



Botswana, considered a model of environmental vigilance under former president Ian Khama, has seen wildlife slaughtering increase since 2018, when incoming President Mokgweetsi Masisi's disarming of bush patrols coincided with an increase in ivory poaching. But this year the enemy is harder to spot. At least six rhinos in areas usually well surveyed by safari vehicles have fallen prey to poachers in this southern African nation since COVID-19 restrictions have killed tourism. In the north-west of South Africa, rhino deaths so far this year stand at nine. Thirteen rangers have been killed at Virunga National Park, famous for mountain gorilla populations, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Across southern and eastern Africa, lodges, camps and game reserves are closed to tourists as the continent battles COVID-19, with serious financial implications for staff, villagers and park employees. While the closure of the world may have given Mother Nature an opportunity to breathe and regenerate, the pause button is potentially dangerous to wildlife in regions usually patrolled by rangers.

Jacques Smit, marketing director for Sabi Sabi's four lodges in South Africa's 65,000ha Sabi Sands Game Reserve, says teams are in place to monitor the environment.

"We remain committed to habitat management, continuing measures aimed at anti-poaching. We also have a team that heads out daily to observe animals, as we've always done, only now with no guests. This allows us to check the reserve, its condition, and wildlife behaviours."

In Tanzania, Alex Walker's mobile safari company, Serian, has launched Mission Possible Serengeti in response to a spike in snaring of wild animals by villagers with no money to purchase food. "The animals are more vulnerable than ever," he says. "The immediate vacuum of game-viewing vehicles traversing these wild areas, coupled with reduced budgets for anti-poaching units as a result of a lack of tourism-generated fees ... will create a perfect storm for the bushmeat trade."

"In Africa, social responsibility falls to those in work; they support large extended families. Those not able to survive from farming, will probably turn to traditional roles as hunter-gatherers ... It is vital to discern the difference between the commercial elephant and rhino poacher from this subsistence-level meat poacher, who uses a wire snare to catch his prey (but) those snares don't discriminate. What was meant for a small antelope may snare a leopard, a lion and even an elephant."

In conjunction with Tanzania National Parks and its major partner, Frankfurt Zoological Society, Walker reports that an enhanced de-snaring program is under way in Serengeti National Park, providing work for many otherwise unemployed lodge and camp staff. "It's about deploying boots and eyes to the ground, where there would normally be multiple game-viewing vehicles. A car or two, or a foot patrol of eight, is a massive deterrent." Latest statistics show that 212 snares were removed in January and February.

The &Beyond group collaborates with Africa Foundation, a non-profit organisation that focuses on community development work in health, education and small businesses. Many projects have been suspended but others are being prioritised, such as ensuring rural clinics have access to water and supplying medical and sanitation needs. But conservation activities have not been put on hold. "Many of our lodges throughout Africa are situated within national parks, which are run according to government regulations," says Les Carlisle, group conservation manager at &Beyond. "The situation is unprecedented and the results are very difficult to predict, as each country is handling the pandemic differ-



Gorillas in Virunga National Park, left; lions in Sabi Sabi Game Reserve, above; a ranger removes illegal snares in the Serengeti, below

QUESTIONS OF SURVIVAL

Tough times for African safari operators

SUSAN KUROSAWA

ently ... In conservation areas that are predominantly tourism-funded, the lack of incentive to protect wildlife in order to attract tourists will no doubt have an impact."

A reduced number of employees have been retained at &Beyond lodges. "With fewer vehicles moving through the reserves, there is a far higher risk of poaching, something (we hope to) offset by keeping a basic number of staff (in the field)." At conservancies such as Phinda Private Game Reserve in South Africa, where the land is owned and managed by &Beyond, research and conservation teams remain in place during lockdown to continue monitoring. South African-based non-profit organisation Rhino 911 has government status as an essential service to continue its emergency helicopter response and transport for injured rhinos.

The Singita portfolio comprises lodges, camps and villas across four African nations and works in partnership with non-profit funds and trusts to implement conservation projects and create economic independence



DANIEL ROSENGREN/SERIAN

within adjacent communities. "Travel and tourism (are) absolutely essential in the fight to secure Africa's last remaining wild spaces," says Singita founder and executive chairman Luke Bailes. "Ecotourism is the fuel for an engine that not only keeps the wheels of conservation turning but brings much-needed economic stability to local communities." He has been quoted as saying that if tourism collapses, "the ripple effect could wipe out decades of proactive conservation work on the continent".

In the Masai Mara, Gordie and Felicia Church of family-owned Safaris Unlimited say conservation efforts in Kenya are almost entirely supported by tourism dollars. "With far fewer rangers on the ground for anti-poaching efforts, and massive unemployment, bushmeat hunting is increasing plus encroachment into protected areas for firewood, cultivation and grazing," the Churches say. Safaris Unlimited is paying all its employees a retainer.

Sujata Raman, Abercrombie & Kent's regional managing director Australia/Asia Pacific, comments, "This global crisis risks undermining collective conservation efforts by cutting off vital support for communities and projects that need it most. As tourism money dries up, those initiatives dedicated to protecting wildlife are losing funds, and thus their ability to defend against poaching and

other threats." A&K Philanthropy has set up a fund to support its 125,000 community members worldwide and initiatives include supplementing the income of women who run small businesses affected by the tourism downturn.

Non-profit consortium African Parks, which manages 17 national parks and protected areas across 11 countries, has redeployed some of its conservation workers into neighbouring communities to educate people about COVID-19 and hand out supplies.

Across the board, donations are crucial and all the main safari operators have foundations and trusts, such as the linked Singita Lowveld Trust in South Africa, Grumeti Fund in Tanzania and Malilangwe Trust in Zimbabwe. "One of the most critical aspects is ensuring our around-the-clock anti-poaching patrols go uninterrupted," says a Singita spokesperson. "We cannot yield any ground in the battle to protect endangered species and restore key habitats."

Neil Midlane, group sustainability manager for Wilderness Safaris, which operates 30 camps in southern Africa and manages more than 25 projects, makes the point that an average of "10 people in Africa are dependent on one person's salary" and employment is critical. "We are doing everything we can to ensure our staff still receive a salary."

Beks Ndlovu, founder of African Bush Camps, comprising 15 camps and lodges across Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana, reports he is optimistic about an August reopening. As many ABC properties are in remote areas that are vast and mostly unfenced, he says it has been impossible to leave them unattended. "We also want to keep staff motivated and expand their skills so even chefs, waiters and laundry crew have been joining guides on nature walks and drives to learn more about flora and fauna." His colleague Mark Brightman, head of Bumi Hills Anti-Poaching Unit in the Lake Kariba region of Zimbabwe, adds, "At this point, (the unit) continues to operate 24/7 with the help of national parks and the army. However, since the start of the lockdown, there has been a definite rise in the number of snares."

But there is good news, too. Most operators report that guests are postponing, not cancelling, and taking advantage of flexible policies and generous discounts for future travel. Meantime, deposits on hold and contributions from funding partners can be deployed towards local staff salaries, facilities maintenance and essential upgrades as well as augmenting donations earmarked for enhanced conservation and animal welfare measures.

IN THE KNOW

Operators mentioned in this feature have charitable foundations and philanthropic trusts that accept donations for conservation initiatives and community projects or are linked to non-profit organisations such as Africa Foundation or African Parks. Details on individual websites.

- africafoundation.org
- africanparks.org
- bushtales.africanbushcamps.com