

Recognizing the Systemic Interconnections Between the Sustainable Development Goals: Why a Systemic Approach is Imperative to Wildlife Conservation and Species' Extinction Prevention

Summer Elize Smith, J.D.



AFRICA PROSPERITY PROJECT

It was the heartbreaking plight and looming extinction of the African elephant that compelled me to move to Tanzania in October 2016. How could Tanzania lose 60% of its elephant population, or roughly 66,000 elephants, in only 5 years (2009-2014)? How could an ivory poaching crisis of this magnitude continue unabated? How can we halt the extinction of the African elephant in the wild, when the rate of decline is 8% per year? As an animal and environmental protection attorney, I felt a moral imperative to take action and seek answers to these complex questions.

Sadly, the African continent has already lost 30% of its elephant population, or roughly 144,000 elephants, in only 7 years (2007-2014). Clearly, current in-situ conservation methods, standing alone, are not enough to halt species extinction and promote biodiversity. It is time to develop new and innovative approaches to effectively alleviate, or sustainably manage, issues like ivory poaching, human-wildlife conflicts, trophy hunting, habitat loss, and the environmental degradation caused by human population growth, pollution, and climate change.

While I lived in Tanzania for almost a year, it took me only a couple of weeks to recognize that poaching is merely a symptom of a much greater disease, a disease fueled by desperation stemming from a devastating cycle of poverty that permeates every aspect of Tanzanian culture and daily life. Sure, I fully understand the role of Asian crime syndicates behind ivory poaching,

but these syndicates would face far more resistance if the local people were empowered with the resources, knowledge, and tools to defend their wildlife and maintain the security of their communities. More importantly, the local people (and Tanzanian nationals collectively) would not participate in the poaching or illegal trafficking of any species, to the extent they do, if their basic needs were met. Every person on this planet needs adequate economic opportunities, a sustainable food supply, and access to clean water, quality education, and healthcare, inter alia. The harsh reality is that 43.5% of the population of Tanzania lives on less than \$1.90 per day (less than \$693.00 a year), which translates to more than 24,000,000 Tanzanians whose basic, fundamental needs are not being met. There is a direct correlation between the percentage of the population living below the poverty line and the success of wildlife conservation efforts. How can we expect an individual or a community, trapped in the desperate throes of extreme poverty, to adequately or sustainably protect their environment or local wildlife species? They simply do not have the knowledge, capacity, or opportunities to fulfill a conservation role. Furthermore, the battle for resources, in an impoverished community, often creates conflict as tensions arise fueled by greed, desperation, inequality, and the like.

As such, the majority of current conservation methods are simply a bandaid to much deeper problems. They fail to address the root of the issues and the systemic interconnections between the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, access to water, availability of economic opportunities, conservation, environmental protection, peace, justice, inter alia, all operate as a complex system. It is ineffective to continue to treat these goals as individual issues, when in fact they are all inextricably linked and interrelated. Thus, a systemic approach to wildlife conservation, and to the 17 SDGs collectively, is critical to the success of the UN 2030 Agenda and to halting species extinction in Africa. The empowerment and security of the local people, and the health and vibrancy of their community as a whole, is far more important to conservation than any number of counter-poaching initiatives. Without a doubt, the armed rangers and paramilitary organizations operating on the front lines are critical to fighting dangerous poaching activities, but that is not a sustainable or particularly effective solution. We must shift our focus to preemptive approaches that foster sustainability and promote wholeness of the entire community as a system.

The vision of Africa Prosperity Project emerged when I recognized the need for three fundamental approaches in SDG implementation: (1) a systemic approach that reflects the interconnections between all SDGs, including wildlife conservation, (2) a community-based approach that adapts interventions to create healthy and resilient communities that are whole, with every component of the system being addressed, and (3) a collaborative approach that calls for unity and cooperation amongst all stakeholders, at all levels, from every sector, to generate the synergy necessary to effectively break the cycle of poverty and achieve the goals

of the UN 2030 Agenda. These approaches encourage active participation of all community members, which is a critical component to achieving healthy and resilient community systems. They allow for intervention strategies to be adapted to the specific needs and issues facing the different communities, cultures, populations, geographic locations, and circumstances. They promote the effective and efficient management of all available resources. Through strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships, we can work together to not only address and rectify a wide variety of critical issues facing each community, but we can also uplift and empower entire communities, planting the seeds of peace and prosperity for all living beings within an ecosystem.

In early February 2019, I will be traveling to Loliondo, a division in the Ngorongoro District in northern Tanzania, adjacent to the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania and the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya. Through a partnership with Serengeti Preservation Foundation, a Tanzanian wildlife conservation NGO, I will be visiting with community members from several small villages in Loliondo, one of which is Ololosokwan. During this visit, I will participate in multiple SDG initiatives, advancing wildlife conservation education, improving access to clean water, developing women's empowerment projects, and cleaning up several local water sources. The primary purpose of this trip is to set the foundation for Africa Prosperity Project's CommUnity Conservation, Development, and Empowerment Pilot Project, which will employ a systemic approach to the SDGs in a community setting located near endangered wildlife populations.

On day one, we will meet with the local government authority (LGA) to introduce our organizations, establish a relationship, and initiate a dialogue. Tanzania has a decentralized government, which requires local administration, transferring planning and development authority to the local people. This makes the LGA a critical stakeholder in our multi-stakeholder partnership objective. By focusing on our common goals and objectives, rather than social or political differences, our partnership with the LGA will enable us to work closely with the community leadership to target our assistance to the community's most pressing issues and impoverished populations. These village communities in Loliondo are plagued with a multitude of challenging social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental issues. Each of these complex issues intersect to create a community system that is entrenched in a cycle of poverty, struggle, hardship, and inequality.

From an environmental standpoint, the Loliondo area has been gravely impacted by climate change, which has dramatically decreased the community's access to water. Water sources that remained until September are now sometimes drying up in June. These water shortages lead to food shortages when their livestock die from drought. The water shortages also force community members to drink contaminated water from the same sources as their livestock,

leading to severe waterborne illnesses and death, greatly affecting the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole.

From a cultural standpoint, it is common for girls to be denied an education, due to the local Maasai tribe's cultural norm of fathers marrying off their daughters in exchange for cattle. This denial of a girl's right to education is a serious issue which not only exacerbates gender inequality, but also perpetuates the cycle of poverty disproportionately affecting women. Child marriage and forced marriage are human rights violations, where girls are often subjected to violence, discrimination, and abuse, and robbed of their ability to attain an education, to live autonomously, and to actively participate in social, political, and economic roles within the community. Furthermore, women within marriages are denied certain property rights, further perpetuating their impoverishment, inequality, and disempowerment.

From an economic standpoint, the primary source of income for these villages is community-based ecotourism, based almost entirely on the abundance of wildlife located within close proximity to these communities. The wildlife is a significant economic asset, the conservation of which is vital to the future prosperity and health of these local communities and to the Tanzanian economy as a whole. Access agreements between the villages and tour operators provide set payments in exchange for camping access and other tourist activities. Unfortunately, the annual income of the villages from these ecotourism agreements is tantamount to exploitation, because village compensation is trivial in comparison to the excessive profits of the tour operators themselves.

From a social and political standpoint, Loliondo villages have been plagued by forced, illegal evictions and human rights violations stemming from complicated land rights and resource management laws. Some of the local Maasai have lost their homes (bomas) and their livestock, and this displacement has left them suffering from a lack of water, food, and shelter. Harassment, threats, and forced fines have caused them PTSD and left them in an impoverished state with little to no recourse.

Through Africa Prosperity Project's CommUnity Conservation, Development, and Empowerment Pilot Project we will begin to address these interrelated issues in systemic and synergistic ways. Initial goals of the pilot project are: (1) to meet with individual members of the community to gain a tangible understanding of the challenges they face, (2) to assess the community's resources and identify the community's greatest needs, (3) to meet with the active NGOs in each community and determine all development projects that are currently underway, (4) to conduct preliminary meetings with the local government and community members to set initial goals for development, and (5) to determine all stakeholders currently working in the Loliondo area to coordinate future development activities. The culmination of

these steps will result in a comprehensive strategic framework that is capable of catalyzing revolutionary change, achieving large-scale and long-term impacts.

In conclusion, let us come together, hand-in-hand in unity, to empower the African people, to offer them hope, to give them a voice, to represent their interests, to strengthen their autonomy, to provide them with the opportunities and resources they need to build healthy and resilient communities founded upon equality, peace, and prosperity. This is a call to action. Now is the time to unite to achieve the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Now is the time to unite to break the cycle of poverty. Now is the time to unite to halt species extinction. Let us come together, hand-in-hand in unity, to plant the seeds of peace and prosperity in Africa, once and for all. Now is the time.