



# Elephant conservation and corruption beyond the ivory trade

Robert J. Smith,\* ¶ Duan Biggs,† Freya A.V. St. John,\* Michael 't Sas-Rolfes,‡ and Robert Barrington§

\*Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NR, United Kingdom

†ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions, Centre for Biodiversity & Conservation Science, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia

‡PostNet Suite 340, Private Bag X1005, Claremont 7735, South Africa

§Transparency International UK, 32–36 Loman Street, London SE1 0EH, United Kingdom

## Introduction

African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) are in decline through illegal killing for ivory, with estimated reductions in approximately 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 illegal killing because it can provide a direct and regular source of funding to elephant conservationists in Africa (Stiles 2004), people who currently depend on overstretched government budgets and grants from international donors to support their work. Such international trade has not taken place since 2008, but several African countries have been stockpiling 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. Bennett (2015) argues that such trade is counter-productive and should be banned because current legal domestic markets have been subverted by corruption and are allowing the laundering of illegal ivory and because reducing this corruption to acceptable levels within the next few decades is impossible.

The impact of corruption on conservation outcomes is often ignored, so we welcome Bennett's article for highlighting the issue. However, singling out the ivory trade gives the impression that it is uniquely affected by corruption. 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.

## Definition of Corruption

*Corruption* has been defined as the “the abuse of public office for private gain” (World Bank 1997). It 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). Although 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). It is also more prevalent when there is opportunity for financial gain and in certain geographical areas. In addition, there are circumstances in which organizations are particularly vulnerable to corruption, such as when discretionary powers are relied on 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 systematic studies on key issues relating to corruption in conservation (Smith & Walpole 2005), and the only available evidence of its prevalence comes from case studies and media reports and examples from similar sectors.

¶ email [r.j.smith@kent.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.smith@kent.ac.uk)

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**Table 1. Elephant conservation strategies, their spatial scale, and the relative role of conservation practitioners in their implementation.\***

<i>Elephant conservation strategy</i>	<i>Spatial scale</i>	<i>Relative role of conservation practitioners</i>
Protected area and habitat management	site	major
Positive incentives through revenue generation from ecotourism	site	major
Positive incentives through revenue generation from trophy hunting	site	major
Increasing tolerance through human–elephant conflict mitigation	site	medium to major
Elephant population monitoring	site to subnational	major
Enforcement of antipoaching legislation (largely by government staff)	site to subnational	minor to major
Land-use planning to maintain and restore habitat and connectivity	landscape	minor to medium
Implementation of government policy on elephants and conservation	national	minor to major
Enforcement of trade legislation on elephant products (mainly by government agencies)	national to global	minor

\* 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 of the spatial scale and relative role of conservation practitioners can 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 involves logging, agricultural, and tourism concessions).

## Effects of Corruption on Elephant Conservation

An increasing amount of evidence on the impacts of corruption in conservation comes from elephant projects. This is because the recent increase in poaching has made corruption a high profile issue, and park staff, enforcement officers, and politicians have been implicated (Milman 2013). Furthermore, these recorded events are consistent with findings reported in 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 adds compelling evidence that corruption undermines legal sales of ivory, but some argue that the 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).

Elephant conservation involves a range of approaches, and corruption could affect them all (Table 1). Bribery undermines efforts to combat illegal trade but also affects enforcement of antipoaching 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).

## Reducing Corruption

That the influence of corruption on elephant conservation is far reaching might appear depressing, but fortunately there is evidence from other sectors that corruption can be reduced at the country (Alam & Southworth 2012), institutional (United Nations 2009), and local project level (Landell-Mills 2013). A first step is to divide the problem into specific issues based on type of corruption and type of conservation approach (e.g., embezzlement of protected area funds). This makes the task less daunting and moves away from portraying corruption as a monolithic, unsolvable problem. Much corruption 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 anticorruption 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 learned from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification system. There are key similarities between the trade in ivory and tropical hardwood; timber and ivory 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 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), although uptake in Africa is currently low (FSC 2014).

The evidence from other sectors 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 the most influence; these aspects 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 the 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 affected by international trade (Craigie et al. 2010).

It is also important to take action and assume leadership at higher political levels. Anticorruption 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 anticorruption community. They could follow the examples of CAFOD, Tearfund, and Christian Aid, development organizations that recognized that corporate bribery was a major barrier to reducing international poverty and so played an active role in supporting anticorruption legislation, such as the recent U.K. 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 argue these declines are likely to continue unless corruption is tackled, so elephant range states with effective anticorruption policies should have more of a voice in international debates.

We are more sanguine about the future of African elephants than Bennett, but if corruption is not addressed we fear their distribution patterns will resemble those of Africa's rhinoceroses, which have relatively large populations in countries with low levels of corruption (Smith et al. 2013) and small populations in a few high-profile protected areas in countries where corruption is more prevalent. Despite corruption's large negative effects, it is not well covered in the conservation literature, 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 anticorruption community, who are confident that corruption can be tackled given recent developments that include new legislation, new political commitment, and greater enforcement (CMS 2013). It would be ironic if conservationists were to conclude that corruption is too hard to tackle just when the rest of the world is concluding the opposite.

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