Not just the ivory trade: corruption undermines every aspect of
elephant conservation but can be reduced

Introduction

African elephants are in decline through illegal killing for ivory, with estimated reductions in 75% of
306 studied populations (Wittemyer et al. 2014). The legal trade of ivory from natural mortality and
problem animal control has been suggested as a way to reduce this problem, as it can provide a
direct and regular source of funding to elephant conservationists in Africa (Stiles 2004), people who
currently depend on over-stretched government budgets and grants from international donors to
support their work. Such international trade has not taken place since 2008 but several African
countries stockpile their ivory in expectation of future sales and many countries outside Africa have
legal domestic markets for ivory certified as antique or coming from these legal stockpiles. A recent
article by Bennett (2014) argues that such trade is counter-productive and should be banned
because: (i) current legal domestic markets have been subverted by corruption and are allowing the
laundering of illegal ivory, and; (ii) reducing this corruption to acceptable levels within the next few
decades is impossible. The impact of corruption on conservation outcomes is often ignored in the
literature so we welcome Bennett’s article for highlighting the issue. However, singling out the ivory
trade gives the impression that it is uniquely affected. Here we argue that corruption potentially
undermines every aspect of elephant conservation and there is no evidence that any approach is
more or less susceptible. Thus, the long-term future of elephants requires conservationists to learn
lessons from other sectors to understand and tackle this problem.

What is corruption?

There is an extensive literature on the definition of corruption in which common themes are the
abuse of office and implication that at least two willing parties are involved (World Bank 1997).
Corruption can take many forms and may be more easily understood when broken down into
component parts, such as bribery, cronyism, embezzlement, fraud and nepotism (Vargas-Hernández
2013). While corruption can occur in any institution or society, it tends to thrive when there is weak
rule of law, abnormal concentrations of power in one individual or institution, and no counter-
balancing mechanisms in place (Luo 2005). This is exacerbated when there is opportunity for
financial gain, and risks are heightened when working in certain geographical areas. In addition,
there are circumstances in which organizations are particularly vulnerable to corrupt exploitation,
such as when they rely on discretionary powers for permits, licenses or activities. Given this
background, it is reasonable to assume that many conservation organizations and initiatives are
highly vulnerable to the effects of corruption, especially when dealing with valuable commodities.
Despite this, we lack any systematic studies on key issues relating to corruption in conservation
(Smith & Walpole 2005) and the only available evidence comes from case-studies, media reports and
eamples from other sectors.

How does corruption impact elephant conservation?
An increasing amount of evidence on the impacts of corruption in conservation comes from
elephant projects, as the recent increase in poaching has made this a high profile issue, with park
staff, enforcement officers and politicians all being implicated (Milman 2013). Furthermore, this
supports studies from the academic literature showing correlations between elephant population
trends and corruption (Smith et al. 2003; Burn et al. 2011) and documenting the role of corruption in
the illegal killing of elephants for ivory (Gross 2007) and meat (Stiles 2012). Bennett (2014) adds
compelling evidence for corruption undermining the legal sales of ivory but others argue the
alternative conservation strategy she advocates, namely banning the legal trade, is similarly
vulnerable. This is because both legal trade and trade bans are undermined by the collusion of
corrupt officials in the illegal killing of elephants and the smuggling of ivory from producer to
consumer states (Stiles 2014).

Indeed, elephant conservation involves a range of approaches and corruption could impact them all
(Table 1). Bribery undermines efforts to combat illegal trade, but also impacts on enforcement of
anti-poaching laws (Barnes et al. 1995), sustainable hunting and effective land-use planning.
Cronyism and nepotism reduce staff capacity and the likelihood of crimes being reported.
Embezzlement reduces conservation funding levels (Thouless & Sakwa 1995), undermines positive
incentives for community-based conservation through trophy-hunting and ecotourism (Leader-
Williams et al. 2009), and leads to decision makers focusing on the wishes of donors and elites more
than stakeholders (Norton-Griffiths 2007). Fraud also diverts and reduces conservation funding and
undermines donor confidence by claiming funds for non-existent projects or colluding to avoid
paying concession fees (Laurance 2004).

How can we reduce corruption?
This suggests the influence of corruption on elephant conservation is far reaching and should be
recognized as an important problem. Such a conclusion might appear depressing but fortunately
there is plenty of evidence from other sectors that corruption can be reduced at the country (Alam &
A first step is to divide up the problem into specific issues based on type of corruption and type of conservation approach, e.g. embezzlement of protected area budgets. This makes the task less daunting, moving away from portraying corruption as a monolithic, unsolvable problem. Many of these issues can then be tackled by standard good management such as auditing accounts, adopting transparent hiring practices and prosecuting alleged miscreants (Transparency International 2013). More broadly, organizations benefit from developing anti-corruption policies and culture that help guide staff when dealing with the problem (Transparency International 2012). Issue-specific solutions are also needed so, for example, lessons for the ivory trade could be learnt from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification system. There are key similarities between the trade in ivory and tropical hardwood, as both come from slow-growing species, are highly valued commodities and their trade involves crossing national boundaries, obtaining permits and working with officials in countries with high levels of corruption (Cashore et al. 2007). Despite this, the integrity of the FSC certification process is widely recognized and is supported by most international conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs), although uptake in Africa is currently low (FSC, 2014).

This shows that corruption can be reduced but shifts focus to the institutional and political will needed for this change. Therefore, one approach would be to focus on aspects of elephant conservation where conservation practitioners have most influence, and these tend to be those that act at the local to landscape level (Table 1). Increasing effectiveness at this scale would help ensure healthy elephant populations and local support for their conservation, as well as tackling the problem of ivory laundering at source. Moreover, this would have broader biodiversity benefits, given that recent declines in African elephants are not unique and are similar to those of lower profile African mammal species that are not impacted by international trade (Craigie et al. 2010).

Just as importantly, we need action and leadership at higher political levels. Anti-corruption policies have been developed and enforced in other sectors through popular campaigns at the grassroots level and pressure from donors. One obvious approach would be for international conservation groups to lead on tackling the problem or to engage more closely with the anti-corruption community. They could follow the example of CAFOD, Tearfund and Christian Aid, development NGOs that recognized that corporate bribery was a major barrier to reducing international poverty and so played an active role in supporting anti-corruption legislation, such as the recent UK Bribery Act. A more radical approach would be to consider corruption when developing international policy. For example, the international community generally makes policy recommendations based on
protecting elephants in countries where they are declining most rapidly. We would argue these declines are likely to continue unless corruption is tackled and so elephant range states with effective anti-corruption policies should have more of a voice in international debates.

Conclusions

We are more sanguine about the future of African elephants than Bennett (2014), but without tackling corruption we fear their distribution patterns will resemble those of Africa’s rhinos, with relatively large populations in countries with lower levels of corruption (Smith et al. 2013) and smaller populations in a few high-profile protected areas in countries where corruption is more prevalent. Despite this, corruption is still down-played in the conservation literature and so we applaud Bennett for raising the profile of this topic and detailing the countries involved. But this needs to be a beginning. We need much more research to understand the specifics of the problem and to start adopting tried-and-tested techniques for reducing corruption at every level. Such action could be inspired by the anti-corruption community, who are confident that corruption can be tackled given recent developments that include new legislation, new political commitment and greater enforcement (CMS, 2013). Indeed, it would be ironic if conservationists were to conclude that corruption is too hard to tackle just at the point when the rest of the world is concluding the opposite.

References


Table 1: An overview of elephant conservation strategies, their spatial scale and the relative role of conservation practitioners in their implementation. Conservation practitioners are defined as people responsible for implementing conservation policy or practice and can include government staff, members of civil society and the private sector. Details will differ by country, region and project type, e.g. government plays a major role when land-use planning decisions involve state protected areas but the private sector can be more involved when planning in logging, agricultural and tourism concessions. However, we argue there is a general trend for the relative role of these practitioners to decrease as spatial extent increases, so site-based interventions are often those where conservation practitioners can have the most impact.

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