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Inclusive anti-poaching?

Exploring the potential and challenges of community-based anti-poaching

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As it is acknowledged that the largely (para)militarised approach to anti-poaching has its limitations, alternative approaches to conservation law enforcement are being sought. One alternative, what we call inclusive anti-poaching, focuses on including people from local communities in anti-poaching initiatives. Using a case study of a community programme from southern Mozambique, located adjacent to South Africa's Kruger National Park, we examine the potential of a community ranger initiative to move towards a more inclusive and sustainable approach to anti-poaching and conservation. While highlighting its challenges and potential drawbacks, we argue that including local people in conservation law enforcement efforts can help address poaching and the problematic aspects of current anti-poaching measures. However, to be a genuine and sustainable alternative, community ranger programmes must be part of a broader shift towards developing local wildlife economies that benefit local communities, as opposed to supporting pre-existing anti-poaching interventions.

Most resources dedicated to combatting the illegal wildlife trade are focused on front-line enforcement efforts and, to a lesser extent, demand reduction. Relatively few are dedicated to community-focused initiatives.[1] Critics posit that many more must be directed towards local communities, with some arguing that conservation law enforcement and local people need not be at odds.

Indeed, given the severity of the poaching crisis and the acknowledgement that the largely (para)militarised approach to anti-poaching has its limitations, which includes the entrenchment of divides between conservation and communities, alternative approaches to conservation law enforcement are being sought. These shifts largely remain recorded

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in institutional or grey literature, and receive little empirical academic focus. The alternative approaches seek to include the participation of people within and adjacent to protected areas in combatting the illicit wildlife trade.

One example of incorporating local people into anti-poaching and conservation law enforcement, what we call 'inclusive anti-poaching', is the Mangalane Community Scout Programme (MCSP) in southern Mozambique, adjacent to South Africa's Kruger National Park, where rhino poaching is at its highest. Part of a broader vision of developing a locally owned wildlife economy, the programme employs people from villages in the Mangalane area as community scouts.

Using the MCSP as a case study, this article explores the potential of a community scout initiative to move towards a more inclusive and sustainable approach to conservation and anti-poaching, and hopes to bring related discussions into academic circles. We argue that inclusive anti-poaching can help address poaching and certain problematic aspects of current anti-poaching measures, and provide broader benefits to communities. However, to meet its full potential, local people need to benefit from the wildlife they are protecting, and from the scouts themselves. Hence, community scouts must be accountable to their communities, not to existing, top-down anti-poaching interventions. We posit this as an organising framework for re-thinking the role of community-based anti-poaching.

Background to inclusive anti-poaching

While much has been written on community-based conservation, the issue of community participation in anti-poaching is garnering more attention. Proponents of inclusive anti-poaching cite the problematic aspects of top-down, often (para)militarised anti-poaching as a reason for seeking alternative models of enforcement.[2]

There are increasing concerns that green militarisation, defined as 'the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation', leads to human rights violations, the (often violent) perpetuation of exclusionary practices of conservation, and the further marginalisation of already vulnerable people.[3] Green militarisation thus risks further entrenching park–community divides, threatening both the social and ecological aims and the foundations of conservation. Hence, a common theme of these critiques is that top-down, para-militarised anti-poaching is unlikely to succeed in the long term.[4]

These critiques extend to the Kruger National Park and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA) more broadly. There is increasing recognition that current anti-poaching efforts risk widening the gap and increasing hostilities between Kruger, neighbouring reserves and adjacent communities.[5] For these reasons, attention is being given to alternative models of conservation law enforcement and anti-poaching in the area.[6] Building on insights from community-based conservation and community policing more broadly, proponents of inclusive anti-poaching argue that anti-poaching is likely to be more effective and sustainable in the long term if it includes the support and participation of people within and adjacent to protected areas.

While recent empirical examples highlight the successes of inclusive anti-poaching throughout sub-Saharan Africa, they also demonstrate the myriad challenges and implications of involving communities.[7] Such challenges include violent reprisals against community rangers, threats to the social cohesion of communities, a lack of support for rangers, and a failure to compete with the monetary value of certain wildlife products, among others.[8] Reflecting on the MCSP, we draw attention to another challenge, namely that community-based anti-poaching

must primarily support the rights and priorities of local people, rather than supporting pre-existing anti-poaching interventions. This proves difficult in contexts where poaching is a pressing and immediate priority.

The Mangalane Community Scouts Programme

Research for this article was conducted by the primary author and involved extensive participation observation over six months at Sabie Game Park (SGP) and the Mangalane area, interviews with anti-poaching unit (APU) and SGP personnel, local leaders and law enforcement, and focus groups with community scouts. These data are combined with the insights of the other authors who designed, implemented and managed the programme.

The Mangalane area is located in the Sabié district of Mozambique in the province of Maputo, running along the border with South Africa and the Kruger National Park. The area consists of five communities – Mucacasa, Mavungwana, Baptine, Ndindiza and Costine – with a combined population of approximately 900 people living in 300 households. Households are largely subsistence oriented with a focus on livestock, particularly cattle, and subsistence agriculture. Employment opportunities and wage labour in the area are scarce and basic infrastructure and social services are sorely lacking. Historically, labour migration to South Africa has been a key source of income, with remittances sent to families. Labour migration continues today, but its prominence has decreased with many young men having turned to the rhino poaching economy.

The villages are adjacent to SGP, a 28 000 ha private hunting reserve that is part of a larger conservancy of private reserves in Mozambique – the Greater Lebombo Conservancy, which is itself part of the GLTFCA. Like many protected areas in the region, the creation of the SGP in 2000 entailed various forms of displacement, including the compensated removal of these communities to what is now east of the reserve's boundary.

The SGP has gained attention as it occupies a strategic position directly adjacent to Kruger's most concentrated area of rhinos. It also has rhinos of its own, possibly the only population in Mozambique. Moreover, the Mangalane area is a hub of rhino poachers. While some local people are poachers, most poaching groups come from outside of the Mangalane area and use the communities as a primary transit point in and out of the SGP and Kruger. Many people from Mangalane thus work in support roles by providing information to poachers and/or working in the rhino-horn supply chain. The intensification of rhino poaching has brought about devastating social and economic consequences, including the arrests and deaths of hundreds of young men, leaving behind widows and fatherless households.[9] The get-rich-quick mindset that accompanies poaching and the presence of external poaching gangs have also generated a rise in criminality, accompanied by social tensions and breakdowns within the villages.

To combat rhino poaching with limited resources, the SGP's anti-poaching activities are led by an anti-poaching non-governmental organisation (NGO) that largely employs green militarisation tactics. Given the critiques of green militarisation and acknowledging that efforts must be made to incorporate local communities into conservation and combatting the wildlife trade, the SGP formed a partnership with the Southern African Wildlife College (SAWC) and WWF-South Africa to organise the communities of Mangalane and build a locally owned wildlife economy. Part of this initiative included developing an alternative anti-poaching model. Initiated in 2015, the MCSP employs 21 local

residents as community scouts, with each community having its respective group of four to five scouts. With one exception, all scouts are male. Scouts range from 21 to 39 years of age with an average age of 28, and all but four scouts have children.

A primary motivation for becoming a scout is the salary, which is just above minimum wage. Beyond the salary, there are other sources of motivation for people to become scouts, and for communities to support them. Firstly, there are monetary benefits to be derived from wildlife and conservation.[10] In addition, community support for the scouts is strongly related to their broader policing roles. Indeed, the scouts are meant to have many policing duties, with protecting the SGP just one of them. For example, scouts undertake conflict resolution within their respective communities, acting as a link between communities and local law enforcement. Scouts are also credited with eliminating cattle theft in the Mangalane area and play an active role in managing problem animals and human–wildlife conflicts. While we cannot detail all non-anti-poaching benefits here, what is important is that such benefits are the primary source of community support for the scouts, and are part of an overall approach to seeing rhino protection as a by-product of conservation-related benefits.[11] Drawing from the MCSP, the remainder of this article focuses on the anti-poaching role of the community scouts, highlighting some of the benefits and challenges.

Community scouts and anti-poaching

There are two primary ways in which scouts contribute to anti-poaching efforts and thus protect the SGP, Kruger National Park and their rhino populations. First, they monitor and patrol portions of the outer side of the reserve's approximately 40 km fence every day, reporting signs of entries or exits by poachers. Scouts also perform other patrol duties as requested by APU management. Second, scouts provide intelligence to the APU regarding potential poaching incursions or past poaching activity, as gathered within their respective communities.

Until recently, most rhino poachers came from or transitioned through the Mozambican borderlands. The modus operandi of poachers has shifted so that the majority now enter Kruger from its western boundary.[12] The SGP has seen a reduction in rhino killings from approximately 25 per year in the previous few years to just three in 2016. It is not possible to attribute this shift to the MCSP; rather, it should be seen as part of the broader efforts undertaken in the Mozambican borderlands to address rhino poaching. Indeed, whether the MCSP has contributed to a net decrease in poaching is difficult to quantify. We thus examine the MCSP from a qualitative perspective, focusing on the benefits and challenges of the programme so far. The lessons learned provide a foundation for ways forward in the Mangalane area and beyond.

There is widespread agreement from reserve and anti-poaching management that the community scouts have assisted in curbing poaching incidents. Observation, interviews and many conversations with APU management highlight the important role scouts play in providing intelligence to the APU, which has led to arrests, seizures and the frustration of poaching attempts.[13] Community scouts provide eyes and ears for law enforcement outside of reserve boundaries and in communities. As poaching groups are largely from outside the Mangalane area, the scouts provide information on the movement and arrival of vehicles and people from elsewhere who may be connected to poaching syndicates. The MCSP also increases the visual policing component of anti-poaching efforts

as they routinely patrol outside the reserve's boundaries. As a result, community scouts discourage poaching attempts, as it is known that poaching tracks and incursions are more likely to be found and reported. Scouts thus contribute in various ways to preventative or pro-active anti-poaching.

Bringing local people into anti-poaching efforts serves to increase the credibility and legitimacy of the SGP's anti-poaching and conservation efforts in adjacent communities. There are still tensions between communities and the SGP, in particular the APU. But community members, scouts and reserve management see an inclusive approach to anti-poaching as a step towards addressing the antagonistic park vs. people relationship. It also demonstrates a willingness on the part of the reserve to work with communities. Importantly, employing people as community scouts offers an alternative source of income, especially for young men, who are otherwise likely to be involved in the wildlife trade. The salary itself cannot compete with the money from rhino poaching, but it does offer an income in an area where the economy is largely subsistence oriented, and based on migrant labour to South Africa or rhino poaching. Discouraging people from entering the wildlife trade may gain traction if scouts know they can climb the occupational ladder and become rangers or guides, and if community-based anti-poaching is integrated with the broader development of a local wildlife economy, as originally intended. This latter part, however, is proving difficult, ushering in a suite of challenges to the intentions and sustainability of the scout programme.

Co-opting scouts: whose wildlife is protected, and who benefits?

The MCSP was not designed primarily as an anti-poaching intervention, but was intended to be an integral part of the broader development of a community governance system that ensures local ownership and decision-making over wildlife through delegated rights and management responsibilities, including those related to anti-poaching. One of the main challenges facing the community scouts is that their role has largely shifted away from this broad mandate towards a narrower role of rhino protection, acting as a support for or appendage to the reserve's existing anti-poaching unit and not as a vehicle for community decision-making and management of wildlife.

There is immense political pressure on both the Mozambique government and the private reserves, including the SGP, to combat rhino poaching. This pressure stems from altruistic motives of wanting to save rhinos, but also from the reality that if the SGP and the neighbouring concessions do not succeed in curbing poaching incursions into their respective concessions and Kruger, they risk losing access to the land and wildlife their businesses depend on.[14] Thus, the SGP and its APU are primarily focused on rhino protection, and the community scouts are perceived as a logical way to support this. This greatly influences how the community scouts work on a day-to-day basis, as they fall under the guidance of the SGP's anti-poaching unit, directed by a paramilitary-style anti-poaching NGO, and work primarily with the reserve's rangers and Mozambican law enforcement authorities, not with their communities. The scouts have thus been co-opted by and brought under the umbrella of the APU, and take their daily orders from the APU management – even if this was not the original intention. This is particularly problematic as the existing anti-poaching unit is top-down, led by external actors, and largely takes a paramilitary approach. Moreover, its priorities may not reflect those of local people, or benefit them. This is a significant issue that frames the challenge to the long-term sustainability of and community support for inclusive anti-poaching efforts. In

a context where the protection of a particular species, such as the rhino, has become politically charged and the focus of attention and resources, this becomes a genuine challenge.

This broader challenge draws attention to the importance of conservation-related benefits as a source of sustainable community support for community-based anti-poaching. Redirecting the duties of scouts to focus primarily on protecting the wildlife of a private reserve and a neighbouring country's national park is problematic in that it also means moving them away from their other community-centred policing roles and the development of a local wildlife economy. Put simply, scouts are not protecting the wildlife of their communities, as they have yet to gain any ownership rights, nor is there an adequate framework in place for communities to benefit from conservation and protecting rhinos. This presents a challenge to the ongoing motivation of scouts, and community support for them.

Apart from the few jobs created by the reserve, the benefits received by communities from the wildlife economy under the current government framework is their share of 20% of the SGP's hunting licence fees. This money is distributed by the government of Mozambique between the five communities of Mangalane. In 2015 this amounted to just shy of US$50 per household, well short of viable motivation to support the reserve and anti-poaching efforts. While the SGP has invested in communities in terms of water access and the building of a school, community centre and a dozen houses, such benefits do not reflect a systematic or organised way for communities to benefit from wildlife through ownership or decision-making. Rather, they are reflective of the actions of an individual reserve and its owners. Moreover, these community investments existed before the MCSP, so beyond the 20% mentioned above, there has been little added wildlife-related benefit to communities since the inception of the programme.

Most important here is the lack of direct benefit from wildlife and from supporting anti-poaching initiatives. The lack of ownership over wildlife means that poaching is not seen as stealing from communities, but rather as the most lucrative way to use wildlife, with the scouts only getting in the way of this. In describing his anti-poaching duties, one scout explained how fellow community members accuse scouts of disrupting their livelihoods by making it more difficult to hunt (rhino), and that they are responsible for community members, being arrested and put in jail.[15] As such, community support for the scouts' anti-poaching efforts is tenuous at best, leading to a host of problems.

With the benefits of conservation and community participation in anti-poaching largely accruing to a private reserve, incentives to become involved in anti-poaching simply do not compete with the incentives offered by the wildlife trade. Scouts, like rangers and police, are routinely offered money to cooperate with poachers, or turn a blind eye. Corruption among community scouts and law enforcement is a major challenge. Numerous scouts, rangers and police have collaborated with poachers through information sharing or in more direct ways, leading to their arrest. In a context where the monetary gains from the wildlife trade are high, wages earned by community scouts, rangers and police simply cannot compete.

In addition, focus groups with scouts revealed how their patrol duties take them away from farming, which is needed to feed their families in the absence of higher wages. Indeed, scouts, rangers and environmental police all claimed to be denigrated by community members involved in poaching, and being insulted for being 'poor', having 'no future' and being 'unable to properly support their families', because they do not involve themselves in poaching.[16]

Such perceptions (and the reality) of scouts and rangers make it difficult to convince young men to view them as role models, compared to those in the poaching economy who reflect the lifestyle and wealth to which they aspire.[17] This highlights the importance of ensuring that scouts (and community members) derive adequate benefits from protecting wildlife. Such benefits and incentives must look beyond salaries to those directly related to wildlife, such as ownership of wildlife or related benefits derived from protecting a private reserve and neighbouring national park.

Pressure to work with poachers also takes on violent forms. Like anti-poaching rangers across sub-Saharan Africa, community scouts are at risk from poachers and the syndicates they are a part of. All Mangalane scouts reported routine threats of violence, and even death. In May 2016, for example, several scouts were attacked in their homes by men linked to poaching groups. One scout showed a scar on his face and explained that he received it when a known poacher in the community accused him of being a traitor and physically confronted him.[18] This highlights concerns about the applicability of inclusive anti-poaching models in certain contexts. The concerns about violence and engagement with armed poachers, who are sometimes militarised themselves, raise the important question of how far community-based anti-poaching can go, and where it may or may not be appropriate, especially when substantial and direct wildlife-related benefits fail to materialise.

Violence against scouts is also indicative of the lack of support they get from community members for their anti-poaching duties. Scouts unanimously spoke of the alienation they faced after being labelled 'traitors' or accused of 'working with the white men', since anti-poaching is seen to benefit white-run private reserves, or South Africa, and not local communities.[19] One APU manager recounted how, while on patrol with scouts outside the reserve, a scout was threatened. A resident of the area yelled, 'Watch out, your time is going to come for working with the white men.'[20] When asked to expand on the violence against scouts and their support among community members, another scout explained that communities support their broad policing duties that relate to cattle theft, conflict resolution and problem animal management.[21] But he and his fellow scouts concurred that fellow community members see their anti-poaching work as impeding a potentially lucrative livelihood.[22] Not only is the lack of support for the scouts and their anti-poaching work problematic for addressing poaching, but it also has the potential to divide people within villages into groups aligned with poachers or those combatting them, and lead to intra-community tensions, if not outright violence against scouts.

It is widely agreed that the tensions within communities are driven by outsiders (working for syndicates) and those aligned with them. The reality is that those associated with poaching are seen as enriching the community, at least in monetary terms, while anti-poaching forces (scouts or otherwise) are seen as impeding that source of wealth and income. This is exacerbated by the fact that the scouts are primarily accountable to an external anti-poaching unit. As others have reported, divisions in communities may be worsened when scouts are 'perceived as part of external law enforcement agents rather than members of the community'.[23] This again highlights the importance of having scouts primarily accountable to their communities, and not to external anti-poaching interventions. Following the original intentions of the MCSP, one way of achieving this accountability is to ensure that communities have ownership over wildlife, or at minimum derive substantial benefits from the wildlife and spaces that scouts are tasked with

protecting. It is also important to emphasise the responsibilities of scouts other than anti-poaching, in particular those that are in line with community needs and contribute to broader community well-being.

Scouts, reserve management and local residents agree that community members support the scouts in their non-anti-poaching work. In this way, and much in line with the original intentions of the MCSP, rhino protection and broader support for conservation (and even anti-poaching) might emerge as a by-product of broader conservation or wildlife-economy practices, where communities directly benefit from species protection and conservation. This could help contribute to the motivation needed to support inclusive approaches to anti-poaching, such as community scouts.

Conclusion: moving forward with inclusive anti-poaching

Drawing on the MCSP, we have highlighted the potential of inclusive anti-poaching approaches, as well as the challenges they face. We put forward these challenges not to undermine efforts at inclusive anti-poaching, but to begin a discussion on the need for community participation in combatting the illicit wildlife trade, and related challenges and implications. One of the main challenges is ensuring that community-based anti-poaching directly benefits local communities, and is not co-opted by existing anti-poaching interventions, especially those that are militarised. This is paramount if scouts are going to have the much-needed support of their fellow community members, which is key to the long-term viability of inclusive anti-poaching activities. We hope to stimulate discussion about how models of inclusive anti-poaching might overcome this challenge, remain bottom-up and accountable to their communities, and increase local decision-making and ownership over the resources that they are helping to protect. We see this as a key framework for thinking about community participation in anti-poaching efforts, and how to move forward.

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