

Corruption Kills Elephants!



An Interview with Dr. Rolf D. Baldus | Photos: Dr. Rolf D. Baldus

Hunter's Path recently spoke with Dr. Rolf D. Baldus about the poaching crisis in Africa. As our readers will remember, the conservation expert worked in Tanzania's protected areas for thirteen years, and knows first-hand the root causes for the ongoing plunder of natural resources, and in particular wildlife.

In the final declaration of the G7 summit at Schloss Elmau in Germany in June 2015, the seven member states committed themselves to combating the smuggling of ivory and rhinoceros horn. Is the present situation in Africa so dire?

Baldus: The situation is still quite alarming, even though the topic is currently in the world's spotlight. A variety of conferences have been held to address this crisis. The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a corresponding declaration on June 30, 2015, which was proposed by Germany and Gabon. Even Pope Francis addressed the topic last November in Kenya. The illegal trade in ivory and the poaching of elephants are conducive to political instability, organized crime, and terrorism. We are still quite far away from the actual implementation of all the good advice that has been offered.

What is new? There has always been poaching in Africa.

That's true, but three things are different compared to the past. First, there has been a tremendous increase in the demand for these products in Asia, especially in China. There, a wealthy middle and upper class have developed, generating an almost unlimited greed for ivory, rhino horn, as well as for lion bones, pangolins and similar products.

Prices have risen dramatically due to the rising demand and that has, secondly, resulted in organized crime entering the lucrative business. That makes the fight so difficult. And thirdly, because of the enormous demand, poaching has spread immensely.

Are there any concrete figures?

No one can put a figure on the size of the demand in Asia. But it is probably higher than

the sustainable replacement rate in Africa. The poaching numbers: perhaps 200,000 elephants have been killed in the past ten years. The high point was between 2008 and 2011. More than 5,000 rhinos have fallen victim to poaching since 2006, and the trend continues upward. In 2006 one rhino was poached every six days. This year the number is four rhinos per day.

Should we fear for the complete extinction of rhinos?

A few years ago I would have answered no to that question, despite the frightening extent of poaching. In the meantime, however, I've lost my optimism. Even the private owners of rhinos are not able to protect them anymore. At the same time, due to the trade bans, they are prevented from using the horns sustainably, as they originally had planned and hoped. Rhino protection just becomes too expensive. The elephant population, currently about half a million, is sinking at a rate of three to five percent each year. At that rate it is possible to calculate how long it will be until the final extermination. Currently, large unpopulated wilderness areas, national parks, but also well-guarded private game farms, are all equally affected. In South Africa and Namibia, poachers nowadays even fly in helicopters, shoot animals from the air, saw the horns off with a chainsaw, and disappear in just a few minutes.

Tanzania, with its large herds of game, is particularly affected. You worked there for thirteen years and know the situation well. What has happened?

Aerial surveys have revealed that Tanzania has lost nearly 100,000 elephants in recent

years. DNA tests from confiscated ivory have proven that the Selous Game Reserve in the south of the country, and the neighboring Niassa Park in Mozambique, have been the focal points for the poaching of savanna elephants in Africa. With 50,000 square kilometers, the Selous is the largest protected area in Africa, and it once possessed the largest elephant population in the country. In the late 1980s, poaching decimated the population of 100,000 elephants, reducing it to 30,000. Starting in 1987, I managed an aid project there for the German Federal Government. In just a few years we were able to stop poaching. When the Germans left in 2005, there were once again 70,000 elephants in the reserve. A 2013 survey showed that only 13,000 remained.

How could that happen?

As mentioned above, the demand in Asia increased enormously, as did the price for ivory. In 2004/2005, when the German involvement came to an end, there was a type of conspiracy in the country. The director of the wildlife department did away with the self-financing scheme of the Selous Game Reserve, which, by the way, had been agreed to with the Germans. Instead of three million dollars, suddenly only half a million was available to fund the Selous. The gamekeepers were no longer being paid and, consequently, no longer went on patrol, and the vehicles were not repaired and so on. The system collapsed, just as it had previously in the eighties. The successful Chief Warden was transferred to a faraway duty station, and the management and infrastructure decayed. This paved the way for large scale poaching and it facilitated illegal business, which was indeed



A poacher's camp as seen from the air.



Elephant bones remain long after the poachers have moved on.



Top: An elephant in the Selous.

Right: Game scouts marking confiscated ivory.

worthwhile. The value of the poached ivory from the Selous alone is worth well over a hundred-million dollars. Many village-level poachers, as well as middlemen, smugglers and corrupt big shots earned a fortune.

Was the Tanzanian government and its officials involved in the wildlife destruction?

Not all, but many. It is corruption that is killing the African elephant. That's why I see black for the future. Quite a few of the ministers and wildlife directors from Africa, who give the pithy speeches at international conferences, or business people speaking

out publicly against poaching, are the same people who profit from it. One shouldn't focus entirely on Tanzania however. It's not an isolated case. Corruption is the problem with conservation throughout Africa. Therefore financial assistance alone will not save the elephants. There must also be political involvement.

China has agreed to control the import of ivory and rhino horn more effectively, or even to stop it, and has initiated the first steps. Is that the solution? I hear the message well, but I lack faith. The fact is that without a suppression of the



Chinese demand, poaching will persist. And nobody can tell me that with such a totalitarian government that keeps its subjects in such an iron grip, that the import, processing, and selling couldn't be stopped if there were a serious political will to do so.

The WWF, Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) and other organizations collect donations, and the German Federal Government has launched a special program. Are such remedial measures still meaningful at all?

Absolutely. There are also highly motivated game guardians and engaged politicians in Africa, who are trying to prevent the worst, under the most difficult conditions. These people deserve assistance. In the past two years, I myself have coordinated emergency aid from the German Government, the FZS, and the International Council for

Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) for the Selous. Although it is just a drop in the bucket, it has helped to keep the elephant population stable, and perhaps even to slightly increase it.

However, private donors must be careful, and they should check to whom they give their dollars or euros. Many wildlife NGOs, in particular from the bunny-hugger scene, operate as organizations and individuals from the money they collect. Very little actually ends up for the intended activities on the ground.

Dozens of airlines, including Lufthansa, Delta and Emirates, no longer transport any hunting trophies from Africa. Is that an effective deterrent against smuggling?

No, the smugglers simply make false declarations or hide the ivory in other goods. The better solution, as also recommended by

the International Air Transport Association (IATA), is to better examine the delivered cargos. The boycott is nothing but window dressing. Animal rights activists threatened the airlines with aggressive action if they continued to accept such shipments, and they buckled, and at the expense of wildlife in Africa. The boycott is just as counterproductive as France's ban on imports of trophies from lions. Without the income from legal hunting, game protection in many places in Africa would break down completely.

Incidentally, I consider such economic boycotts that discriminate against minorities, and that are pushed through by emotional campaigns and blackmail, to be constitutionally questionable. It is frightening how individual hunters can be publicly harassed thousands of times with impunity.

What can hunters do in this situation?

Well, without the revenues from hunting, and the additional voluntary contributions from hunters and safari operators, there would be no anti-poaching to speak of in many wild areas in Africa. In the recent escalation of the poaching crisis, a helicopter pilot, on an anti-poaching patrol, was shot down and killed by poachers while surveying three freshly-killed elephant carcasses. This happened at the end of January in a hunting block in Tanzania. The tragic event was widely reported worldwide. However, not a single newspaper or social network mentioned that the late Roger Gower was indeed working for a hunting company, which does anti-poaching in its own hunting block and supports TANAPA, the Tanzanian National Parks Authority, in its battle. Instead, at the same time, a photo of an elephant hunter went around the social networks. The hunter had participated in a control hunt for problem elephants. The name of the man was given, and he was labeled as 'subhuman'. That is the reality we are facing today. Unfortunately the mainstream media too often offers a forum for these radicals.

Having said this, I am rather frustrated by the lack of practical involvement of the international hunting community in general. And this includes most of the hunting organizations. There are exceptions, like the auction of a rhino hunt for rhino conservation in

Dr. Rolf D. Baldus
with game scouts.



Namibia by the Dallas Safari Club. Or the CIC's campaign "Hunters United Against Wildlife Crime" that co-financed the "Selous Elephant Emergency Project" in Tanzania, which I have mentioned before.

Most hunters, professional hunters and hunting operators just ignore the ongoing and pervasive attack on sustainable hunting in Africa. They lament privately, but otherwise go on with business as usual, as if there were no tomorrow. Have you heard about individuals or organizations that face the organized global anti-Africa hunting campaigns with effective counter-campaigns? Hunters are largely helpless against the social media phenomenon of anti-hunting explosions and can do little to oppose the slander.

And, they have the better arguments on their side. But as long as they are not willing to spend money to build their public relations capacity and to pay scientists in order to have facts on hand at short notice to counter the emotional attacks, nothing will change. There are people who spend \$80,000 for a hunt in Africa, and neither they nor their outfitters that earn money from them, are willing to spend \$1,000 for public relations campaigns.

On the contrary, perversions like the shooting of pen-raised lions continue. At least the annual hunting show in Dortmund, Germany, has now set an example and banned the purveyors of 'canned shooting' and the hunting of specially-bred unnatural species.

You are of the opinion that hunters possess better arguments than their opponents...?

Whoever wants to eliminate hunting, must explain instead where the money will come from to protect wildlife. Animal rights activists,

who aren't in a position to do this, have lost all credibility. I would also like to know how nature and biodiversity in the hunting areas would be preserved without hunting. I haven't heard anything about that from the 'campaigners' and activists in the last few months. Whether African wildlife is conserved, depends largely on whether it remains economically competitive against the advance of cattle, goats, palm oil, sugar cane and cornfields. Anyone who removes value from wildlife condemns it to perish! Politicians considering bans on the importation of hunting trophies, must have this clearly explained to them. The bagging of a trophy is part of hunting in Africa, as this is what hunters pay for. However, this is not the purpose, but rather only a means to an end. Conservation hunting, by which revenues generated go into conservation and to the local communities, has much to offer in retaining wild places and wildlife for future generations.

Any hunter who wants to do something effective against poaching should above all go hunt in Africa right now. He gives landowners, farmers, rural communities, and conservation agencies the chance to effectively sustain their wildlife.

Our interview partner, Dr. Rolf D. Baldus (67) lives close to Bonn, near the Rhine River in Germany. He has served as a civil servant in different capacities for Germany's Development Aid Ministry and as head of department in the Chancellor's Office. For thirteen years he managed German wildlife projects in Tanzania and advised its government. ■