

Lessons from Africa's Wild Frontiers

By Wayne Visser

Birthplace of blood diamonds

We start our journey around the world in Africa, in the country known today as Zimbabwe. This is the place where I was born and spent my childhood years. At that time, however, the country was still called Rhodesia – so named after the colonialist Cecil Rhodes in the late 1800s. Rhodes, an English-born explorer turned entrepreneur and business magnate, is the focus of my first story – a lesson in the abuse of corporate power.

In 1871, Rhodes joined the diamond rush and headed to Kimberley in South Africa. By 1889, he had formed an effective monopoly through a strategic partnership with the London-based Diamond Syndicate, which agreed to control the world supply of diamonds – around 90% at one point – and thereby maintain high prices. In the same year, Rhodes established the British South Africa Company, which was empowered under royal charter to trade with African tribal leaders, as well as to form banks; to own, manage, grant or distribute land; and to raise a police force.

In return, the company agreed to develop the territory it controlled, to respect existing African laws, to allow free trade within its territory and to respect all religions. Four years later, however, the very same company had recruited its own army and invaded tribal king Lobengula's territory in what became known as the 1893 Matabele War. The troops and white settlers occupied the town and Bulawayo was declared a settlement under the rule of the British South Africa Company. Rhodes ordered that a new town be built on the ruins of Lobengula's royal place.

For me, the lesson to learn from Rhodes and his British South Africa Company is clear: when companies have too much power—either political power or economic power – they will tend to abuse that power to enrich themselves. The fusion of private economic interest with public political sanction is the ultimate toxic recipe for corporate irresponsibility. We see it in all the classic cases of business crimes against society and the environment, whether it is through the regressive political lobbying of the oil industry in the United States (going all the way back to Rockefeller's Standard Oil company), or the majority ownership of Shell by Nigeria's former military dictatorship government.

Man versus wild

My second story from Zimbabwe is about how greed and exploitation is decimating wildlife on the planet. I have a childhood memory of visiting Hwange National Park (then called Wankie), which is Zimbabwe's largest game reserve, a short plane-hop from Victoria Falls. Apart from the incredible wildlife we inevitably encountered – everything from elephants, giraffes and crocodiles to zebras, warthogs and monkeys –there was an incident early one morning that is branded in my memory. An antelope ran into the forecourt of the hotel, cut and bleeding and still entangled in a poacher's wire snare. The frightened deer was caught, the wire snare removed and the animal released back into the wild.

Little did I know at the time, but I had witnessed a potent symbol of another war that was already raging – between man and nature, conservation and development, environmental protection and community inclusion – between the value of biodiversity and the economics of greed. This was brought into even sharper contrast years later, in April 1990, when I returned to Zimbabwe for a pan-African Wildlife Management conference, organised by the student organisation AIESEC.

At that time, wildlife poaching – especially of elephant and rhino – was at horrific levels, and there was growing pressure under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to restrict the sale of ivory and other wildlife commodities. In Kenya alone,

the number of elephants had plummeted from 65,000 in 1979 to 17,000 in 1989. In a dramatic and controversial act, in 1989, Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi set fire to a 12-ton, 20-foot high pile of elephant tusks – a gesture to persuade the world to halt ivory trading.

The CITES-led international ban of ivory trade did eventually come into force in 1995, resulting in a dramatic recovery of elephant populations. In South Africa, the numbers more than doubled, rising from 8,000 to over 20,000 today. Now the problem is overpopulation in many game reserves, with consequent damage to the environment. As a result, in February 2008, the ban on the ivory trade in southern Africa (but not elsewhere) was lifted, sparking controversy among environmental groups, as poaching has once again started to rise.

Battling the sixth mass extinction

Today, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), there are between 470,000 and 690,000 African elephants in the wild, considerably down from an estimated 1.3 million in 1979, but by no means on the verge of extinction. In fact, they have moved from 'endangered' to 'vulnerable' the IUCN 'red list'. This is a real success story and I am convinced that these and other international regulatory frameworks are essential in trying to halt what scientists in *Nature* magazine (3 March 2011) have called the 'sixth mass extinction'.

But in order to do this effectively, we have to recognise that by far the biggest cause of species decline – which is now happening 100 to 1,000 times more rapidly than the natural 'background' rate – is not poaching. Rather, it is loss of habitat due to changes in land use; in other words, through converting wilderness and forests areas into farms, mines and urban areas. This is why I am excited by the recent move of the IUCN to create a 'red list' for threatened *ecosystems*. If we are able to protect and enhance the complex life support systems of regions and habitats, we are far more likely to win the battle against 'the great die off'.

No doubt, having protected areas (nature parks, wildlife reserves and wilderness areas), of which Hwange in Zimbabwe is one of 133,000 in the world, is part of the solution. But not only for physically protecting species and ecosystems. I believe they are crucial in creating the sort of affinity and respect for nature, of the kind that I experienced growing up in Zimbabwe, and which undoubtedly played some part in inspiring my later career in sustainable business.

Reflecting on my own childhood, I must confess that I worry sometimes about the new generation of urban city-raised children. Will they grow to love nature as well, or will they be alienated from it? Will the 'environment' be reduced to exhibition zoos, natural disasters and virtual reality games? When we have no personal experience of wilderness – of the kind described in George Monbiot's new book, *Feral* – do we lose our ability to care deeply about nature? For all our sakes, I hope not.

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