

**WILDLIFE TOURISM: CREATING A  
GLOBAL FORCE FOR NATURAL  
PROTECTION**

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*"Shhhh. Everyone please stop talking. Look, over there, right through there, through those bushes. See the watering hole? Just look at her. Isn't she incredible?"*

In a deep, hushed voice the awe-struck group of travellers from Hamburg could see the source of the Trekkers excitement and affection. A great white rhino, her mass slowly rolling in a shallow pool of muddy water, her statuesque horn piercing through the sunshine like a beacon. She was truly magnificent.

Quietly, thoughtfully, with a clear tinge of pain in his voice, his words stopped all of the cameras and mobile phones from clicking. He was no longer speaking about what he was seeing, but what he was feeling. Deeply.

*"Every day her life is at risk. The nights are when we fear for her the most. We have already lost so many to their butchery. It breaks our hearts. All they want is her horn...they will simply leave the rest to die. I will never understand."*

The reality of the tragedy came to life right beside them, right there in their 4x4. **Poaching...the** quest for Mother Nature's great natural treasures, be it rhino horns, elephant tusks, shark fins, exotic creatures great and small. The unashamed capture, and increasingly often, slaughter, of precious beings, on land, in the air, in the world's waters, for the sake of human trade and trafficking. Human greed.

The safari tourists knew in that moment that the sight they were looking at – one that they, in all of their months of travel planning, had been dying to capture - was literally dying out in front of them.

For nations across the world that are home to precious wildlife, species inspiring travellers the world over to come and view, this endangerment is not only threatening the tourism industry of the destination, it is threatening the spirit of the nation.

For tourists, this grim reality ignites a fire in their minds and hearts, a burning desire to do something to stop these criminal acts being undertaken for the huge amounts of money they generate - money that can and does go directly to the world's illegal arms, human trafficking and other serious crime circles. Never, ever would these tourists support such barbaric acts.

Sadly, unknowingly, tourists find themselves part of these illegal practices, without even being aware. It can be through an act as simple and pure of intent as purchasing a curio for a loved one back home, a special keepsake for oneself to remember their fulfillment of a lifelong dream to take that holiday to that place.

Similarly, it can be simply by being in their natural habitat can cause an unnatural impact, putting the lives of wildlife, flora and fauna at risk.

### **AWARENESS AS THE FRONT LINE OF ACTION**

With over 1.138 billion international tourists crossing borders each year, the Centre for the Promotion of Imports in the Netherlands (CBI) has stated that the African continent is where over half of all wildlife watching tourism trips occur. With global wildlife tourism believed to be over 12 million trips per annum, the sector's 10%+ annual growth rate in tourists is an indicator of the earnings value of the niche – one that enjoys mainly high-end travellers.

As stated by the UNWTO:

*“Wildlife crime is threatening the very existence of iconic species that are essential to Africa’s image as home to the world’s top wildlife destinations and thus jeopardizes the basis of one of Africa’s most important tourism products. The loss of wildlife caused by poaching is likely to significantly impact tourism development in Africa as well as the tourism sector worldwide linked to the African market with the subsequent reduction of the sustainable development opportunities.”*

For this reason, the world's tourism industry is standing up to make tourists aware of the role they can and must play in putting a stop, once and for all, to the illicit trade of wildlife, while promoting healthy wildlife tourism growth for the sector and its supporting communities.

As explained by John Scanlon, Secretary General of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) – ‘an international agreement between governments aimed at ensuring that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.’ (<http://www.cites.org/>):

*“ Wildlife based tourism can benefit wild animals and plants, local communities and national economies. In some countries, such as Tanzania, it is a major contributor to GDP. It can be a win-win-win. But it needs to be managed carefully and sustainably and with benefits accruing to local people. Well managed wildlife based tourism actually serves to drive away poachers and smugglers and allows local people and national governments to develop their own natural resources – rather than have them plundered by illegal traders who exploit wildlife for a short term profit putting money in the hands of organized criminals in distant lands at the expense of local people and wildlife.”*

Still, Scanlon warns:

*“The unwitting errors made by tourists can be many and varied. It can include buying illegally sourced wildlife and their products and fuelling unsustainable exploitation, getting too close to wild animals and upsetting their natural routine, or walking off the tourist track and degrading fragile habitat. Some tourists knowingly buy illegal wildlife products, especially from species of high financial value such as elephant ivory and rhino horn. They run the personal risk of prosecution and heavy fines or even jail. Such illegal trade is no longer low risk with the risk of detection and prosecution getting much higher. The small number of tourists who are inclined to act illegally must know that they are now taking a significant risk in buying illegally sourced wildlife.”*

World Wildlife Day in 2015 (March 03<sup>rd</sup>) called on the global travel community to support CITES’ efforts. The response: inspired and inspiring. Reflecting on this year’s #WWD, Scanlon states with confidence and strength:

*“I am personally heartened by the efforts being taken by countries, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector to tackle demand and supply for illegally traded wildlife across source, transit and destination countries. Within the UN we have seen a scaled up effort involving UN WTO, UNODC, UNDP and UNEP. We have also seen CITES, INTERPOL, UNODC, the World Bank and WCO join forces under the banner the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime to provide more coordinated enforcement support to countries. We are seeing Heads of State and Government express*

*themselves on the issue, as well as the UN Secretary-General and high profile individuals across all continents, such as Prince William. The global community has woken up to the scale and nature of the threats posed by illegal wildlife trade and its serious consequences. And on World Wildlife Day 2015 we reached close to 200 million people through the theme 'let's get serious about wildlife crime.'*

### TOURISTS PLAYING A PART IN WILDLIFE PROTECTION

With the world's billion plus tourists able to play an invaluable role as our planet's guardians, a powerful, collective opportunity exists for the blessing of travel to turn into the essential barrier needed to protect wildlife from endangerment, and extinction.

Scanlon is clear, and unedited, in the role that tourists can and must play:

*"While the actions of any one tourist alone may not have much impact on wildlife, when multiplied by tens of thousands it can have major consequences for species and their habitats. Wildlife runs the risk of suffering 'death by a thousand cuts'. To avoid this situation every tourist must take their role seriously and not buy illegally traded wildlife and take care not to disturb fragile habitat."*

To Scanlon, the problem, and solution, is even more clear:

*"The fact is that we know what needs to be done, and we are now collectively getting on and doing it. Success depends upon each one of us playing our part. If we can all be responsible tourists and help to bring the illegal trade in wildlife to an end we can succeed – let's all get serious about wildlife crime."*

It all comes down to the power of one. One times 1+ billion, without one moment to spare.