

ERSA Policy Brief

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Skills, employment, strong local institutions and good relationships between people and parks can counter subsistence poaching

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The issue

Subsistence poaching can severely threaten biodiversity and community livelihoods. It can lead to a decrease in wildlife abundance, and in the worst cases, extinction of certain species. This can have devastating ripple effects throughout ecosystems, jeopardize food security and impact on rural economies dependent on wildlife through, for example, tourism. In southern Africa, subsistence poaching is impacting on the conservation of small game such as kudu, antelope, nyala and impala. It is mainly poor rural households that hunt wild animals either for household consumption or for sale on local and distant markets. In the light of large scale illegal commercial wildlife trafficking in the region, the impact of subsistence poaching has received little attention from government, international development agencies, private nature reserves, conservation NGOs, academia and the media. Often law enforcement turns a blind eye to subsistence poaching due to the perceived low impact, when it can be equally as disastrous to wildlife conservation as commercial-scale poaching.

The research

A research study by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa and University of Gothenburg in Sweden, interviewed members of communities living in the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA), a region spanning across Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe, to understand why some households and communities are involved in subsistence poaching. The research found that the age of an individual, gender, trust among community members, the size of the community, the quality of local institutions, abundance of wildlife in an area and perceptions about park management influence subsistence poaching. The research also showed that young men are more likely to get involved in wildlife crime than other men and women. Subsistence poaching is not generally viewed as an offense by indigenous communities since it involves less valuable species. Illegal hunting has also been part of the culture in communities around protected areas, such as the GLTFCA. However, investment in community trust, strong institutions and good perceptions about park management and wildlife conservation can be used to counter illegal behaviour.

Policy recommendations

Immediate interventions that build the capacity of local institutions are needed to assist communities in protecting their wildlife resources. People's perception of wildlife, parks and subsistence poaching should be positively influenced through public awareness campaigns and training related to wildlife management that will affect behaviour change and large-scale cooperation in conservation areas. Furthermore, alternative livelihood options and employment opportunities that are consistent with wildlife conservation are also crucial to address the impact of subsistence poaching in the GLTFCA.