

“Counting Sheep”: The Comparative Advantages of Wildlife and Livestock – A Community Perspective¹

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Mr Nick Ankudey, Executive Director of the Ghana Wildlife Division. Tragically killed in a vehicle accident in November 2003, Nick had the vision to see wildlife from a community perspective and understand the comparative advantages of livestock and wildlife.

Dead or alive? Where is the value?

It was a hot humid morning as always in the small village of Amokwasuaso in Ghana’s western region. We sat in the small, dilapidated community meeting hall awaiting the arrival of a World Bank fact-finding mission. The Amokwasuaso community has achieved some celebrity in Ghana as the first community to have the rights to manage wildlife devolved to its residents by the State. The fact-finding mission wanted to know how this had been achieved and whether this approach could be tried elsewhere. As we waited for the World Bank team to arrive, we talked informally about issues and problems facing the community. Then I asked the gathering a question, “If I brought you a goat and a bushbuck and you could choose one of them, which would you prefer?” A woman in the assembly immediately shot back with the question, “Are they alive or dead?” I had not expected this question, but replied that we should assume that they are alive. Her response was swift, “I would take the goat!” “Why?” I asked. “Well, if you have a goat you can control it, get another, breed it, and own it. If you have a bushbuck you cannot control it and it will run free and be taken by others.” This was a logical and sensible response. Then I asked, “And what if they were dead?” Again there was no hesitation in the response, “Certainly, I would choose the bushbuck!” Again I asked why. With a smile on her face and to the amusement of all gathered, she said, “Everyone knows that the bushbuck is much better meat!”

In this short exchange, this lady from Amokwasuaso had highlighted the challenges faced by governments all over Africa that seek rural development, including improved domestic animal husbandry, while looking after the environment and wildlife resources. The challenge is to understand comparative advantages and values of wildlife and domestic livestock, to seek a scenario that gives people the freedom to choose but that also changes the tenurial status of wildlife resources so that the value is more than just “better meat.” For conservation of wildlife in Africa to work, a significant shift is needed in the current real and perceived comparative advantage of livestock over wildlife.

Incentives and disincentives for wildlife

The challenge for wildlife conservation is not simply to replace domesticated livestock production with domesticated wildlife. The challenge is more about keeping ecosystems intact and wildlife wild, with people having an incentive to use and conserve wildlife resources. Many of those incentives are clear and immediately achievable, while some are more complex and require significant changes in public perceptions, policy, and legislation. Some of the immediate incentives for wildlife use and conservation include:

- the preference for meat of wildlife over that of domestic animals;
- strong cultural sentiment or religious significance of wildlife;
- strong link to wildlife hunting in sport and culture;
- wildlife’s superior disease resistance and tolerance of local environmental change;
- generally (although not always) better use of and impact on habitat by wildlife than by domestic stock (an exception being large elephant populations in southern Africa, which confer negative impact);
- income or other benefits to the community if there is a community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) programme present.

In Zimbabwe, the policy for wildlife maintains that wildlife holds a “comparative advantage in economic terms” (Child 1995). Unfortunately this is not enough. The disincentives for wildlife centre on the problem of ownership; often the key to wildlife conservation in Africa is getting ownership right, whether this be private, communal, or even State. Some of the disincentives for wildlife in this regard include the following:

- Wildlife is a mobile resource and difficult to control.
- There is rarely individual ownership (unless the animal is dead).
- Tenure over wildlife rests with the State or, in some cases, the community but not with the individual unless the land title is freehold.
- Wildlife resources usually require a collective management system, often even where land title is held individually.

¹See abstract on p.xxvi.

- Wildlife often poses a threat to other livelihoods through direct competition or disease transmission.
- In communally managed situations, direct consumptive use is often discouraged and sometimes illegal.

So what is so great about livestock?

The incentives for domestic livestock tend to be readily understood, and, while there are strong incentives, there are also strong disincentives that are often overlooked even by producers. Some incentives for raising livestock include the following:

- Livestock are easily controlled and bred.
- Ownership and tenure are well defined.
- State support and subsidies are often offered.
- Livestock are easily traded for cash, goods, and services.
- The benefits are immediate when livestock are sold or consumed, and transaction costs tend to be minimal.
- Livestock can be used for work.

One of the problems in rural development in Africa, a problem often overlooked by agricultural departments and rural development agencies, has been the manner in which domestic livestock production, especially that involving cattle and small ruminants, has been promoted. The development of livestock production in much of Africa has been heavily subsidised by policy, legislation, and direct financial investment. Some areas have suffered severe ecological damage due to very high stocking levels and poor range management. In many cases, there are also livestock-owning elites who control access to grazing and water at the exclusion of other community members (Isaacs *et al.* 2000). In summary, disincentives for livestock production include the following:

- Livestock can be an expensive investment for poor farmers; if the animal dies, the loss can be devastating.
- Livestock are prone to disease, especially in remote, “wild” areas.
- Livestock are not as resilient as wildlife to local environmental changes such as droughts (certain animals excluded).
- Access to grazing is often controlled by local elites.
- Environmental costs result if ranges are poorly managed.

Where is community-based natural resource management?

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a CBNRM revolution swept through southern Africa. This revolution brought fundamental change in the relationship between rural communities and wildlife resources. CBNRM is largely based on the following principles (Murphree 1991):

- Effective management of wildlife is best achieved by giving it focused value for those who live with it.
- Differential inputs must result in differential benefits.

- There must be a correlation between the quality of management and magnitude of benefit.
- The unit of proprietorship should be the unit of production, management, and benefit.
- The unit of proprietorship should be as small as practicable within ecological and sociopolitical constraints.

The importance of these principles is that they are not part of an “either/or” approach that seeks to coerce communities into saving wild animals. These principles challenge policymakers and governments to create an enabling political and economic environment that allows wildlife to improve its comparative advantage over domestic livestock.

While considerable progress has been made and, in some cases, wildlife has significantly changed peoples livelihoods, the following can also be said of many CBNRM initiatives in southern Africa:

- For the most part, CBNRM in southern Africa has spoken to these principles but rarely applied them, resulting in livestock retaining the competitive advantage from an individual and community perspective.
- Another difficulty with CBNRM is that, in most cases, financial returns from wildlife tend to be small at individual levels, cumbersome to manage, subject to bureaucratic pilfering, and provide only annual payouts.
- In southern Africa, CBNRM has relied on third-party–use regimes, relegating communities to passive participation in wildlife management. There are few cases in which communities use wildlife directly; in most instances, wildlife is sold to a safari operator who in turn sells it to the hunter or tourist.
- Community members who directly use wildlife are classified as poachers and CBNRM in southern Africa has emphasised maximum economic return, even when this is not a community priority (Sithole and Frost 2002).
- Southern African governments are comfortable with the status quo and are reluctant to devolve full management rights and responsibilities to communities. In some cases, the devolutionary process has been captured by a new set of bureaucratic elites at the provincial or district level.
- The retention of management rights by the national and subnational bureaucracies has disadvantaged wildlife, especially from individual perspectives.

The result of this has been that the initial strides made in CBNRM in southern Africa have slowed as state and community struggle for control over access rights, management rights, and benefits. This is a no-win situation that does not benefit people, wildlife, or livestock. In this case, CBNRM acts only as a hand brake on the drift of competitive advantage to livestock until wildlife ceases to be a viable option. In some cases in which CBNRM programmes have been problematic, Sithole and Frost (2002) argue that the CBNRM programme actually contributes to giving livestock a comparative advantage.

Conclusions

Clearly, CBNRM approaches in southern Africa have not sufficiently applied their own principles, especially in respect to devolution of authority and benefit. In addition, agricultural and veterinary policies have distorted economic and ecological advantage in favour of livestock production. If wildlife is to secure a comparative advantage over livestock, then policy and practice need to be reconciled with govern-

ments recognising that the future of wildlife is determined at local levels. It is important that wildlife is recognised as a legitimate component of rural livelihoods and land use, and not simply an object of conservation.

The challenge today is to create the political, social, and economic environment that enables rural farmers to count both sheep and wildlife.

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