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Zimbabwe's Severe Poaching Crisis

Poaching is a problem that many hear about all around the world. It is a problem many have fought and rallied against, but things are getting worse. The situation is dire, the Earth is going through what many have deemed the sixth extinction. 41% of amphibians, 26% of mammals, 50% of primates, and one in every eight bird species face extinction - 18,000 species (Mckie). The earth is losing species that we don't even know exist. We need to change this by changing our behavior in order to stop it and eventually start to reverse it. While many people write this off – it's happening in Africa, the Congo, the ocean. People don't see how they could possibly be contributing to the situation or how they could possibly help it either. The answer however, is quite a lot. People can stop using single use plastics, donate to conservation efforts, dispose of waste properly, go to AZA accredited zoos (which help with conservation), help stop wasting resources, and a number of other things. In Zimbabwe, growing political and economic instability has put unprecedented pressure on the country's environment. Deforestation, poaching and unsustainable resource exploitation are destroying what was once among the best-managed park systems in Africa" (Barbee).

In Zimbabwe, there are many sanctuaries and conservations but gun use is becoming increasingly common as well as many other horrific methods of killing and poaching. Much of the conflict lies between people and animals. This is why AZA accredited zoos and other organizations are not just working on saving animals but working with people and bettering their lives. They work by the One World Concept which has the goal of a sustainable future for animals and people. It's three parts - according to Jessie Lowry, a conservationist at the Blank Park Zoo - which are Wildlife Management and recovery, conservation science, and supporting human populations that coexist with wildlife. Supporting communities near the wildlife, who can help protect the animals. There are already many groups which watch the wildlife around them, and they do it without proper gear. One way zoos help is to send tools and clothes and boots to help. They also create more projects which help give families a source of income and some go from poachers to protectors. Many natives only help poachers because they are trying to feed their families.

Zimbabwe consists of about 16.53 million people with around 67% residing in rural areas while the rest live in urban neighborhoods (Economics). There has been a large shift to rural due to some redistribution programs, which gave families land to farm. Currently there is a lot of political turmoil, which is causing a lot of problems for the people of Zimbabwe. Especially with their suffering sanitation and water quality. 33.3 of the 39 million hectares that make up Zimbabwe is cultivated and used in the growing of maize, cotton, soybeans, wheat, tobacco, roses and other cut flowers and vegetables. There is much variation but farm sizes are anywhere from 318 to 37 hectares including crops and grazing land. Zimbabwe's geography is composed of highlands and is found in Southern Africa with a mild to moderate climate. A typical family consists of around four people and the majority of families live in villages with mud and stick huts, and thatched or metal roofs. *Zadza* (maize meal, a thickened porridge) is popular like rice or pasta in other cultures, eaten with Vegetable stew, and beef or chicken is also common for those who afford it. Cooked in pots on an open fire, or a stove if they have the money. Education is scarce and limited and health care is not readily available. They are supposed to have access to clean water and sanitation but the system has been failing for a while. The country did not maintain the sanitation system so families go to the bathroom in the streets and their water is often tainted. "The average household

income is \$62 a month and unemployment exceeds 90 percent” (Fletcher) This is a large problem and why poaching can make a big difference to their lives. Often poachers don't need to offer that much money for help because these families are so impoverished and desperate.

According to the African Wildlife Foundation, “Africa is home to some of the most iconic wildlife, but illegal poaching might destroy it forever.” The Black Rhino, African Elephant, Mountain Gorilla, African Lion, and Grevy's Zebra are in serious danger due to several contributing factors. “The black Rhino population is down 97.6% since 1960, there are as many as 35,000 African Elephants killed every year, approximately 1,000 Mountain Gorillas remain, 43% of the lion population has been lost in as little as 21 years, and only around 2,000 of the Grevy's Zebra remain” (African Wildlife Foundation). Endangered animals are killed for a plethora of reasons, specific body parts, pelts and other things are sold illegally for large amounts of money on the black market. The rhino horn is believed to treat - but has not been proven to affect - hangovers, fever, cancer, infertility, and show high social status. It sells for around \$60,000 a pound (half a million for a single horn). Ivory is made into jewelry, utensils, trinkets, religious figurines and more. Ivory can fetch as much as \$1,000. Zebras are hunted for their unique pelts, mountain gorilla infants sell for around \$40,000, and Lions have lost a lot of territory and are mostly hunted in retaliation for preying on livestock because they have been forced closer to humans. These Highly coordinated and dangerous groups have Ak-47s, grenade launchers, night-vision goggles, gs and low-flying helicopters. Many efforts are made to stop poaching, but it is never enough. If trends are to continue these animals could be completely gone within our lifetime (African Wildlife Foundation). Efforts are being made all over the continent to protect wildlife, conserve land, educate the public, and provide alternative livelihoods. Zimbabwe is no exception, to this continent-wide epidemic. They are actually one of the most affected countries, especially because of their political climate, low wages, and high poverty and unemployment. That being said there are a lot of efforts being made to stop poaching and preserve these wonderful species.

Conservationists have also been working to get communities involved. The more value they see in these animals the more they will care and be willing to help save them. There are several programs being used to get communities involved and help with money problems which might lead them to help poachers or poach themselves. One program is a community pot. Donations and money from tourists go in this pot and depending on the amount of poaching in a community's area, they get money from the pot to help their people. If there is a lot of poaching they don't get any money, and the more effort a community puts in to stop poaching the more money they get from the pot. Another program has been to create job opportunities. They employ these people on task forces which watch for poachers and protect these beautiful creatures. By helping with money, these people can afford to feed their families and don't need money from poaching or helping poachers. Most of why these people help poachers or poach themselves is because they need money to feed their families. Providing them with a source of income helps with this problem and creates a value in keeping these animals alive. Organizations are also working to reduce conflict between the animals and farmers. The organizations relocate the animals as an alternative to the farmers killing them. They are also using beehives to protect farmer's crops from elephants, which won't go near bees. Conservationists are getting extremely creative and doing whatever they can to help protect these endangered and valuable species.

Another way many organizations are fighting against poaching is by increasing sanctuaries and security as well as surveillance tools. A sanctuary in Zimbabwe has implanted a system which tracks all vehicles within the park. If there are any vehicles that shouldn't be in there, they can see them and stop them before anything happens to any of their animals. This has helped deter many poachers and their response time has gone from twenty or thirty minutes to just seven minutes. The Zimbabwe government already spends around forty million a year in efforts to stop poaching, but it is estimated that they will need

around twenty million more dollars. Drones have also become a useful and effective tool to decrease poaching and monitor rhinos. One conservancy employs highly trained men, all expert trackers, supremely fit and equipped with semi-automatic rifles and radios. They have a “substantial network of paid informants in the surrounding communities and beyond; four 4x4 vehicles and 12 motorbikes; and nearly 100 armed scouts employed” (Fletcher), yet even this is not enough. The poachers they are up against are now equipped with “high-powered hunting rifles with silencers to shoot the rhinos, and AK-47s to ward off the rangers. Sometimes the poachers use AK-47s against rhinos too. In fact, in 2014 one rhino was hit 23 times” (Fletcher). These poachers are well funded as rhino horn is worth \$60,000 dollars a kilogram making a decent sized horn worth around half a million dollars. They also show extreme brutality and even if they are caught face minimal consequences. The poachers have even started using poison. “One poacher was caught after laying oranges and cabbages laced with the pesticide Temik in the path of a rhino – Temik is nicknamed “Two-step” because that is how many steps an animal takes before dying. Another poacher planned to poison a waterhole, but was thwarted by an informer” (Fletcher). Unfortunately, some aren’t caught in time and can cause immense damage. As long as there is a desire and a market for these poached goods no amount of security will ever be enough - even armed guards travelling with these creatures 24/7. Nothing will ever be enough as poachers will just adapt and evolve and update their technology. Ultimately, we need to find ways to decrease interest and stop the demand for these materials.

One solution that several groups have been using as a last-ditch effort to save rhinos is to dehorn them. The process is harmless and painless for the animal. The animal is shot with a sort of tranquilizer so while it is awake it doesn't feel anything. A blindfold and ear plugs are put in place to reduce stress for the animals. It is then a matter of cutting off the horn, this is done with saws typically and they don't go deep enough to cause injury. They leave the growth plates in tact and The horn actually grows back in about 2 years and must be cut off again. This solution can really only be done in sanctuaries or conservatories, and only smaller ones. The dehorning is all or nothing, if they were to only do some of them those with horns would have an advantage in a fight. This is why it can't be done to wild rhinos because there would be no way to make sure they were all taken care of and it is also an “expensive and invasive [procedure] but we believe it is a necessary evil,” says Galliers, noting that it costs about £580 [\$ 658.23] to safely dehorn a rhino”(Carnie). Dehorning the animals doesn't affect their eating or any other part of their lifestyle. They also work to keep it safe for all involved and avoid stress for the animals. This solution unfortunately can't be used on elephants because they use their tusks to strip bark from trees and need them to eat and protect themselves. Dehorning is unfortunately not always enough of a deterrent for poachers as they “will kill dehorned rhinos for any residual horn. In February 2015 they shot a six-month-old calf for just 30 grams of horn” (Fletcher). They also can't do anything with the horn. Not even send it to a university where they could do research and possibly prove that there is no medicinal value, decreasing the need for the horn, and therefore poaching. This solution is helping, but it is certainly not enough.

Another solution is called the Pink Horn Project. Lorinda Hern is the founder of the Rhino Rescue Project which is sabotaging poacher's bounties. “The Rhino Rescue Project is a specialist team of conservationists who are combatting the hunter's sophisticated techniques with a special pink dye” (Gelareh Darabi). The process is similar to dehorning only instead of removing the rhino's horns once they are sedated safely, they drill holes and infuse both horns with a pink dye mixture which renders the horn worthless. The mixture has a dye similar to that used in banking which cannot be removed. It also has an ingredient which is harmless to the animal, but dangerous for human consumption, or touch. On the outsides the horns look normal but they are completely worthless once harvested. To get the word out they are also putting up signs which show that the rhinos have been treated with it, so poachers won't go after the rhinos in that area. Even if they don't treat every single rhino in an area, all of them are more protected because they all look the same on the outside. The poachers wouldn't know which ones were

treated and most poachers won't risk poaching when it might end up being worthless. This solution also can't be used for elephants because of the way their tusks are constructed and what they are made of. Rhino horns are made of keratin, the same as people's fingernails, their horns are porous so the dye spreads well and infuses with the whole horn. Once the horn is dyed it is worth no money, so it is a great deterrent to poachers. This solution seems to be effective so far, but it is still not enough.

All of these methods are working, but they are working too slowly. Our animals are dying at an alarming rate, being slaughtered for just one small part of them. We need to focus on conflict resolution - resolving the conflict that people in Zimbabwe are having with these animals. Resolving the conflict of their impoverished living conditions, which makes them much more willing to help poachers slaughter the animals for money to feed their families. Resolving the conflict at the root.

This cause is important and while these animals seem light-years apart from ourselves, they are not so far away. There is a lot that people all over the world can do - little things which make a world of difference. Everything helps, a donation small or large to any organization which works toward conservation. Anything can help save the life of an animal - a species - in desperate need. Imagine a world without Rhinos, Elephants, Lions, Tigers, Gorillas, Zebras and so many others, which are slightly to severely endangered. Imagine telling future generations about these creatures, showing them pictures, remembering these magnificent species. Then having to tell them that our generations killed them, killed them all. Every single one, down to the last calf and cub. Is that a world you want to live in? Is that something you can live with? Actions have consequences and unless things change, and change quickly, this is a very real possible future.

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