



Bush wars: on the frontline with Victoria Falls Anti-poaching Unit **An *Animals on the Edge* report, written by Chris Weston**

Unbeknownst to the poachers, they were walking directly into a trap. The Unit had discovered the snares 48-hours earlier and now, tired, bedraggled and hungry, they lay in wait. When the moment came an explosion of action shattered the early morning calm, as mission commands were barked to the troops, and the poachers, caught squarely by surprise, shouted panicked warnings to their comrades in their attempt to escape. But the trap was well set and less than a minute after the urgent cry "Go, go, go" crackled over the 2-way radios, the culprits were down – tied and captured. For the small army of rangers of the Victoria Falls Anti-poaching Unit (VFAPU) it had been a good day. It isn't always so.

The ambush had taken place a few days into my time embedded with VFAPU. I was working on an *Animals on the Edge* assignment, investigating the effects of poaching in Zimbabwe – a country sullied by political and economic turmoil that has left 10-million of its 13-million population living in chronic abject poverty and its wildlife decimated. And, while wealth is the driving force behind the commercial poaching of headline species such as rhinoceros and elephant, poverty and survival are the forces behind equally damaging environmental and subsistence poaching.

The cost of poverty

Charles Brightman is a conservationist, a bushman and the founder of VFAPU, a privately funded non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of wildlife and natural habitat. He described the problems the Unit encounters:

"With the deteriorating economic situation, poaching has grown exponentially. By far the commonest form of poaching we deal with is done to supply bushmeat, mostly for local consumption. Poaching syndicates lay 30 – 40 wire snares along a line, targeting large mammals such as buffalo, eland, kudu and impala. Captured animals are killed, butchered and hung to dry in the forest. The meat is then walked to a road where it's collected by car or taxi and taken to villages to sell. Poached meat is typically around 75% cheaper than legal meat, so there is huge demand in the poor communities ... they aren't short of customers."

Bushmeat poaching has an horrific knock-on effect. Snares are indiscriminate and are as likely to trap endangered lions or elephants or other threatened species as they are deer or antelope. Brightman showed me images of a trapped hyena, which had fought tirelessly to free itself for two days before succumbing; others of an ensnared lion that, in trying to escape, had been strangled, its eyes popping out; another of a female elephant that had taken three weeks to die of starvation. There were more.

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Wildlife is not the only target of subsistence poachers. Brightman continued his grim recounting, "Gangs enter the National Park illegally to remove river sand and quarry stone, used to build shelters or to sell to contractors. Indigenous hardwoods, such as ebony and mahogany, are also targeted, plundered simply for firewood or, more often, to supply the raw materials for the carvers who sell to the 5,000 or so curio vendors in and around the Falls – the second most-visited tourist destination in southern Africa. At the lower end of the scale, up to 100 women a day enter the park to pilfer deadwood – a cheaper alternative to expensive and scarce paraffin – for cooking and to sell to other villagers for money to buy food."

The unmistakable truth

The effects of subsistence and environmental poaching are dramatic. Figures sourced from the Zimbabwe Conservation Task Force, an independent NGO, suggest that in recent years over half-a-million wild animals have been poached. My own visit to Zimbabwe's premier National Park, Hwange, revealed habitats once teeming with wildlife now devoid of animals. And, although top predators such as lion, leopard, cheetah and painted dog aren't targeted directly, they are badly affected by the huge drop in the number of prey species.

Environmentally, the removal of river sand and stone has led to gully erosion and habitat degradation resulting in disastrous floods. Deadwood is a critical link in the ecosystem, providing nutrients for the soil, food and dwelling for insects and nest sites for birds that feed on the insects. And a forestry commission report noted that in an area close to the airport 62% of the native mukwa trees – used to carve high-standing giraffe curios – had been cleared by poachers.

The unmistakable truth is, while ivory poaching grabs the headlines, lower-level poaching has a far more detrimental effect on the environment and ecology of Zimbabwe – and the region as a whole – with potentially devastating consequences. But long-term consequences mean little when you are starving, your children dying and your prospects denied by political shenanigans beyond your control.

Desperate measures

Proof of the desperate measures people will take in order to survive are visible all around the area. To make their snares, poachers use fence wire and, when the fences are gone, telegraph wire. When the telegraph wire is exhausted, they move on to electrical cables, cut from pylons. It's deadly work, a point not lost on Brightman. "Subsistence poachers are usually people with no alternative, impoverished people who have got families to feed. They don't really want to poach but they are given little choice. Extreme circumstances lead to extreme measures", he tells me.



Around Victoria Falls VFAPU is taking a multi-faceted approach to solving the problem. On the frontline, in the eleven years it's been operating, the Unit has confiscated around 20,000 wire snares, arrested 360 serious poachers and even removed 46 land mines, remnants from the Rhodesian war. During my assignment, as well as apprehending the gang of poachers, the team rescued, treated and released three warthogs from random snares, all close to the town centre.

But Charles Brightman recognizes that frontline efforts alone are insufficient, particularly given the financial plight of the majority of perpetrators. He knows that the job is too big for just one man – or one team – and that prevention is better than cure.

Strength in numbers

He has established working relationships with like-minded groups. A close ally is the Wild Horizons Wildlife Trust, which helps with treating rescued wildlife in the field. Another is Environment Africa, which works with local schools to set up Environment Clubs to teach children about the long-term benefits of wilderness and wildlife. "We want to win the hearts and minds of the next generation", he tells me while visiting one such project involving elephants. From the look on the children's faces, there is perhaps some hope.

Critically, Brightman has engaged with the National Parks & Wildlife Authority of Zimbabwe (NPWAZ), which now works closely with the Unit, supplying rangers for joint patrols and overseeing their rescue work in protected areas. VFAPU also collaborates with the national police force and municipal police, and the tourist police, helping to apprehend criminals whose activities fall outside the Unit's anti-poaching remit. Mr Mbewe, a NPWAZ Senior Ranger I met during an animal rescue was one who trumpeted the value of the collaborative effort.

Perhaps most importantly, Brightman recognizes the need to provide subsistence poachers with an alternative source of income, and he has worked hard on building relationships with local businesses – sources of legitimate work.

Working towards a better future

He takes me to meet Joseph. Joseph came to Zimbabwe from Mozambique as a trained chef but lost his job. Unable to find employment he started his own business carving intricate curios from wood. Initially, he made a decent living, enough to provide for his family. But then the price of wood increased and became unaffordable. As an alternative he began poaching wood from the nearby Victoria Falls National Park.

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Joseph had an accomplice, Baxton. Baxton came to Zimbabwe from Zambia in 1957. He worked in a shop but lost his job when the owners fled to South Africa during the Rhodesian war. He buried six of his nine children before Joseph taught him carving. They would plunder the forest together.

Since they took up poaching, both men had been caught, prosecuted and sentenced five times and on each occasion they were fined the equivalent of \$20. It was a vicious circle. In order to pay their fines they carved more curios, taking from the forest to do so. Then Charles Brightman stepped in. He found them work as Official Carvers at one of Victoria Falls's most popular and upmarket hotels. Using their skills, they now earn a decent living; enough to buy wood sourced legitimately, to provide for their families and even accumulate a small amount of savings. Neither has been back to the forest (or to the courts) since.

On my final day in Zimbabwe, I sat with Charles Brightman on the veranda of the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, overlooking a small waterhole, where a herd of impala were drinking, surrounded by a muster of storks. "Everything is connected", he reflected. It is this simple but profound appreciation of the holistic nature of the problem that makes Brightman stand out. He is no urban warrior on a lone crusade. He is a down-to-earth bushman who loves the land and the animals that live there, and who wants to make a difference.