

The Effects of COVID-19 on the Wild Life Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Wild life tourism is one of the economic sectors that is most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The wildlife economy plays a primary economic role to rural communities. The shutting down of borders, grounding of flights and restriction on movement gave the wild life tourism sector hard hit and people without incomes. As a result of job losses, no income and threatened livelihoods, there has been an additional increase in poaching and exploitation of the environment. Communities are struggling to survive under lockdown and have resorted to killing of wild animals which has negative effects on wild life tourism. This is expected to get worse as the economic environment declines. In conclusion governments should make proclamation on bans in trading of wild animals, including warning about the health risk of eating wild animals. Also eating of wild animals should be prohibited. The government should make it clear about punishments and legal violation, including sentence to life prison on killing and eating of wild animals.

Keywords: Wild life, tourism, COVID-19, livelihoods, poaching and animals

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an engine for jobs, exports and investments [1]. In 2016, travel and tourism generated \$7.6 trillion (10.2% of global Gross Domestic Product) and an estimated 292 million jobs globally. The tourism area is also the major market-based provider to finance protected areas such as national parks [2]. In some countries, tourism depends almost completely on natural systems, often with wildlife as the main attraction. This nature-based tourism (NBT) is a prevailing tool that countries can leverage to grow and bring jobs to local communities, generate government revenues and foreign exchange, and create new markets for entrepreneurs to sell their goods and services [3]. Wildlife is an essential draw for tourists who visit parks and generate economic activities that benefit local people [4]. For NBT to flourish, wildlife and its natural habitat must be protected and managed sustainably. To achieve the latter, the design of conservation programs that are socially and economically sustainable will be essential.

Tourism is a major source of employment globally. The labour market has some distinguishing features. The

industry is labour-intensive in nature [5]. A high proportion of the jobs are undertaken by women, 54 per cent, significantly higher than in most other sectors, and young employees, meaning the industry is seen as inclusive. However, women are more likely to be entrepreneurs in tourism than in other sectors and most women hold low skilled jobs in the tourism sector, making them vulnerable to shocks [6]. There is also a significant amount of indirect employment in construction and infrastructure development, plus supplying food and drink and souvenirs to tourists. Furthermore, many employees have direct contact with tourists in travel agencies, airlines, ships, hotels, restaurants, shopping centres and various tourist attractions. Wildlife tourism is a emerging phenomenon, predominantly in developing economies of the world [7]. Alleged remuneration of this growth in tourism include greater tourist curiosity in, and support for conservation. Today, there is no enhanced way for the tourism industry to establish its bonafides than to locate itself some distance away from the boundary of a national park or sanctuary and then

work assiduously with cooperatives formed by farmers and locals to ecologically re-establish the insignificant lands between their lodges and the forest edge [8]. This would invite wildlife to their very doorstep and give their guests the 'close to nature' experiences for which most people are willing to pay a premium. Apart from the financial benefit to locals, this would dramatically reduce incidents of human-animal conflicts, which are largely triggered by wildlife-farmer interactions. Wildlife tourism has averaged 15% growth in India, mirroring many countries [9]. This growth is reflected in the increase in visitor to many Indian protected areas.

On the other hand, wildlife tourism can also contribute positively to conservation and economy. For conservation to be successful in the long term, it must be promoted both inside and outside protected areas, and must be incorporated with the realities of modern economies and meeting people's needs. Well-managed nature-based tourism generates earnings for conservation of natural habitats and wildlife and the economy as a whole [10].

By June 2020, COVID-19 infected over 11 million people and caused the deaths of over 500,000 worldwide. Internationally, the spread shows no sign of declining. Even though daily cases in Europe and Western Pacific are failing, they are increasing in the Americas, South East Asia and Africa. In reaction, most countries have closed their borders to visitors and tourists. The UN World Tourism Organization reported during the second quarter of 2020 for the first time ever that 100 per cent of global destinations introduced travel restrictions [11]. As a result, international tourism has been almost totally suspended, and wild life tourism curtailed by lockdown conditions imposed in many countries. Although some destinations have started slowly to open up, many are afraid of international travel or cannot afford it due to the economic crisis.

COVID-19 is a health and economic crisis on a global scale. It is generally agreed that the virus is easily transmissible and that the fatality rate is low when compared to previous

pandemics such as SARS, Ebola and the bubonic plague [12]. Fatalities are heavily skewed towards older people and those with existing ailments. To slow the spread of the virus, many countries have encouraged or mandated the use of sanitary practices such as hand washing, social distancing and isolation. Government have introduced a slew of policy measures such as targeted testing and tracing, lockdown measures, upgrading public health facilities and closure of borders. These measures have impacted negatively on wild life tourism and the delivery of personal services, resulting in demand and supply side shocks [13].

Wild life tourism is among the economic sectors most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN WTO) estimates a loss of 850 million to 1.1 billion international tourist arrivals, \$910 million to \$1.1 trillion in export revenues and 100-120 million jobs, depending on whether the borders are opened in July, September or December [14]. Most destinations were entirely closed in April and May 2020, opening only in some regions slowly for the northern summer. UN WTO projections reflect considerable uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic, in addition to the government response to support economic activity.

Wild life watching

Wildlife is a general term that technically covers both flora and fauna, although in popular use, wildlife is mostly used to refer to animals in the wild [15]. Perhaps a classic image of wildlife for many people is a large mammal or a flock of wild birds, but the term is widely used to cover all types of animals, including all kinds of insects, and marine life. Wildlife watching is simply an activity that involves the watching of wildlife. It is normally used to refer to the watching of animals, and this distinguishes wildlife watching from other forms of wild-life-based activities, such as hunting and fishing [16]. Watching wild-life and animals is essentially an observational activity, although in some cases it can involve interactions with the animals being watched, such as touching or feeding them. Wildlife watching tourism is then tourism that is organised and

undertaken in order to watch wildlife [17]. This type of tourism has grown dramatically in recent years, and a quick search on the Internet provides many examples of tourism companies that either market specific wildlife watching tours, or promote their products by highlighting wildlife watching as an optional activity that their clients can enjoy.

Tourism industry tends to use the term 'wildlife tourism' rather than wildlife watching tourism. In many cases, the two terms are the same, but wildlife tourism is sometimes also used to refer to hunting or fishing tourism, and in a few cases to the viewing of captive wildlife in zoos or confined parks where the animals no longer live a wild existence.

The devastating effects of COVID-19 on wildlife conservation

In Africa, the wildlife conservation industry has dealt with many challenges ranging from political, economic, social, impacts of urbanization and even disease outbreaks like COVID-19. However, most of these challenges have been contained to parts of the continent [18]. Whereas with the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), we have experienced unprecedented challenges the world over [6]. The global pandemic has wreaked havoc to our very existence as a species and has demanded a change in the way we function in the economy and our daily survival [7]. The world is a different place to what it was just a few months ago, and the veil of not knowing torments the society [8].

Inventive and exceptional alternatives need to be developed to guarantee that many endangered species, which we have fought so hard to conserve, do not become extinct during this global pandemic [4]. Those species reliant on human conservation efforts and upkeep of their habitat are at greatest risk [6]. The wildlife economy plays a primary economic role to rural communities [1]. According to an article published in the United Development Programme, the travel and tourism sector accounted for 10.3 percent of global GDP and created one in four new jobs in 2019. Wildlife tourism supported 21.8 million jobs across the world, or 6.8 percent of total travel and tourism jobs [8]. In

Africa, where wildlife tourism is a drawcard to the sector, the percentage was much higher, at 36.3 percent. The wildlife economy is therefore key not only to the conservation of wildlife and their habitats but the very existence of many of the people living in the vast communities adjacent to conservation areas [9]. Many of the people employed in this sector live in rural areas where they only have the wildlife economy to depend on for their livelihood. The shutting down of borders, grounding of flights and restriction on movement gave the wild life tourism sector hard hit and people without incomes [10].

Many National Parks in Africa, as well as the many private reserves have closed their doors to both local and international tourists [2]. Without the funding received from guests, the operations of these properties are seriously compromised [1]. The fear is that there does not appear to be a "light at the end of the tunnel" at this stage. The restrictions on travel, especially across provincial borders and internationally, may continue for months, and even when the restrictions are ultimately lifted, the wild life tourism sector will need to deal with the impacts of perceptions while it endeavours to once again entice the return of visitors to the country [11].

The tourism industry battled in South Africa due to Ebola breaking out in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2014-2016 epidemic, thus the will to resume traveling may further be compromised due to travellers fearing leaving the safety of their homes [4]. This all has unimaginable impacts on conservation of these wild areas [1]. Important conservation meetings and conferences tackling the usual threats to conservation are also either been postponed or cancelled, which in turn has an indirect impact on how we manage our wildlife.

Since lockdown, there has been a decrease in financial and surveillance resources [3]. Most of the funding in the conservation industry comes from the tourism sector. With the global lockdown halting most wild life tourism sector activities, there simply is no cashflow from incoming tourists. The wild life tourism industry, for lack of a better word, is dead [2].

Increased poaching of Animals

As a result of job losses, no income and threatened livelihoods, there has been an additional increase in poaching and exploitation of the environment [1]. Communities are struggling to survive under lockdown and have resorted to living off the land. This is expected to get worse as our economic environment declines [4]. As the government and private landowners are further stressed by the pandemic, their willingness and ability to fund anti-poaching units, reserve management and conservation offices will be reduced considerably [7]. This, coupled with the fact that communities are under stress financially, paints a grim picture for poaching, as they inevitably turn to for subsistence poaching, in order to maintain livelihoods in often rural areas [8]. Poaching for the pot is bad enough for wildlife, however the real risk is felt when poaching for greed through sophisticated and specialized syndicates take the opportunity to poach [9].

Wildlife conservation industry amid COVID-19 pandemic

The economy and people cannot survive indefinite periods of lockdown or paralysis on productivity [3]. Also pre-covid-19 way of going about businesses and industry is over. There will be a new 'normal' which all have to adapt to [5]. At this stage, nobody knows what the new 'normal' will be, however no doubt the wildlife industry will have to adapt to survive [1]. There is needed to be innovative, not only in how the resources are used, but how the technology is used. The use of technology in wildlife conservation will become more important than ever before [2]. This pandemic has shown us, that there is need to reform wild life tourism to prevent future collapse in any case of another pandemic. This might be tackled by new funding and operational models. It will certainly create an opportunity to keep our communities safe whilst maintaining the balance in our biodiversity efforts.

Wildlife protection and food safety to prevent exposure to COVID-19

There has been an additional increase in poaching of wild animals due to hardship caused by COVID-19. The following procedures have been suggested for protection and

conservation of wild life tourism amid pandemic periods.

- Increase social awareness of hazards in eating wild animals. A proclamation on bans in trading of wild animals, including warning about the health risk of eating wild animals should be made. The painful lesson of eating wild animals has not prevented some Chinese people from changing the notion that wild animals, especially rare ones, are tonic medicines for human body [1]. In fact, most of the *zoonosis* were caused by viruses from wild animals and passed into humans through the process of killing and eating infected animals [2]. Social awareness of hazards in eating wild animals, reducing contacts with wild animals, and respecting wildlife as an equal living being as human life in the natural ecosystem should be further enhanced [7]. As Internet and social media applications have skyrocketed nowadays, social media could be useful tools for promoting public awareness and health education to completely eradicate the risks from eating wild animals [10].
- Eating of wild animals should be prohibited. The government should make it clear about punishments and legal violation, including sentence to life prison on killing and eating of wild animals. It should also be amended in the criminal law and the Law on the protection of wildlife that eating and consumption of all the wild animals is related to alleged criminal behavior and should be seriously punished or be sentenced to prison [12]. Criminal liabilities for eating, killing, processing, transporting, and selling the unauthorized animals should be defined clearly. Only severe penalty exceeds the pleasure and vanity acquired by eating wild animals, the general public, especially those who have such a weird

consumption hobby, will be awakened to the alarm signals from SARS and the current event, and such a public health incident of global impacts will be prevented and avoided.

- Market supervision and monitoring mechanism should be improved. It is hard to entirely ban the consumption of wild animals solely through the improvement of people's awareness; an efficient and feasible market supervision system is required to ban the possibility of eating wild animals [13]. Wild animals may enter the distribution market because there is no specific law presently. To entirely eliminate the movement of wild animals in the market, a list of legalized edible animals should be made. For that, the animals that are allowed to be sold in the market should have a classification code, which can be checked by online monitoring in the whole process of slaughtering, processing, transporting, selling, and consumption so that the sources can be easily identified and controlled in case of any emergencies [13]. Regular and flight inspection should be taken especially for agricultural products and seafood markets. The administrative supervision department should take the initiative to examine any prohibited activities in the market and bear the conscientiousness for malfeasance. All-round supervisions from public consumers, business, governmental departments, and non-governmental organizations should be strengthened as an entity for the improvement of public health [14].

Sustaining of wildlife watching tourism

With the continued expansion of wildlife watching, and the increasing impacts and risks this poses for watched animal populations and their habitats, it is important to ensure that future management of wildlife watching

tourism, and associated development of tourism facilities and infrastructure, is better planned and far more systematic than has often been the case in the past [12]. Wildlife watching can only be sustainable if it contributes to the conservation and survival of the watched species and their habitats, provides benefits for local communities and community development, offers good quality tourism in line with market expectations, and is commercially viable [13]. The requirements that are needed to attain long-term sustainability of wildlife watching are:

- Long-term survival of population and habitats
- Minimal impact on behaviour of watched and associated species
- Improvement to livelihoods of local people
- Increased awareness of and support for conservation activities amongst all stakeholders
- Plans for sustainable management of wildlife watching tourism, conservation and community development based on set limits of acceptable change and adaptive management
- Ability to manage access to wildlife watching resources and to limit future development
- Supportive legal and planning frameworks combined with commitment from national and local government

Achieving each of these elements involves different sets of skills and expertise, including the ability to access tourism markets, to work with local communities, and to manage wildlife resources [15]. They can best be brought together through participatory approaches to planning for wildlife watching tourism, involving the tourism sector, local communities, local government authorities and wildlife managers [16]. Wildlife watching tourism will not be appropriate in some locations for conservation, social, market or commercial reasons, or a combination of these. It is therefore important to identify and focus on those places where there is a realistic potential to develop sustainable wildlife

watching tourism. There are four areas in particular that needs to be addressed to improve the sustainability of wildlife watching tourism, particularly in relation to developing countries:

- Improve understanding of the biology of watched species and monitoring of the effects of tourism on them.
- Improve guide training and interpretation.
- Evaluate the conditions required for wildlife watching tourism to be a viable option particularly for generating net revenues for conservation and benefits for local communities
- Improve planning and management of tourism in protected areas and wildlife viewing sites [17].

The economic value of wildlife watching

Wildlife watching is a valuable asset for many localities: large numbers of people regularly pay significant amounts of money in order to view particular species of animals, and nature in general [18]. For example, around one in five US residents listed bird watching as one of their recreational activities, and almost 40% travelled away from their homes to view birds, according to a major survey conducted in the US recently [14]. Overall the direct expenditure of US residents on wildlife watching in the US was around USD 32 billion, including nearly USD 7.5 billion on food, transport and accommodation linked to wildlife watching trips [2].

In East Africa, wildlife watching is one of the attractions for international tourists, and the basis for the majority

of their national income from tourism. In 2000, Kenya received 943,000 international arrivals which generated international tourism receipts of USD 304 million. For Tanzania the figures were 459,000 arrivals and tourism receipts of USD 739 million, and for Uganda, 151,000 arrivals and receipts of USD 149 million. In total the region received over one and a half million international arrivals and generated more than USD 1 billion in foreign exchange receipts from tourism, much of it based on wildlife watching [7]. Wildlife watching tourism generates income in several ways. These include:

- payments such as for entrance and permit fees made by tourists to visit wildlife watching sites, and to the guides, drivers and other staff who may accompany them.
- In addition, tourists pay for accommodation and other services in order to travel to wildlife watching sites. At a national or regional level, the fact that tourists make visits for wildlife watching also creates opportunities to interest them in other tourism activities, perhaps to visit other areas of the country to watch different species of wildlife, or to see additional aspects such as a country's heritage and culture [16]. By providing additional opportunities for tourism, tourists can be encouraged to stay longer and spend more money in a country, having initially been attracted to visit in order to view some of its wildlife.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion governments should make proclamation on bans in trading of wild animals, including warning about the health risk of eating wild animals. Also eating of wild animals should be

prohibited. The government should make it clear about punishments and legal violation, including sentence to life prison on killing and eating of wild animals.

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