

A close-up portrait of a Black man in a military uniform, looking directly at the camera. He is positioned behind a large pile of dry, tangled grass or brush. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a small building.

# When Tourism Stops

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC





The first few weeks of global lockdown due to Covid-19 was almost celebrated by people across the world as we looked at the ‘surface success’ of wildlife walking in empty streets, clear waters returning to the canals of Venice, and smog clouds lifting. There was a spark of hope yet at the same time a glimmer of a future apocalyptic horror. The only truth to come out of this travesty is that the fate of the world is in the hands of mankind. But is it as simple as just staying home?

The initial success of wildlife walking the streets, clear skies and more, was soon overshadowed by mankind once again; poaching and the illegal trade in wildlife. With travel halted, parks had to close to tourism, rangers wages had to be cut, conservation fees dried up, things changed, and changed rapidly. Stories came through of poaching, an increase in bushmeat hunting, conservation projects shutting down, wildlife rangers losing their jobs. Whilst it is easy to sit in our Western culture and point the finger, we must also remember the significance of context...people on the ground have been left jobless, cashless, and bushmeat is sometimes the only way to turn. This may not be a justification in itself, but it does provide a setting. We’ve asked some of our partners in Africa about the impact of the pandemic as seen first-hand by them.

**Alex Walker, creator of Serian, a charismatic collection of exclusive and intimate safari camps in the prime wildernesses of Kenya and Tanzania:**

For nearly a century Africa has warmly welcomed safari enthusiasts, travellers, artists, and photographers to celebrate her beauty, smile with her people, and marvel at her otherworldly sunsets.

Now Africa finds herself in the midst of an unprecedented and regrettably, mounting, crisis. With each new day come new challenges, new stressors and new realities. The Covid virus and the subsequent global lockdown meant the immediate cessation of any tourism activity. The life blood of tens of thousands has been brutally ruptured and there is no way of knowing when we will return to ‘business as usual’.

To bring this reality into sharp relief; our camps have been empty since late February and with postponements and cancellations we have zero income for the foreseeable future. June through August traditionally constitutes 65% of our annual income; we currently project an annual turnover at 13 to 15% of normal. A

core element of essential maintenance staff remain in camp, scrubbing, cleaning and fixing; rotating in teams preparing for our next guests.

In Africa social responsibility falls to those in work, they support large extended families. A considerable portion of our crew are employed locally; sourced from the rural communities in the areas where we operate, primarily for their intimate bush skills, their tremendous hard work and their ease at living in these remote environments. Those not able to survive from subsistence farming, will return to traditional roles as hunter-gatherers amongst other means to find a way of feeding their families.

Thus, the animals are more vulnerable than ever before to poaching. The immediate vacuum of game viewing vehicles traversing these wild areas, coupled with reduced budgets for anti-poaching units as a result of a lack of tourism-generated fees to the park authorities, creates a perfect storm for the bush-meat trade.

In discussions with Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) and the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) — a major partner of TANAPA’s working in Tanzania — we have agreed to build on a pilot and highly successful Serengeti National Park de-snaring programme. We have deployed our trackers and guides, under TANAPA management, to further supplement the de-snaring teams already in place and thereby provide a critical presence while undertaking anti-poaching and de-snaring work. This temporary solution helps our staff, the wilderness, and wildlife upon which we rely for our tourism. Our challenge now lies in sourcing sustainable funding until things return to some form of new normal.

**Andy Hogg, Founder of The Bushcamp Company in the South Luangwa National Park, Zambia:**

The role that tourism plays in protecting and maintaining the world’s wild places should not be underestimated. The damage to the world’s tourism industry due to Covid-19 has been well documented. It is clear that Africa’s safari-operators have not escaped the massive economic and social disruption to their businesses.

Many governments rely on tourism revenue to fund the maintenance of national park infrastructure and to pay for such vital conservation activities. The poaching threat to Africa’s wildlife has risen and has been highlighted as one of the major impacts of the decline in tourist numbers. National Park authorities are having to work with reduced ►



manpower and fewer resources, so this threat to wildlife is real. However, what many fail to appreciate is the huge impact that is being felt in the human communities that have also come to rely upon a thriving tourism industry.

The success and growth of tourism enterprises in recent years has resulted in rapid growth of human settlements that adjoin many national parks and attractions. This is particularly true in South Luangwa where the local population has risen rapidly, and has begun to overwhelm the facilities and resources of the area.

The local economy is almost entirely driven by tourism to the national park, and the community relies heavily upon safari companies to provide employment, or as a market for locally produced products. With limited public finances there is also a growing reliance on safari companies to fund and support community and conservation projects, particularly in the fields of education and health.

Unfortunately, with virtually no tourist income, and with few visits from potential donors, many safari companies are having to re-assess their financial commitments and may not be able to maintain the high levels of social responsibility and contribution.

Already the knock-on effects of financial hardship are being seen. In recent months electricity and other fuel costs have increased considerably. Unable to pay their bills, the local people are now reverting to using firewood, and the inevitable acceleration in de-forestation can be seen as a result of this. Unable to afford basic foodstuffs people are forced to revert to meat poaching activities, especially snaring. Dwindling supplies of medical equipment and drugs in local clinics have resulted in fewer resources to treat other common ailments such as malaria.

Until revenue streams start to normalise, and tourism returns, these problems faced by local communities will only get worse.

**Pierre and Maria Bester, owners of Masoala Forest Lodge situated in North East Madagascar:**

In some high-volume tourism destinations, and perhaps over-visited remote locations such as Kilimanjaro and Machu Pichu, positive social and environmental effects

have been noted with the temporary halt in tourism. However, in low volume, nature-tourism destinations, the effects have not been positive, resulting instead in increased poverty and pressures on both the local communities and the environment. Masoala in Madagascar falls into this second category.

Tourism income motivates governments to protect what tourists come to see. Without this income, governments can be tempted to lose interest or look for other sources of income, such as sales of natural resources. Less tourism in Madagascar is likely to reduce the level of protection of the environment, including the enforcement of the law when it comes to illegal logging and slash and burn agriculture.

The presence of tourists in remote protected areas also serves as a deterrent to illegal activities and further incentive to government agencies to enforce wildlife laws.

The impact on local rural communities through the loss of income from tourism is an additional problem. Tourism provides employment, the purchasing of local products and services, and provides funding for community and environmental projects. This income, directly to remote communities, provides an alternative to the harvesting of natural resources. Without this, the human pressure on the environment increases.

Like most lodges worldwide, Masoala Forest Lodge is currently closed due to the Covid-19 crisis, and must remain so, until the travel restrictions are lifted and tourism restarts. We are continuing to employ as many of our staff as we can, which amounts to only 20 out of a total of 60 staff, on a shift basis. With each employee supporting an average family of 5, this leaves 200 people without income. In this remote area, there is no prospect of alternative jobs or financial aid.

The closure of the lodge has also halted the purchasing of local products and services from the local communities. Projects, funded by the lodge, that would cease without our continued support, include; a village pre-school, where we provide free meals, basic education and child-care for the village pre-school age children and the support of the village woman's foundation. ►

**“There is a growing reliance on safari companies to fund and support community and conservation projects.”**







There is no doubt that no tourism for too long a period of time will lead to the inevitable degradation of this pristine area. Tourism is essential to prevent an irreplaceable piece of untouched nature suffering irrevocable harm.

In order to mitigate this potential damage, and to assist us in supporting the local community and environmental projects, we have initiated a crowd funding campaign. We have used this fund to purchase staple food for over 40 families and to continue with the village and beach clean-up projects.

One of the positives we will hopefully take away from this pandemic might be the conversations underlining the value of our last remaining Eden's. We remain in hope that nature-tourism businesses worldwide will not only survive but will become the focus of the travel industry.

This needs to happen if we want our grandchildren to have an opportunity to experience what gives us so much peace and joy.

**Derek Joubert a National Geographic Explorer and the CEO of Great Plains Conservation:**

The air is cleaner. Dolphins are swimming through Venice. Nature is fighting back. These are all things we heard in the news as secondary responses to the pandemic and while some are actually true, we have to be extremely careful about furthering these alternative facts and opinions. Yes I agree that mass tourism and clogged up air as a result of hundreds of thousands of air travellers flitting from Miami to Paris to go shopping on the Champs-Élysées is totally unnecessary and responsible for a lot of the global pollution and change we have seen. The irony of thousands of people descending on France for the Paris Climate Agreement meetings in private and government jets was not lost on me, nor on others who have been calling for travel bans in the name of the environment. So the Pandemic lockdowns were the perfect proof of concept for this and for us all.

However, as travel and tourism has been brought to a standstill, many wilderness areas are left vacant and workers left with uncertainty of personal income. This 'perfect storm' of conditions is leaving many endangered animals highly vulnerable to wildlife crime. Of the 120 lions researchers were studying in a park in Uganda, only two remain. Rafiki the famous gorilla was shot. 12 rangers died in Virunga in a running battle with poachers. A park in South Africa where rangers were in lock down returned

to only 20% of the wildlife remaining. The rest had been turned into bush-meat.

This is the story, from the Cape to Chad, from Gabon to Mozambique, I am hearing about the devastating slaughter of the wildlife across Africa, and each, has one root cause. The tourism was stopped.

It's only when we lose something dear that we understand how precious it was to us. Eco tourism feeds about \$50 billion a year into Africa, and a good deal goes to communities. Much more stays behind in the form of philanthropy, and one in ten African's works in tourism. Each of them, according to the United Nation's statistics, brings home the money and benefits to an additional eight dependants. This is a huge economic driver in Africa. The Covid-19 pandemic's ripple effects have led to an economic collapse, the stoppage of all tourism and that in turn is leading to millions of acres of wild lands being left vacant and vulnerable to poaching.

**“Millions of acres of wild lands being left vacant and vulnerable to poaching.”**

Our Project Ranger campaign was started to fill a critical gap in the wildlife monitoring, surveying, and anti-poaching operations of existing NGO's in Africa. This aims to support rangers and supplement their salaries, holding the front line of conservation while the world sorts itself out and until travel can begin again.

**Calvin Cottar from Cottar's Safaris in Kenya:**

Two months after the Covid induced collapse of the tourism industry, we on the frontline of the Mara conservancies were seeing tragedies for both humans and wildlife.

Individuals depending on conservation, income for their survival, were suddenly struggling to make ends meet as tourism operators lost the capability to pay conservancy leases resulting in an increase in poaching. This has however presented a new opportunity, in that this crisis is forcing the tourism and conservation philanthropic 'giving' industries to step up and put funds where they would not have been prioritised pre-covid — biodiversity conservation leases and easements.

There is far more at stake than the survival of a few Mara Conservancies here. For years we have been building up





trust, with the singular purpose of demonstrating how wildlife can be valued in a way that pulls in enough income for poor landowners without having to monetize wildlife body parts; trophies, ivory and recreational hunting. So yes, while there are real impacts from the crisis such as increased poaching and poverty, the true casualty will be the trust that has been built up over the years that this is a viable solution, and collapse of the socio-economic experiment. If this happens, there will be far reaching and probably terminal impacts for conservation of wildlife across the continent in the future.

The Mara conservancies, tourism operators and multiple wildlife conservation NGO partners have — thankfully — managed to find some funding to keep the conservancies from failing in the next 8 to 10 months, but then what?

It is vital for the tourism industry inside and on the edges of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, that are not currently in the program to now join it and start contributing to leasing land for conservancy. In addition, government would be wise to give landowners some kind of tax break for securing the precious national asset called ‘wildlife’ on their land, as well as developing and enforcing ‘spatial land use plans’ that are strong enough to realistically counter short term political cycles and the inevitable elite capture of prime sites in or on the edges of National protected areas; we have to cast the net of tourism opportunity and benefits far wider than we have been, and in doing so not only secure the wildlife but also help pull millions of people out of abject poverty.

**Andrea Heydlauff Chief Marketing and Communications Officer for African Parks:**

There is no question that these are unprecedented and devastating times. And this is the year that made our connectedness and dependability upon nature excruciatingly clear. There is scientific proof of the link between the rise of infectious - and largely zoonotic- diseases with our destruction of habitats and our consumption of wildlife, and what Covid-19 has demonstrated is that funding and actions needed to protect nature and prevent future pandemics are far less costly than living through future ones.

When the world entered into global lockdown, we knew it was imperative that African Parks continued to carry out our obligations to our Government partners, and to global society in fulfilling our conservation mandates in a

responsible manner. Historically, we have done this in the face of adversity, including threats ranging from regional instability and international terrorism to outbreaks of the Ebola virus, and rampant diseases like malaria and HIV. We did the same throughout 2020 and will until we get through this.

Africa’s response to the pandemic was rapid and seemingly efficient. Lockdowns were initiated in most countries and tourism came to a dramatic standstill. At African Parks we immediately recognised our important role to play in helping to curtail the spread of this virus, especially to the vulnerable communities that live in and around the parks. In an effort to reduce the spread of the virus we distributed over 65,000 masks to staff and community members. In addition, 5,000 litres of soap, 285 litres of bleach, and 223 bottles of hand sanitiser were distributed to health centres, schools, and other community centres; and we assembled more than 630 handwashing stations which were placed in clinics, schools and community centres around the parks. We also conducted awareness and sensitisation campaigns reaching at least 135,800 people in local communities around the parks under our management.

We were fortunate this year however that all the 19 parks under our management remained fully operational over the year – not one person lost their job (we employ almost 6,000 full and part time staff, 98% of whom are from local communities) – and not one ranger missed one day of patrols. We were able to bring on two new parks – W National Park in Benin and Nyungwe National Park in Rwanda, as well as expand our footprint with Chinko in the Central African Republic. Elephants, rhinos, lions and cheetahs continued to increase in numbers while poaching was kept at bay. And most importantly, these parks continued to provide safety, as well as ecological, social, and economic benefits for thousands of people.

While tourism came to a standstill, our core business did not – that being protecting and managing national parks for the benefit of society. We are hopeful moving into 2021, with an ambitious goal of protecting 30 parks by 2030. Because what is not managed, will be lost. And that is why our mission matters now more than ever: protecting nature is truly a matter of our own survival.

*Photography courtesy of African Parks, credits; Naude Heunis, Marcus Westberg, Mia Collis, Annegre Bosman, Scott Ramsay, Tacdir Amade, Raphael de Laage. ■*