



# **Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa**

## **Reflections from Conservation MBAs April 2020**



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## Contributors.

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## Introduction

Towards the end of December last year the Chinese city of Wuhan Reported the first case of a novel virus, now known as COVID-19 (C19). Over the last 3 months, the virus has spread exponentially to all parts of the world. The world has over 1,000,000 confirmed cases of the virus and over 45,000 deaths with Africa reporting slightly over 6,000 cases (early April 2020). Countries such as Italy and Spain, being the hardest hit, instituted total lockdowns of their populations. Countries across Africa have instituted protocols to protect their populations from widespread exposure to the virus. South Africa, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda have instituted total lockdowns and restricted all movement other than completely essential movements, Kenya and Tanzania have instituted dusk to dawn curfews and closed all their malls and entertainment centres. The majority of the population and all sectors have been affected by the work from home order.

We have seen conservationists and conservation organizations across the world and indeed in Africa pull back both human and natural resources from critical programs in a bid to play their part in curbing the spread of the virus. This means that the dialing down of economic and social engagements and the enforcement of lockdowns and curfews will have both negative and positive consequences on conservation across the continent.



# Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa

## Positive impacts of COVID-19 in wildlife conservation and habitats in Africa

Despite the grimness of the virus and its effects on human health, biodiversity is reaping some positive benefits from the crisis. The lockdowns and curfews have seen a **more than 90% reduction in transportation and carbon intensive factories**. Barely a month into the lockdown in Wuhan, Italy and Spain, scientists reported cleaner air and verified reductions in carbon emissions that ensued when factories shut down and the use of fuel intensive transportation reduced. According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air in Finland, the restrictions contributed to a 25 percent drop in China's carbon dioxide emissions over four weeks beginning in late January, compared to the same time last year.

Additionally, due to the reduction in movement and declaration of the majority of industries as non essential, large scale natural capital offtake has reduced and therefore accorded a **pressure release for wildlife resources**. For instance, industries such as fisheries now have an opportunity for the resource to replenish. The world has over the past several years suffered from over-tourism in many of its key attraction sites. This is a prime opportunity to record the positive changes that biodiversity can reap from reduced exploitation levels, as well as over-tourism effects on biodiversity.

Furthermore, the reduction in transport may result in **decreased illegal trade in trophies across jurisdictions** and we might see a verifiable decrease in the number of seizures over the next one year and a half.

The C19 crisis has also afforded a platform for **robust discourse on animal husbandry**, as well as an opportunity to interrogate supply chains for wild meat legal markets. Wuhan has recently reopened its wet markets and we can now see increased interrogation of hygiene and supply chain processes for the industry.

# Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa

Additionally, there is **improved discourse and review of the utility and efficiency of international conferences on biodiversity**. A lot of money will be saved by the cancellation of many international conferences on biodiversity and there are proposals that the money can be converted to the “boots on the ground” conservation initiatives that are often starved of large donor funding as they do not provide a large platform for media and international attention.

Furthermore, we have seen governments across the continent **appreciate the contribution of biodiversity-based tourism** and finally realising the indirect multiplier benefits of tourism. Once the actual figures come in after the end of the crisis, we will be able to better quantify the contribution of biodiversity based tourism, and this will hopefully not only lead to investment in biodiversity to support tourism, but also a diversification of the wildlife economy to mitigate future disruptions to tourism.



Fortunately, the crisis is **spurring innovation in the conservation space** and we are bound to see growth in the insurance industry especially in insuring wildlife economy products and value chains. **Technological innovation in the conservation sector** will increase because people are looking for ways to deal with cabin fever. We may also find that people may be so starved of nature and outdoors and they may start to appreciate nature more and thus go for more game drives and more safaris which will inject more investment into the sector.



# Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa

Lastly, the C19 crisis has illuminated the **need for conservation dependent sectors to find buffers** in cases of such a crisis as well as better financial sustainability models outside of conservation, perhaps by tapping into private sector support for endowment funds, conservation banking and other economic instruments.

## Negative impacts of Covid-19 on conservation in Africa

Despite the above positives, conservation as a sector is also experiencing negative impacts from the C19 crisis. Firstly, most money that is channeled to conservation comes from public institutional donors and international philanthropic and development agencies. Currently, most of these institutions are looking for ways to **cut back their budgets which affects the ability of conservation efforts to deliver**. The C19 crisis is not only a sanitary crisis but will end with an economic crisis and a conservation crisis due to the reduction of conservation organizations' capacity to deliver project deliverables as planned.

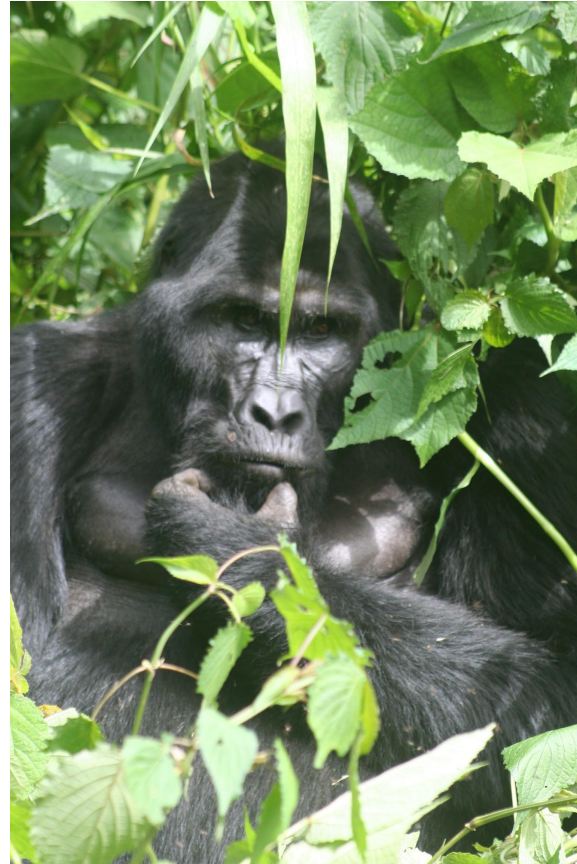
The sector is already experiencing the **negative impacts of re-allocation of funds by donors** from conservation to other “urgent initiatives” like health. Additionally, funding from corporates may reduce due to the economic effects of the pandemic on companies, thereby reprioritization of funding initiatives from conservation to survival and other more urgent funding starved sectors such as health. We are seeing reports of donor reliant organizations having to take drastic steps such as cutting back on important project activities (such as anti-poaching) moving to less expensive offices and reducing all non-essential expenses.

The sector is also seeing an **almost 100% reduction of revenue from tourism** and therefore no resources to pump back into ecosystems. Additionally, illegal resource users are taking advantage since the regulatory forces and law enforcement, such as scouts, have fallen back. This will possibly lead to an increase in poaching and illegal offtake of resources.

# Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa

Furthermore, we are seeing reports that there may be the **risk of the virus being transmitted from humans to gorillas and other primates**. Countries such as Rwanda, Uganda and DRC are taking measures to protect their gorilla populations, which are a core source of their tourism income.

2020 was announced by the United Nations as the “Biodiversity super year”: the big year for biodiversity. There would have been huge progress in biodiversity protection, however, we stand at a **possible loss of opportunity to speak about habitat loss** since the discourse will inadvertently be focused on everyone focusing on illegal wildlife trade and the negative impacts of wild meat consumption.



Additionally, there are projections that **more people will be hesitant to deal with wildlife** due to its potential links to the wet wildlife market and wildlife. This will see most volunteer based organizations suffer a blow to the number of people willing to be hands on volunteers in wildlife sanctuaries.

Ultimately, if we don't stand together, the **impact on an African scale will be huge and extensive**, thereby reducing regional collaboration and support in dealing with the aftermath of the crisis and its impacts on wildlife conservation and the wildlife economy.

# Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa

## How do we maintain positive impacts, and mitigate negative impacts, on wildlife and the wildlife economy?

If we are to successfully navigate through and beyond the crisis, we need to ensure that we maintain the positive impacts on wildlife and the wildlife economy, and mitigate the negative impacts that are surfacing and will continue to rise in the coming months.

The crisis has given us an **opportunity to rethink the way that we plan conservation and the introduction of tools that we can use to save money and time in the future.** It will be important that we build on these innovations and there will be a need to rethink conservation management plans in the future in terms of where revenues come from, increasing product diversification and innovative fund-raising methods for conservation.

Navigating through the crisis has resulted in organisations having to **evaluate systems and operations, structures of the wildlife economy and to be innovative in the way that we structure systems and teams** going forward. Ultimately, we need to **review, reset and innovate** so that we not only build more resilient systems and teams but also a more resilient wildlife economy.

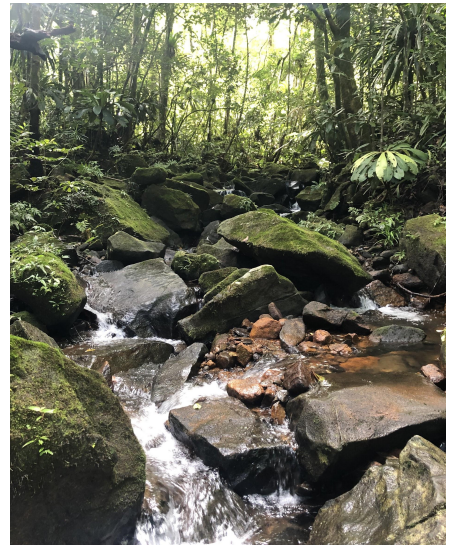


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A key positive that needs to be maintained is the **space that has been created for greater collaboration between stakeholders from different backgrounds, different sectors and with different ideas.**

These new partnerships can forge new ways of thinking that can promote more sustainable approaches to wildlife conservation and the associated wildlife economies in the future.

Inherently, we all know that **experiences are more important than things** but the world has got caught up in consumerism and COVID-19 lockdowns have broken this consumerism cycle, which should be used to highlight the importance of connecting to ourselves, to nature and to one another. We need to disconnect to reconnect.



As important as it is to maintain the positive impacts of the pandemic, there is a need for mitigation of the numerous negative impacts highlighted earlier and those that are potentially still to come.

As governments start working on economic recovery, there will be a **need for conservation watchdogs to ensure that environmental regulations are not sacrificed to allow for rapid growth and development.** The world will need conservation advocates to safeguard environmental standards and ensure sustainable regrowth and development going forward. If nothing else, the events of the past few months have been a **wake up call in terms of regulation, reporting and monitoring and the need to monitor the flow of wildlife and the impacts of these flows.** Regulations related to wildlife flows will need to be reassessed to mitigate future disasters and to ensure better management of the wildlife sector, both consumptive and non-consumptive.



# Impacts of COVID-19 on wildlife and wildlife economies in Africa

What is needed now is attention given to how we want to sell conservation after the pandemic. If we find the right angle, we will be able to continue to mobilise resources for conservation, especially in relation to the connection between wildlife and human health, and we will also be able to revitalise the interest of people in visiting parks and nature as they find themselves once again 'free'. We all have a role to play as we find innovative, creative ways to work now and in the future to diversify the wildlife economy to ensure more resilience for people and wildlife.



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