



Center for Responsible Travel

Transforming the Way the World Travels

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April 15, 2019

The Critical Importance of Protecting People *and* Parks: Adhering to Core Values A Statement from the Center for Responsible Travel

“[T]he rural communities in and around our parks should also benefit from our natural heritage and find in it an opportunity for their development.”

-South African President Nelson Mandela, Address at the launch of the Kruger National Park Centenary Celebrations, 1998

As part of our mission at the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), we face the fundamental yet challenging imperative of seeking solutions for protected areas that will benefit both conservation and local communities. Today, more than ever before, pressures from human-generated forces threaten our fragile ecological systems. Among them, the steep rise in elephant and other big game poaching is shaping approaches to wildlife protection in Africa and Asia with increasingly militarized and often unmonitored responses.

In March, a year-long investigation by [Buzzfeed News](#) was published, revealing grave accusations of abuse towards local peoples by anti-poaching units funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Like many others, we find the BuzzFeed allegations against the WWF to be deeply distressing and rally around calls for a full, transparent, and independent investigation. While often these events feel far outside of our geographic sphere and our capacity to make change, as travelers and global stewards, we must take these instances to reflect on the complexities that occur within our beloved travel destinations and to spark wider discussion about how to effectively counter poaching without abusing human rights.

The themes presented in these press reports reflect longstanding global issues of conflict between people and parks. In her book *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* CREST’s Executive Director, Martha Honey, traces the turbulent history between rural communities and the “preservationist” models of conservation in Africa, which helped to spawn the early concept of ecotourism. She writes:

Most national parks and reserves in Africa were originally established for hunters, scientists, or tourists, with little or no regard for the local people. Park management emphasized policing—fencing, fines and firepower—which forcibly evicted and kept out local community members, who were often politically and ethnically marginalized rural poor. These people...deeply resented being excluded from lands of religious and economic value and being restricted to increasingly

unsustainable areas around parks. Poaching, degradation of resources, and local hostility towards the parks and tourism were on the increase. The 'preservationist approach' one study concluded, 'requires an essentially militaristic defense strategy that will almost certainly heighten conflict.'

Regrettably, not only many park rangers and state officials, but also a number of conservation organizations, bought into the “preservationist” prescriptions of protecting wildlife – often, by any means necessary. However, the firepower approach didn’t work, and by the late 1970s, parks and community leaders in Africa, Asia, and the Americas began to push for a new paradigm that equally protected and respected local people and wildlife. They argued that protected species and ecosystems would survive only if those people living nearest them benefited financially from both the parks and tourism. From this emerged the early experiments with ecotourism that strove to simultaneously conserve the environment *and* improve the well-being of local people.

The tragic upswing in poaching over the past decade has marked a new age of conflict between local communities and militarized anti-poaching campaigns. These combative efforts often do not address the real reins of power behind the poaching rings: the international chain of buyers, suppliers, and arms dealers. Instead, anti-poaching squads target local front line hunters, who are often struggling to make ends meet and receive only the crumbs from the illicit trade, and who, when captured or killed, are easily replaced. Even worse are the cases of local community members being beaten, raped, and tortured for engaging in legal subsistence hunting and gathering.

More often than not, reports of abuse, masked under the guise of protection of wildlife, never make it to our mainstream media. In [response to the allegations](#) by BuzzFeed News, WWF has recommitted to safeguarding the rights of local communities and vowed to take swift action should an independent review find conclusive evidence of any policy breaches. On April 8, [WWF announced](#) that former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, will chair the panel leading the independent review.

We support WWF’s decision to investigate and take action, and above all else, we call for renewed international attention to address the core issue between people and parks – an issue that first gave rise to the concept of ecotourism. We need to once again focus on how to protect the rights of people living on the edges of parks, while simultaneously protecting the lives of the endangered wildlife within.