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Wildlife Exploitation in sub-Saharan Africa: an Entrepreneurship Analysis

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Principal Topic In recent years the areas protected by African governments through gazetting national parks and game reserves has been increasing, largely as a result of pressure from external organisations such as the EU, IUCN, UNESCO, the WWF and western governments. The IUCN and UNESCO principles have been signed up by the governments of nearly all sub-Saharan African countries. Large areas of wilderness have been set aside as National Parks or wildlife reserves. In Kenya alone, for example, there are now 55 national parks and wildlife reserves covering some, 8 per cent of the land area. Some 27 per cent of Tanzania's land area is gazetted either as a national park, game reserve or national forest, with people prohibited or severely restricted from settling or grazing animals in these areas. Even West Africa, not renowned for its wildlife, there are over 90 national parks and protected areas. In Gabon alone President Omar Bongo Ondimba created 12 new national parks in 2002 following favourable publicity on the unique wildlife of the area. The total area now covered by National Parks and protected wilderness areas in Africa conservatively exceeds 2 million square kilometres, and many of these parks are also surrounded by very large areas of un-gazetted wilderness, with low population densities. The total area of protected or semi-protected wilderness is greater than the Roman Empire of Trajan.

While increasingly honouring international commitments to preserve wilderness areas, African Governments face pressures from their own people whose immediate interests are probably much better served by taming the wilderness, as Europeans, North Americans and even Australians have done. In so doing they open up protected land for the commercialisation of wildlife products, attain new land for agriculture and settlement, increase their economic and personal security by eliminating game which would otherwise prey on them, raid their crops or provide reservoirs of disease that could attack their livestock. This conflict of interest is increasing as Africans become more numerous and consumer orientated. There are in essence conflicting sets of entrepreneurial opportunities and priorities on how wildlife and wilderness areas should be exploited.

In this paper we distinguish, following terminology from environmental economics, between consumptive commodification of wildlife (such as meat, horn, fur, hides etc.) and non consumptive commodification, where the animals are not killed (such as eco-tourism, wildlife film making and selling of animals to restock areas where wildlife has disappeared). Environmental economics is based on neoclassical economics, and has been little influenced by entrepreneurship theory. The laws of supply and demand drive both forms of commodification. In the paper we demonstrate that entrepreneurship theory is in fact important to our understanding of wildlife exploitation in sub-Saharan Africa. This is because exploitation of wildlife, in practice, contradicts the assumptions of free competition and information that underlies the neoclassical paradigm. Where information is unevenly distributed and markets distorted, as it is in the case of wildlife exploitation in Africa, entrepreneurship does have an important role to play in shedding light on one of Africa's great contradictions: how so much well intentioned conservation can coexist with so much ruthless poaching. Wildlife numbers are plummeting faster than ever at a time when the growth of protected areas has never been greater.

In this paper we invoke Barth's (1967) theories of spheres of value to analyse this contradiction. We identify a number of value systems that impinge on the exploitation of African wildlife, and theoretically explore how entrepreneurs, by bridging these value systems, are able to create added value in terms of commercial success. The analysis of value systems reveals that traditional African systems of value are very compatible

with consumptive forms of wildlife exploitation. Commercial trader entrepreneurs can invoke traditional hunting values to attain a supply of valuable wildlife products from local hunters, and through political networks can establish protection to smooth their nominally illegal trade. It is a system where everyone gains on the value chain, except for the wildlife itself. Unfortunately traditional African thought is not very compatible with modern ideological conservation. The entrepreneurs best placed to exploit this value system are westerners and Africans of European and Asian origins, who have the awareness, knowledge and skills to bridge between conservationist values and the commercial world of tourism and wildlife film making. They have been "alert" to new opportunities, especially those presented by eco-tourism, and have acted as classic Kirznerian entrepreneurs.

This paper analyses these issues with particular emphasis on two geographical areas. First Swaziland and South Africa, which lost most of its wildlife, but has now seen it blossom under policies designed to encourage both local and western entrepreneurs. Second Kenya and Uganda, countries whose wildlife heritage is severely under threat despite the development of a lucrative tourist industry and gazetting large proportions of their countries to wilderness preservation. Some interviews will be conducted to assess more clearly the value systems of local Africans and those of western or Asian origin.

Barth, F. (1967) Economic spheres in Darfur, in Firth, R. (eds.) Themes in Economic Anthropology, London: Tavistock, pp. 148-174.

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Methodology/Key Propositions

(INSERT_YOUR_TEXT_HERE)

Results and Implications

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