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DESTINATIONS

Is Safari Guiltless?

There Are Serious Problems That You Might Not Be Thinking About

By *Ethan Gelber, GORP Editor*

On an African safari, your jeep's door is sometimes all that stands between you and the wildlife you have come to see. That door can seem so terribly thin when you roll to within 10 feet of a hyena and can hear its teeth grinding against the bone of a recent slaughter. But the thin skin of that jeep is more effective than you realize and distances you from more than just the claws of a lion.



How much do you really know about the harsh reality of life and, more importantly, death in the wilds of Africa? And, as you ponder the circle of life from the ease of your seat, what do you really know about the effect that you yourself are having on it? What do you know about the politics that made it possible for you to get where you are? What do you know about the impact you and all of humankind are having on the lives of the animals?

There Is Still Hope

In Africa, the 1990s have been a period of wildlife recovery. After more than a decade of devastating poaching, many of Africa's most famous animals — elephants, lions, white and black rhinos, gorillas — have been pulled from the brink of extinction. Protected national and private parks, improved understanding of animal lifestyles and needs, coordinated international lobbying, public relations pressures, and so much more have resulted in increases in the numbers of many of the almost decimated animal populations. Just when many people thought it was too late, there are now sure signs of hope.

But hope should not mean relaxing vigilance. Just as the attention focused on animal welfare issues and conservation has borne positive fruit, so also do the devastating effects of war, increases in the human population, overgrazing animals, tourism, and much more require ongoing attention and our redirected concern. That, plus wisdom on the part of travelers choosing to allow the thin skin of a jeep to distance the bitter reality they may be playing a part in prolonging.

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A baby rhino at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust orphanage

Think about the Following

Endangered animals, especially predators like the big cats of Africa, continue to be threatened by a dramatic reduction in genetic diversity (more than a decade of heavy poaching has resulted in inbreeding and threatens the strength of the species), a dwindling habitat lost to humans and grazing herds of domesticated animals, and direct conflicts with humans (like smugglers, and commercial and survival poachers).

Think about some of this when you are watching that lolling lion or that cute baby rhino. And, because it is important to understand something about the efforts being made to battle the destructive effects around us, take a moment to learn about the [international, national, and local initiatives](#) being taken to secure lasting wildlife survival.

Commercial Smugglers and Poachers

On April 9, 1999, in Namibia, the first legal sale of over 12 tons of ivory saw the end of an international nine-year ban on such trade. Four days later, Zimbabwe auctioned off 20 tons of tusks, and four days after that, Botswana saw 18 tons go to the market.

These sales were sanctioned by a committee of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora](#) (CITES). CITES, initially agreed to in 1975 and now signed by 150 countries, bans "commercial international trade in an agreed list of endangered species" and regulates and monitors trade in others that might be endangered. The big question is whether or not renewed ivory sales open up a can of worms best left shut. Although CITES removed the elephant from the endangered list of the southern African countries in 1997, there is concern that conservation controls are still inadequate and abuses will continue.

Commercial poaching is still the most serious threat to the survival of Africa's great animals.

Survival Poachers

While illegal poaching is still problem number one, add to that the poaching by many of Africa's fishermen, pastoralists, and herbalists — those who have traditionally used natural resources to stay alive — who now find themselves illegally depleting protected resources.

Human Land Exploitation

Africa's rangelands are not what they used to be. Overgrazing, poor crop management, depletion of soil quality, escalating demand on a limited water supply, and the increased use of arable land to feed growing

numbers of humans have all cut into the resources available to animals. Now there is a new problem: leleshwa weed. The kudzu of Africa, leleshwa weed spreads quickly, is difficult to control, not eaten by local fauna, and chokes edible grassland flora. Scarce land is now even more scarce and competition for it even more fierce.

Tourism

Mass tourism in Africa has been on the rise. Over the years, delicate natural resources have been trampled and normally feral animals made dangerously accustomed to the wowed and eagerly shutterbugging humans who surrounded them on numerous occasions. Guide services have not always been fully qualified and business practices have been questionable.

Other Threats

Large tracts of beautiful forest are routinely cleared by loggers and road builders. Once-protected habitats are now easily accessible. Others are practically destroyed.

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Is Safari Guiltless?

There May Be Solutions

By Ethan Gelber, GORP Editor

The following is a list of some of the more important foundations, programs, unions, centers, and conventions that have preserved the gorgeous land and incomparable animals you see when you go on safari. Serious questions can be raised about whether such beauty would exist today without these organizations. Since it still does, new questions are being asked about how long it will last . . . even with them. There are no good answers to these questions. But we can learn a lot by throwing our support behind work spearheaded by:



- ▶ [American Wildlife Foundation](#)
- ▶ [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora](#)
- ▶ [World Wildlife Fund for Nature](#)
- ▶ [World Conservation Union](#)
- ▶ [World Conservation Monitoring Center and TRAFFIC](#)
- ▶ [Other Funds and Foundations](#)

African Wildlife Foundation

The African Wildlife Foundation (see the [Web site](#)) has labored at a grassroots level since 1961 to "protect [African] invaluable natural resources." In a coordinated effort that includes park employees and representatives of local communities, every attempt has been made to "safeguard wildlife and wilderness areas." Strategies are long-term and include species and ecosystem conservation, community conservation, training, institutional development, education, conservation, private-sector involvement, and more.

Some particularly beneficial and excellent projects include:

- the **International Gorilla Conservation Program**, an initiative to create a sustainable environment for the conservation of the world's 600 or so surviving mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo;
- the **Amboseli Elephant Research Project**, a 30-year-old effort (the world's longest-running study of elephants), led by Cynthia Moss, to record the lives of Kenya's [Amboseli National Park](#)'s 900 elephants;
- a **rhinoceros monitoring project**, keeping a watchful eye on the 2,500 remaining animals (down from 65,000 in the 1970s) in Kenya's [Tsavo National Park](#) and South Africa's Madikwe Game Reserve;
- the **Cheetah Conservation Fund** in Namibia, a

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program to protect domestic animals from cheetahs as an important step in protecting cheetahs from animal domesticators;

- the **Community Conservation Service Center** in Arusha, Tanzania, an effective facility designed to aid conservation programs throughout Africa;
- the **Kenyan Professional Safari Guide Association**, a public and private-sector collaborative effort to certify safari guides and drivers and thereby "secure responsible business practices."



Stacks of elephant jawbones

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (see the [Web site](#)) recognizes that extinction "is a natural feature of the evolution of life on Earth." However, it responds to the fact that "in recent times, humans have been responsible for the loss of most of the animals and plants that have disappeared." This has principally been due to the coopting of habitat as the human population expands, land exploitation goes unchecked, and trade aided by improved transport despoils Africa of its wildlife wealth (alive and dead).

The most recent CITES victory is less than a month old. In mid April, Cameroon, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Kenya officially withdrew a proposal to CITES that would have allowed for limited elephant population control. The threat of renewed poaching and ivory trade may have played a part in saving the elephant for another two years.

CITES and other organizations continue to encourage improved law enforcement, and work on coordinated community involvement in support of conservation through benefit sharing and corruption control. For example, six African countries — Congo, Kenya, Lesotho, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia — reached an agreement last year on cross-border operations led by an "African Interpol" to battle against wildlife crime.

Other work projects that have developed out of the agenda set by CITES, include family planning programs, and stricter controls on "bush meat" (a vital source of sustenance for rural Africans, but now in demand as a specialty item around the world).

World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF)

The World Wildlife Fund For Nature (see the [Web site](#)) is the world's largest and most experienced independent conservation organization, with around 5 million supporters and a vast global network.



**We love getting close to animals . . .
but is that the best thing
for the animals?**

World Conservation Union (IUCN)

For more than 50 years, the World Conservation Union (see the [Web site](#)) has labored to create a world in which nature is valued and preserved. With hundreds of partners, the IUCN has pursued its mission to "influence, encourage, and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable." This has been particularly important in the debate around reconciling population dynamics with conservation needs. To this end, IUCN has set up geographical information systems to assist many of Africa's national parks in monitoring flora and fauna. Training programs have helped keep local managers informed about the best way to integrate social issues into natural resource management.

World Conservation Monitoring Center and TRAFFIC

The World Conservation Monitoring Center (see the [Web site](#)) and TRAFFIC (see the [Web site](#)) are both joint programs of the WWF and the IUCN. Both are wildlife monitoring programs designed to make sure that wildlife trade is kept to sustainable levels as determined through national and international conventions and agreements, and to provide accurate information about biodiversity throughout the world.

Other Funds and Foundations

- The **David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust** (see the [Web site](#)) is a Kenya-based organization working "for the protection and preservation of the black rhinoceros and for anti-poaching and the elephant cause."
- The **David Shepherd Conservation Foundation** (see the [Web site](#)) similarly works "for the survival of tigers, elephants, rhinos, and other critically endangered mammals in the wild."
- The world-famous **Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International** (see the [Web site](#)) has grown into one of the largest private employers in Rwanda and is an important contributor to the local economy. Through anti-poaching, research, education, and economic development programs, the DFGFI has made strides in the conservation and protection of the endangered mountain gorilla and its war-torn habitat in East Central Africa.

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