirates Airline, Sir Tim Clark, has joined the United For Wildlife taskforce, too, and is focused on stopping the shipment of poached goods. As paperwork is often forged, Emirates has now banned all trophy shipments.

You can join too by taking to social media and asking the question:

#WhoseSideAreYouOn

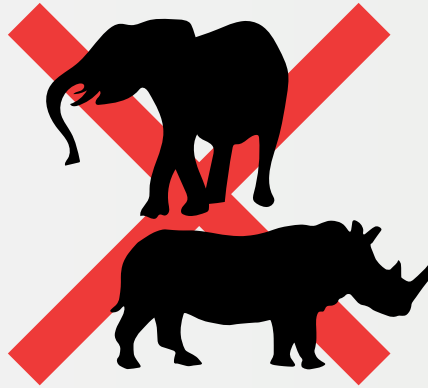


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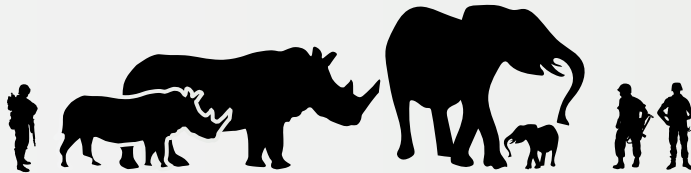
UNDERSTANDING **POACHING**

THE INNER WORKINGS OF AN ILLEGAL TRADE

Killing elephants and rhinos is illegal across Africa, except in the case of a small number of permits that are issued by some countries to control populations or to raise funds for conservation.



Most of Africa's remaining big animals are found in national parks and reserves, where they receive some protection from rangers.



Those rangers are often ill-equipped and underpaid, however, and they often have vast lands to patrol.



Poachers exploit those limitations by sneaking into protected areas, occasionally by helicopter. They set traps and use high-powered rifles.





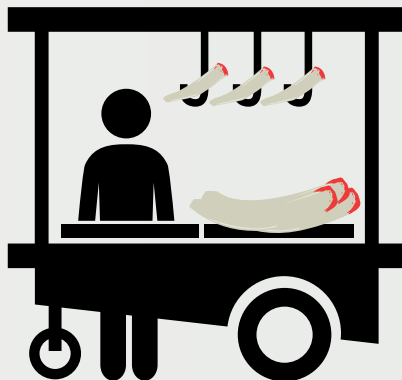
Poachers usually take only the most valuable part of the animal, often hacking off an elephant's tusk or rhino's horn while the animal is still alive. The poachers then leave the animal to die and go on to their next victim.



The tusk or horn then enters an underground supply chain, where it travels by foot, truck, boat, or aircraft.



The materials are often hidden in shipping containers, destined for the world's major ports.



Sometimes, smugglers bury the items for a few weeks or dip them in coffee. This makes them look antique so they can be sold as vintage pieces and not subject to the 1989 international ban. Eventually, the products end up for sale to consumers around the world.