



This is a team of Conservancy Officers in Zimbabwe; notice the fully automatic AK rifles. These men are serious about stopping poaching. They were kind enough to allow me a picture with them. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Taking on poachers

This column is part of an ongoing series that will appear here monthly. Many aspects of Africa, wildlife, culture, and safari life will be covered here, along with a few hunting tales along the way.

Poachers really are the low life of society, as they give all ethical hunters a bloody nose. In the States, we have game wardens, and federally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to keep poachers and game smugglers at bay, but Africa has a unique problem.

To clear up a few misconceptions about the hunting industry in Africa, I should point out that without sport hunting, all the wildlife in Africa would be gone. Hunters, and their dollars, are what keep the animals safe.

Take for example an elephant. Most animal rights groups would have you believe that elephants are on the verge of extinction. Zimbabwe has a population of around 100,000 elephants, and they are overpopulated in some areas. An elephant eats 500 pounds of food a day, mostly from trees. Basically, as human population expands, elephant territory decreases, and the elephants will literally eat themselves out of house and home.

Zimbabwe allows hunters to take 500 elephants a year, at a license cost of \$10,000 each. That does not include the fees paid to the hunt staff, and trophy fees paid to the concession holder, that can exceed an additional \$50,000. This money gives value to the animals.

In a place like Kenya, hunting is prohibited, meaning no hunter dollars to the economy, and nobody to protect the wildlife, and the result is the animals are all endangered because poachers



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

run amuck.

No game meat is wasted in Africa. The safari operator will process all game meat, and what is not eaten by staff and clients, is provided to the local bush Africans, who desperately need it for protein for their families. The locals know that protecting the game animals keep them with employment in these safari camps, and meat is provided to the communities, so they help protect from the poachers.

There are two types of poachers in the bushveld. The first type uses snares to entrap whatever game happens by, getting caught up in the snare. As the animal tries to escape, the snare tightens, leaving the animal with a very gruesome death.

The poacher will then crudely process the game animal and sell the meat to local people, often times for less than a dollar a pound. Many of his customers do not have access to a safari operation, so a buck a pound is a fair price to pay for food.

The other type of poacher is the one seeking riches, killing elephant for their ivory and rhino for their horn. Rhino poachers have decimated the world populations, mostly because of some ridiculous myths that the horn cures cancer and hangovers and can be used as an aphrodisiac or an



This is a pile of captured snare traps collected by the Conservancy Officers. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

exotic party drug.

Rhino horn is more valuable than gold, averaging \$100,000 per kg, and a horn weighs about 3kg. If you were to guess what country was driving this organized poaching crime, you would probably say China, but in this case, you missed the boat. Vietnam is driving this crime ring.

Hunter's dollars are fighting these poachers. In Zimbabwe, the Malilange Trust was established, funded by hunter's bucks. This trust, through their Rhino Conservation Officers, have been successful in reintroducing the rhino. In the 21 years since the program has started, the black rhino population has increased 729%, while the white rhino population has grown 532%.

The firm we hunted with, Desfountain Safaris, employs several security people, year-round, to patrol their 100,000-acre concession for poachers. In addition, the safari company also hosts members of

the Rhino Conservancy on their lands.

These people are so serious about catching poachers that all operators have to call in by radio, every time a shot is fired. Otherwise, the Conservancy Officers respond to the area of the shot, assuming it was fired by a poacher. It seems that everyone I ran into while visiting, understands the value of the wild game and the hunter, and works as a team to protect the animals.

My wife and I ran in to several teams of these Conservancy Officers while we were hunting. All were very courteous and friendly to us, but rest assured, they were some of the most capable cops I have ever seen. All of them live in the bushveld for long periods of time. Sleeping in tents and surviving on whatever provisions the game department provides. It is not an easy life, as they respond to shots 24 hours a day since many poachers operate at night.

The officers we ran into did not have body armor or duty belts. What they did carry was AK-47, fully automatic weapons. You see, poaching carries some very long prison sentences. A poacher of a rhino can see a sentence of 18 years in jail, and a \$120,000 in fines. Because of those stiff penalties, many poachers will take a chance on fighting it out with the Conservancy Officers. Big mistake from what I have seen.

There are countries in Africa, including Botswana and the Congo, where it is legal to shoot and kill poachers if they are caught in the act. These regulations, often referred to as shoot-to-kill policies, have been widely discussed and are a very controversial topic in Africa.

The conservation war comes with human casualties on both sides. The International Ranger Federation reports that 269 officers were killed across Africa between 2012 and

2018, most by poachers. During the same time, Mozambique reports 476 poachers were killed there by officers, so the battle rages on.

No good comes from poaching, no matter what country were are talking about. The important thing to remember, without ethical hunters and their dollars, there would be no wildlife to protect, and Africa is a perfect example.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

10 SOUTH SELIG AVE
 MONTROSE, COLORADO 81401
 970-249-4226