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Botswana: A lack of consultation is bad for conservation- lifting the Hunting Ban

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Opinion: A lack of consultation is bad for conservation- lifting the Hunting Ban

It has been five years of ultimate opportunity for the photographic tourism industry in Botswana. During this time the country was established as a prime tourist destination resulted in tourism as the second highest contributor to the GDP and the creation of thousands of jobs. Seen as a leader in conservation, and accommodating the largest African elephant population in the world, Botswana was riding the wave of success. Despite this seeming success, Botswana is at a crisis.

An important part of the nation is disillusioned and unhappy regarding tourism, referring to it as another form of “colonial raiding”. They consider conservation and the elephant as a threat. In a recent national consultation on the lifting of the hunting ban most key stakeholders were in favour of lifting the ban. The recommendations based on this consultation illustrated a much wider issue than simply a hunting ban. It diverged to elephant related measures like culling and fences, conflict compensation, the revival of the safari hunting industry and even the use of culled elephants for pet foods. Why then, despite the many more jobs and foreign income is Botswana in this crises?

I believe it is because we have failed democracy, and in the process ignored the value of consultation and the need for local people to be involved in decisions regarding their own. As with many other things in life, taking shortcuts with politics catches up with time and leaves many fatalities, in this case conservation casualties that could have been avoided.

To support my point, I need a step back to the implementation of the hunting ban. It did not follow a democratic consultation process. It was announced in January 2014 as a temporary ban by Presidential Directive that had to be passed through parliament after the expiry of 12 months. The endorsement by parliament never happened yet the ban remained in force. The announcement was preceded by some meetings, although more prescriptive than consultative. Most people, except the photographic safari companies, were opposing the ban.

The hunting ban was simply an instrument and was followed by a process of centralising natural resources. Over the relative short period of a few years Botswana was moving away from CBRNM based community programs. Yet communities were used to being part of the decision making and benefit programs. It was replaced by a centrally controlled system where all wildlife concession land leasing, decision making and revenue spending was controlled through the Botswana Tourism Organisation. A centralized approach is practised in countries like Kenya and Tanzania and centralization of wildlife resources is not necessarily a bad policy. CBRNM programs in itself bring a number of other challenges. However, the hunting ban signified a major paradigm shift in land use benefits which in all scenarios would be controversial.

Despite an increase in need for dialogue, a period of “exclusion administration” followed. Many stakeholders were simply ignored and not given the opportunity to air their concerns. A perceived exclusion from tangible riches related to the blooming “high income low impact” – tourism industry around them followed. It left especially remote communities inside the wildlife management areas feeling betrayed and left out. Job creation on national level increased, but was not tangible enough at grass roots because promises by the photographic safari industry to take over all ex-hunting employees did not realize and feedback systems from the top did not exist. Furthermore, a government promise of funds to support communities in the transition between hunting and tourism never materialized.

Before 2014, it was acknowledged that a change in legislation was needed to align the Wildlife and National Park Act of 1992 with the new requirements of a post millennial Botswana. It was also acknowledged that the Act was in essence a hunting act and that part of the hunting industry was not following the ethical and legislative rules. However, these concerns could have easily been resolved by a democratic process. Instead, a national policy change towards centralization was promoted without consultation. Arguments were used to exclude consultation rather than embracing it. The two land use activities were presented as incompatible. In the process, the principle that both hunting and eco-tourism are biodiversity sustainability tools, each with its own limitations, was overlooked. As such the benefits both could contribute to conservation and the national economy were not considered in perspective. More importantly, the involvement and provision of sustainability to communities close to wildlife management areas were underemphasized. It was based simply on the creation of employment expectations as is dictated with centralization principles. It lack empowerment capabilities to remote communities without suitable concessions. Botswana missed a great opportunity to find a golden midway solution and many of the issues could have been resolved if a sound consultation process were followed. It may even have come to the same conclusion, but by following a different process could have resulted in a more embraced solution.

How did elephants ended up in the debate?

Once hunting was banned, the marketing of Botswana as a prime tourist destination was a priority. The hunting ban within a framework of increased international discontent with hunting, coupled with a significant growing population of elephants within a framework of increased poaching of elephants in Africa, provided the ideal marketing tool. Botswana soon became known as the country in Southern Africa with no hunting and a “safe haven” for elephant and rhinos. The involvement of the Botswana Defence Force and an elite protected species Anti-Poaching Unit both with “Shoot to kill” – policies was publicised in the media.

Elephant population sizes became a marketing and political tool instead of a conservation management tool. The impact on communities was down- played and since there was no feedback system allowed, the voices of communities remained unheard. When Botswana needed to enforce the image of a “safe haven for elephants” with no or little poaching, numbers were inflated and poaching statistics were deflated in the media. Poaching was always present and probably increasing. At the height of the previous administration’s “Shoot to kill” – policy, an article by Rogan et al in Biological Conservation (2017) indicated that the bush meat trade removed 620 000kg of medium-large herbivore mass annually from the Delta. The DWNP District Wildlife Coordinator announced in Mmegi of 27 July 2017 that 17 elephants were poached during that month in Ngamiland and that an “estimated 600 tons of bush meat were leaving the district monthly.” Poaching was reported at low profile rather than giving it the alarm focus it deserved. The communities were not necessarily taking part in the bush meat trade or poaching, but since wildlife were not bringing tangible benefits, they looked the other way.

At the same time that the hunting ban was implemented, problem animal control policies were changed, again without consultation. The 20 degree latitude rule whereby elephants south of it were discouraged was abandoned and elephants were allowed to disperse further south. Many of the old hunting concessions were not suitable for photographic activities and despite the undertaking to develop it, it was left abandoned. The presence of hunting outfitters before 2014 provided not only water in the areas, but also patrols during most of the dry season when poaching seemed more severe. Incidentally many of the poaching hot spots reported are old hunting concessions. Even though the national elephant population may have remained stable, the distribution pattern moved closer to people and the conflict increased. Compensation was adapted to more market related values, but since human wildlife incidents increased as results of the increase in interfaces and the budget was not adapted accordingly, compensation ran out early in each financial year and soon got months if not years behind. Human casualties in the conflict increased. A total of 36 people were reported to be killed by elephants between 2014 and 2019. Within the framework of exclusion politics, elephant related damages and lives lost to elephants, it was easy for people to remember that hunting of elephant not long ago provided income, meat, safety and sustainability.

Exact elephant population numbers and poaching statistics were only available through aerial counts conducted by Elephants without Borders. The manipulation of numbers in the media by all involved created expectations and perceptions, both within the international community and local communities. The perception within disenchanted and left out local communities was that of “too many elephants and a government that cares more for elephants than people”. The perception within an international

community was that of “a paradise and safe haven for elephants with no hunting and no poaching worth visiting”. It was a matter of time before stakeholders like the previous administration and EWB were caught in the crossfire of perceptions and expectations.

It is therefore no surprise that the recommendations in the report are very drastic. Some of it is in my opinion not in the best interest of conservation. But the commissioning of the report signifies the reinstatement of a needed consultation process that allows people to participate. The process followed to implement the hunting ban caused confusion, despair, anger, knee jerk reactions and most importantly, a lack of sense of sustainability from conservation to many key stakeholders. From that perspective, it was damaging to continued conservation in Botswana irrespective of all good intentions involved.

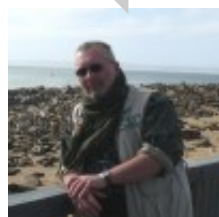
Witnessing a conservation report that followed sound democratic processes, is encouraging. President Masisi would have saved a lot of time and gain massive support from the rural communities if he simply lifted the hunting ban by Presidential decree without consultation. But we would have learned nothing from the past and the solution would again have a high risk of failure. He bravely chose to embrace a democratic process based on extensive consultation to ensure maximum input and the highest probability of finding a long lasting solution for a complex issue despite being placed in the crossfire by the previous administration. Credit must be given where credit is deserved.

The Social Dialogue Report will follow a set route. It will be combined with the technical report and people’s opinions will be weighed up against a bigger picture within the President’s assurances of a responsible approach. The process will allow the filtering of most of the emotionally based issues and what is left will be scientifically and socially sound for both people and conservation. Not everyone will be satisfied. Such a complex issue leaves many casualties behind because it is a trade off. What is important is that the outcome is part of the democratic process. The alternative can be much more damaging to conservation as history has shown.

Wildlife affects the everyday lives of many rural people in Africa. It is far from idyllic and Common Heritage makes no sense in the daily battle to survive Africa. Therefore conservation in Africa will only survive if Africa embraces the solution. Africans will not embrace if they are not part of the decision making process and see tangible benefits.

There are lessons to be learned for African leaders and to the international world. Holding a boycott threat against the head of Botswana or pre-empting the outcome of the report by means of petitions or sensational press statements are contradicting the value of true democracy and the sovereign right of Botswana. It will nullify the good that tourism has brought, simply antagonise the electorate to take ownership, and impoverish the communities even more. It will not benefit the elephants or conservation. On the contrary....

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