Truth Matters for Conservation and the Environment

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Abstract

There is an understandable, but ultimately misguided temptation of some environmentalists to cling to any explanation which appears to strengthen their case. One such recent example is the attempt to claim that the proceeds of illegal trade in ivory may support and fund international terrorism. But enduring policy decisions are dependent on mutually-agreed and established facts, so rigorous fact-checking and sustaining the highest standards of professional integrity remain essential. Truth not only continues to matter; it remains the biggest weapon and shield for all wildlife conservationists and environmental scientists in a world of increasingly wanton, politically-motivated myth-making.

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In the current “post-truth” environment, it behoves conservation professionals, to work even harder to substantiate assertions, or debunk myths peddled by others in connection to global environmental change, even if misleading stories appear to support the cause of conservation. And few stories illustrate that need better than the still-rumbling debate about a supposed strong link between ivory trading and terrorism.

It goes without saying that poaching and wildlife trafficking in Africa are top conservation issues, causing a major decline in the population of elephants, as well as other species. It is also incontestable that the crimes associated with such illegal activities also raise security

concerns; the question is which concerns, and what is, specifically, their security impact. Interpol, the international criminal police organisation, and the United Nations Environment Programme published last year their "*Strategic Report: Environment, Peace and Security–A Convergence of Threats",* which alleged a link between ivory poaching and trafficking and terrorism; the report claimed that proceeds from the trade sustain many illegal activities including terrorism and that these amount to $91–$258 billion annually (INTERPOL-UN Environment 2016).

As an exercise in attracting deserved attention to the scourge of wildlife crime, the alleged link to terrorism worked well; the report received plenty of coverage. And the argument also fitted well with broader and more lingering stereotypes some of us have about Africa, such as the suggestion that the continent is poorly governed and is increasingly a breeding ground for terrorism.

However, there was a very rough-and-ready misreading of the INTERPOL-UN Environment report – as news agencies are wont to do – to state that ivory-trade is funding terrorism directly. It was also professionally dubious to blur the distinction between terrorism and other organised crime with the argument that all criminals use bribes, corruption, killings, forced labour, as well as poaching, trafficking and smuggling. They certainly do, and criminality usually begets criminality in other areas as well, but a simplistic lumping together of diverse criminal activities tells us little about the specific crime of ivory trafficking, or its world-wide security impact.

Moreover, the methodology for quantifying the nexus between wildlife crime and terrorism-financing was neither clear, nor transparent in the report, while the financial estimates provided were both within unacceptably wide margins and largely devoid of justificatory explanations. Nor was there a breakdown of statistical values needed to ascertain the exact contributions of illegal ivory trade to security threats. So it did not take too long for such

conclusions to be challenged: a 2016 report published by the Royal United Services Institute, a British-based think-tank, and entitled "*Poaching, Wildlife Trafficking and Security in Africa–Myths and Realities*", dispelled the much-publicised ivory-terrorism connection by providing evidence that such a nexus plays only an minor role in the current ivory poaching and trafficking crisis, and is neither indicative of an emerging trend, nor a pervasive feature of it (Haenlein & Smith 2016).

Indeed, the INTERPOL-UN Environment report acknowledged that "the annual income from ivory to militias in the entire Sub-Saharan range is probably in the order of between USD 4 and 12.2 million", which is a relatively small portion of the overall environmental crime money running around; and "there is, however, limited evidence to establish a clear and direct link between wildlife trafficking and the funding of rebel groups and terrorist organisation". This therefore substantiates Haenlein & Smiths' (2016) assertion that ivory-terrorism link is insignificant.

The episode offers a number of important lessons. First, that once a poorly-documented claim is made and it is in the open, it continues to linger even if it subsequently gets dispelled: although allegations of a strong link between wildlife poaching and terrorism were either corrected or removed from the websites of reputable news organisations and newspapers such as the New York Times, they continue to be displayed on the websites of many other outfits, and even on the electronic platforms of some non-profit conservation organisations.

More broadly, the ivory/terrorism debate is a reminder that truth remains crucial for wildlife conservation. It may seem odd that anyone should have to make such a self-evident case for the need for scientific truths. But, in an age when the sources of information and the platforms for the delivery of news not only multiply but get cheaper so that they are within anyone's grasp, fact-checking and the upholding of the highest professional integrity are even more urgently required. And that is not only important because the resources devoted to

tackling the scourge of poaching risk, for instance, being channelled away from fighting the real culprits if the wrong problem is identified, but also because truth remains the biggest weapon and shield for all wildlife conservationists in a world of increasingly wanton, politically-motivated myth-making.

It is tempting to conclude that the wildlife-crime-terrorism narrative is a one-off event. But it is not, for inaccurate reporting about scientific findings or facts has already become a plague, at least in many news related to land use. For example, it was widely reported that the haze caused by illegal forest clearance in Indonesia in 2015 “might” have killed 100,000 people. Such claims have certainly caught the public’s attention. However, what not reported was that methodology for estimating the number of deaths was based on a rapid assessment (Koplitz et al. 2016). Yet another example that empirical facts can be skewed not only by those with bad intent – for that is an old phenomenon – but also by those driven by the best of intentions, in this latter case those committed to stamping out the illegal “slash and burn” forest clearance in South-East Asia.

The swift reiteration of facts as well as the swift dispelling of myths also matter for government decision-making on environmental issues. For all governments face multiple policy choices against a background of a fierce competition for resources, and often contradictory priorities, such as containing pollution while not dampening economic growth, or promoting food security while not destroying free markets or discouraging Third World producers. Every stakeholder of our environment can have a very diverse but equally respectable stance in all these national debates now taking place, yet any serious position on these matters ultimately depends on mutually-agreed and established facts.

However, the challenge is huge, since various misinformation campaigns and ‘alternative facts’ are affecting almost every discipline of the environmental sciences, hampering reasoned debate and setting back scientific progress (Boykoff & Boykoff 2004). We need the

media to report truthfully about the environmental risks and debunk any biased news from any political allegiance; scientists and conservation practitioners to make scientific information more visible and assessible to increase public awareness and engagement; and teachers to teach children at young ages skills in critical and independent thinking (Anonymous 2017). However, such collective effect alone may not be sufficient to resolve the issues.

More importantly, the need for the public to take up a stronger role in combating fake news is becoming increasing apparent. To achieve this, we can harness the advantage of the technological tools available. For the same expansion of rapid electronic communications and cheap media platforms which have promoted the growth of fake news can also be used to rebut them speedily. One such online debunking platform is Wikitribune (https://www.wikitribune.com) where journalists and volunteer community members work together to provide articles that can be verified and updated. And here lies the biggest opportunity of all: that of harnessing the knowledge of conservation practitioners and environmental scientists and of pairing it with professional journalists to produce fact-based articles that can have real impact on both local decisions and global policies.

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