



An alternative approach to eradicating the threat of wildlife poaching

An *Animals on the Edge* report, written by Chris Weston

There is something foreboding about entering a prison, particularly at the moment the door to the outside world is banged shut and locked behind you. In your mind there is disconnection, a permanent separation from everything you have known. All of a sudden, even the most banal life can seem very appealing. Of course, I was fortunate. My visit was both voluntary and temporary. I was in Nepal to talk to wildlife poachers, to try to understand their motives.

My interviewee, who I'll call Fanishwar, was led from a small, dark cell that he shared with two other people. He looked tired and many years older than his actual age. He is 28 and was caught poaching rhinos in Chitwan National Park. He will be over 43 by the time he gets out of prison, assuming he doesn't die first. I don't expect you to feel sorry for him, or for that matter any of the other 111 poachers languishing in jails in Nepal. I know many people who will feel that justice will only have been served if Fanishwar never sees freedom again. But that is just one side of the story because Fanishwar isn't the problem and focusing on him gets us no closer to resolving the real issue.

Fanishwar sits across from me, seated at a small table on a wooden chair. The room we share is featureless and grey. In many ways it reflects Fanishwar's life. I asked him frankly, why had he killed the rhinos? He didn't answer. He just looked down at the table, avoiding eye contact. I tried a different tack and asked him about his life.

Like many people in Nepal, Fanishwar lived in poverty. I don't mean poverty as we define it in the West. I mean the sort of poverty where, when you wake up in the morning, the first thing you do is check to see which of your children are still alive. On the day Fanishwar's life changed, his youngest, a boy aged just 18-months, wasn't.

Poverty – a recruiting sergeant for organised crime lords

That day, Fanishwar reacted as I suspect any parent would react. He felt compelled to do anything necessary to protect his remaining family. He was aware of a man in the local area. This man showed the signs of wealth, of success. He was educated and had a way with words; and he was well connected at a high level. He was also known to have improved the standard of living of other impoverished people, people just like Fanishwar. Maybe he could help him too.

The man spun for Fanishwar a colourful tale: There were plenty of rhino's left in the wild, the stories he had heard to the contrary were just propaganda. There was no chance that



Fanishwar would get caught and, if he did, then the man would be there to help him. He would be safe. His family would be safe. And, most alluring of all, Fanishwar would be paid the equivalent of \$200 for a single rhino horn – almost a year’s salary. Fanishwar started dreaming of a better life for his family. A life where he could provide regular food, a warm, dry home, possibly he could even buy a second-hand bicycle.

This is how it happens. This is how regular, law-abiding folk like Fanishwar end up on the wrong side of the law as poachers. And for every Fanishwar that we capture and put in jail there are literally thousands more to fill his shoes. The human population of Chitwan National Park, the area in which Fanishwar was caught, is around 183,644 people. Of these, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) estimates that at least one third are living in abject poverty. That makes over 60,000 people susceptible to be drawn into poaching – 60,000 potential Fanishwars. We can’t capture and jail them all.

Patrick Brown is an Australian-born photographer who since 1999 has been based in south east Asia where, among other things, he worked on a project documenting the illegal trade in wildlife in Asia. In a recent interview he talked about how “only the ignorant and often desperate poachers get caught.” Explaining his experiences, Brown goes on to say, “I actually feel sorry for the poachers. I empathize with them quite a lot – not with what they are doing but with the situation that they are in. For example, these guys are going to get at the most \$250 for a rhino horn. A rhino horn in weight is five times more valuable than gold by the time it gets to Hong Kong or the Middle East, or even to the United States or Europe. They are fueling the market, but the poacher is being fueled by other needs – the need to keep a family alive.”

The men in the middle

Deepak Acharya works for Co-Action Nepal (CAN), a non-profit, non-governmental, community based organization working in the field of conservation. He retells a story that supports Patrick Brown’s findings and those of my own:

Raj Kumar Kumal is one of the 183,644 people from indigenous communities living around Chitwan National Park, whose livelihood relies heavily on the natural resources the park provides. He is the second member of his family convicted for wildlife crime – his father is serving a jail term related to the tiger trade. Raj was only 15 when his father was arrested. After a couple of years, a person of Indian origin appeared in the community and promised he could show Raj a way to get his father released from jail. Unaware that the promise was a lie, Raj Kumar went along with the Indian stranger so that he could earn the 50,000 Nepalese Rupees (c. \$675) he was told he needed to secure his father’s release.

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"My motive was only to rescue my anguished father. I was hell-bent to prove myself as a responsible son, to no avail", Raj said at his trial.

For Deepak Acharya, Raj Kumar is just one example that reveals how unscrupulous middlemen are drawing into wildlife poaching illiterate and marginalized community members, most of whom see poaching only as an alternative to the very limited and meager means available to them of earning a sustainable and legitimate living elsewhere.

In 2006 CAN conducted a study into wildlife poaching in Nepal, the findings of which mirror those of most poaching operations. The report describes how poaching networks involve three levels of operator: the high level trader, the middlemen (or mediators) and the poachers.

The high level traders are the people who control the mechanisms of the poacher's activities. Typically they are unknown to the people working at the lower levels. These are the men who benefit most from poaching but who also escape punishment the most. The middlemen are the link between the traders and the poachers. They motivate the poachers by providing food and money and protection, and they provide the weapons and tools to do the job. They will be paid many times the sum earned by the poacher and, because they are aware of the law and that poaching is a serious crime, they never involve themselves in the actual killing. Consequently, they are rarely arrested. The poachers themselves are usually uneducated people, who are unaware they are committing a crime and are ignorant of the legal ramifications. Of course, the middlemen feel it unnecessary to educate them.

The CAN study also concluded what is already widely suspected: that poverty and unemployment are the main causes that motivate community members towards poaching. The middlemen exploit the unemployed and the poor who, once involved in poaching, find it very difficult to extricate themselves. However, poachers and ex-poachers interviewed for the study all said that if they had another means of earning a sustainable living, they would readily cease their involvement.

Patrick Brown's research supports CAN's study. "The middleman or trader is at the forefront of the stockpiles, the harvesting grounds. This is the man whose role is most abhorrent. He's the one that encourages, entices, tells the poachers and their families that there's nothing to be risked. These are the smooth talking guys; the guys that you can't get to. They know the risks. They know that if they get photographed or met by a foreigner then their whole cover is blown. They're the nasty guys and no mud sticks to them, they never get caught. This guy also is in cahoots, usually, with local governments, either on a counsel level or right up to the state government. He is usually in cahoots with them because otherwise he would not be able to survive."



Conclusion – Learning by example

The challenges facing any anti-poaching conservation initiatives are similar to those faced by governments trying to control the narcotics trade. A quick search on Google reveals countless headlines involving the arrest of drug traffickers. For example, in the first six months of 2009 Colombian police arrested 1,080; in June 2008 65 traffickers were arrested in Puerto Rico, another 23 were arrested in September 2009; In August, 8 Iranians and 4 Japanese were arrested for drug smuggling. In fact, according to various news sources, over the past eighteen months, police authorities around the globe have seemingly captured some of the most wanted and prolific drug traffickers in the world today. And yet, despite these efforts, tones of illegal narcotics still pour onto our countries' streets.

At the end of my interview with Fanishwar I asked him again, why had he killed the rhinos? This time he didn't lower his head. He looked me in the eye for a long minute, his eyes moist. Then he simply said, "Because I love my children more than I love rhinos."

Fanishwar is no longer a threat to wildlife. He's in prison and will be there for a long time to come. But are the rhinos of Nepal any safer from extinction? I suspect not. If we are to protect rhinos and other endangered wildlife we need to involve rather than marginalise community members such as Fanishwar and Raj Kumar, and we need to provide them with alternative ways of making a living and enable them to feel the pride one gets from the ability to support a family.

This is the approach to conservation taken by the Rwandan government that has proved so successful in protecting the country's population of mountain gorillas. In Rwanda's case, tourism has provided the means for local communities to benefit financially from the presence of gorillas. As a direct result, poaching has been all but eradicated. By taking the same community-led approach to conservation elsewhere in the world, perhaps we can find a solution to the real issues we are facing, trying to protect and preserve endangered species. Perhaps then, too, even if we can't catch him, the next time the well connected, smooth talking middleman comes calling there will be nobody around desperate enough to listen.