Conservation, Crime and Communities

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The Ruvuma Elephant Project, Tanzania

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Project background

Species of focus:
- Elephant

Country/Countries:
- Tanzania

Site(s):

The Ruvuma Elephant Project covers a 2,500,000 ha area of Tanzania between two protected areas: the Selous Game Reserve in the south of the country and the Niassa National Reserve, just across the border, in Mozambique. The project operates primarily on community owned land, of which some has been formalised as Wildlife Management Areas (5 in total) in the Selous-Niassa Wildlife Corridor. The project also includes five forest reserves (managed by District Forest Officers), a game reserve (managed by the Wildlife Division), and village land (managed by local village governments and the Districts).

Project web site:

http://pamsfoundationtanzania.org/portfolio/ruvuma-elephant-project/

Summary description:

The Ruvuma Elephant Project was established in 2011, organised by the not for profit organisation PAMS Foundation. Its goals are to establish a reliable picture of elephant status and threat in the area, to understand seasonal movements, to control poaching, to ensure law enforcement and prosecution is a real deterrent, and to reduce elephant mortality due to human-elephant conflict.

To achieve these aims, the project implementers are pursuing a range of activities:

1. Strengthened patrolling through training game scouts and rangers in anti-poaching skills and case reporting. The project is also implementing joint field patrols where village game scouts accompany wildlife officials and rangers from the District or Wildlife division.
2. Improving monitoring and data collection through regular air surveillance carried out over set routes. This provides geographical positioning system (GPS) data for elephant count, carcasses and illegal activity.
3. Establishing incentives and giving rewards for individuals' good performance and information. The resulting intelligence is then fed into special intelligence-led operations.
4. Setting up a human-elephant conflict mitigation programme – including putting up chili pepper fences and beehive fences to deter elephants from crops.
5. Supporting income generating activities for Wildlife Management Area communities.

In essence, community engagement in combating ivory poaching boils down to three types of action on the part of local people: they act as informants, they act as guards, and they change their own behaviour. In return, the people are paid for information, and for carrying out tasks. They receive help to protect crops and sell the chilli peppers which are used for crop protection. They are also rewarded for good performance in law enforcement.

Land management type:

State managed land outside protected area
Communally managed land

Product(s) in trade:

- Ivory

Product value at site level:

Tshs 50,000 per kg, but variable.

Types of poachers:

Individuals from local community
Individuals from outside
Other

Details of 'other' poacher type:

Indiviuduals from the local community are financed and organised by outsiders.

Project implementation

Yes

Is the project implemented by an external party?

PAMS Foundation

Implementing organisation:

Name of funding organisation(s):

Funds from the Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg Foundation and other donors.

Community organisation(s) involved:

Not specified.

Yes

Was the project established specifically to engage communities in combatting IWT?

2011

Year the IWT project or component started

Ongoing

Project status is currently:

Approach taken to community engagement and its rationale:

Community members are employed as game guards
Community members are rewarded for intelligence on illegal activities,
Community members benefit from resource harvesting (e.g., small scale hunting; grazing; thatching grass) as conservation incentive
Community members are provided with livelihood alternatives in lieu of wildlife use
Human wildlife conflict addressed as a way to decrease incentive for revenge killing of wildlife

Financial:

People get paid for information, for carrying out tasks (i.e. as a community guard). The Ruvuma Elephant Project has also paid financial rewards to any and everyone who provides assistance or helpful information that furthers the objectives of the project.

Non-financial:

Farmers get help to protect crops such as chili pepper fences and beehive fences to deter elephants from crops. They also receive help to sell the chilli peppers which are used for crop protection.

Involvement in the project is not without risk. Community guards have been shot and had their homes destroyed by fire. The project, however, is quick to provide compensation and to rebuild morale among those who are committed to wildlife protection.

Stand alone initiative

The community engagement project is:

Yes

Do community guards conduct joint patrols with formal guards?

What "rules of engagement" for working with communities does the case study address?

Include local people in wildlife monitoring and enforcement networks
Acknowledge and address costs to communities from living alongside wildlife

What has been the impact on poaching/IWT?

Poaching levels have decreased

What has been the impact on wildlife populations?

Wildlife populations have stabilised

Further detail about the impact on poaching:

In the three and a half years since the project got underway the impact on poaching has been greater than any other unit or project in Tanzania. (Though there is one exception, the Friedkin Conservation Fund project has comparable levels of effectiveness. This project operates in the north and western parts of the country and adopts a very similar approach to the Ruvuma Elephant Project.) The Ruvuma Elephant Project patrols and aerial surveillance show a substantial drop in elephant carcasses seen during the first three years of operations (216 were spotted in year one compared to only 68 in year two and less than half of that in year three). This decline cannot be explained by a decline in the elephant population overall. Indeed, the population of live elephants has remained stable or has marginally increased over the same period. Interventions have led to the seizure of 1,582 snares, 25,586 pieces of illegal timber, 175 elephant tusks, 805 firearms, 1,531 rounds of ammunition, 6 vehicles and 15 motorbikes. So far, law enforcement activities have led to the arrest of 562 people.

What worked about the community engagement approach and why?

Conducting patrols and related law enforcement activities is essential but it is addressing a symptom and not the root causes of why most of these people are poaching. Similarly, focusing on operations to defeat poaching groups within the protected areas alone is also a reactive, not a proactive, strategy. The strategy used by the Ruvuma Elephant Project has included various approaches and activities - beyond the scope of conventional anti-poaching units or programmes - to which most of the success achieved thus far is primarily attributed. These include a strong focus on: working with communities to achieve their reciprocal support and participation; joint patrols and operations; and intelligence-led operations within and extensively outside the protected areas (Lotter and Clark 2014).

The judiciary system and the people who run it should be the allies of conservation, whereas in reality there are many cases where even magistrates and prosecutors are not on the side of conservation. In the case of the REP, most of the worst offenders were repeat offenders. However, this trend is changing since these aspects were better addressed by the project and some poachers who were previously freed shortly after being arrested, have been properly convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3 years to 10 years (Lotter and Clark 2014).

Another important ingredient needed for ensuring success in anti-poaching at the protected area level is to involve more than one agency in the law enforcement effort. It is far easier for criminal syndicate leaders to be able to understand, predict and in many cases influence and corrupt, single agencies and systems working within well known reporting structures than it is to do so when there is more of a multi-agency approach. It is prudent that not only one agency should be tasked, empowered and incentivized to deal with the problem of commercial poaching and its associated crimes, and equally important

that the approach employed should include the implementation of routine as well as unanticipated cross-checks. A measure of unpredictability needs to be a part of the modus operandi at all times to keep the enemy guessing. Establishing ad hoc task forces reporting only to the highest authority in each country and comprised of a selection of the best officers coming from all the agencies (national parks, police, security, customs, army, etc.) is a practical way to accomplish this (Lotter and Clark 2014).

What did not work and why?

Not specified.

Further comments or additional information about community engagement

Lessons learnt include:

- Avoiding raising expectations of communities in case the project is unable to deliver on those expectations. Promising less and delivering more has proved to be an effective approach to win the support of communities.
- It is important to be sincere, reliable and timely (e.g. with payments) in all dealings.
- Sometimes the path of least resistance is not the path that is right. It is critical not to compromise on principles or do anything that could be legally used against you in the future – even when this might provide a short term fix.
- Don't limit your friends and allies to a single source – successful projects require support from a wide variety of sources if they are to be sustainable in the long term.
- While financial resources are essential, an integrated strategy, commitment and determination affect success more than just funding.
- Adaptive management is essential. Projects need to be prepared to change course and change tactics if what was originally planned is not working.

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Lotter W and K Clark

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