

Risks of relocating wildlife

Re-introduction Specialist Group (RSG) defines 'Benign Introduction' (BI) as an attempt for the purpose of conservation, to establish species outside its recorded distribution but within an appropriate habitat and eco-geographical area. Such attempt is only feasible when there is no remaining area left within the species' historical range.

In the recent issue, Tanzania Wildlife magazine No. 55- pg 5, you published a letter titled '*Relocate wildlife to improve distribution*' in which the author made valiant arguments why he thinks relocation of wildlife is important. The letter suggests two key points. One, removing wild animals from Open Areas (OA) where they are threatened by poaching; and secondly, introduce them to other 'safe heaven areas' (poaching-free areas) outside the species historical range to increase species diversity.

I see problems with the impact of this article despite its conservative approach particularly under the increasing conservation threats in Tanzania. First, it should be understood that mining which threatens wild animals from OAs is as good as abating the philosophy behind establishment of Wildlife Management Areas (WMA). WMAs were meant amongst others, to bring wildlife and the local people closer with hopes that it would stem the current declining trends of wildlife population particularly in non-protected areas including OAs. There are already successful examples such as Ipole WMA in Sikonge District, Tabora Region where the local communities are benefiting economically while the wildlife are increasing in numbers!

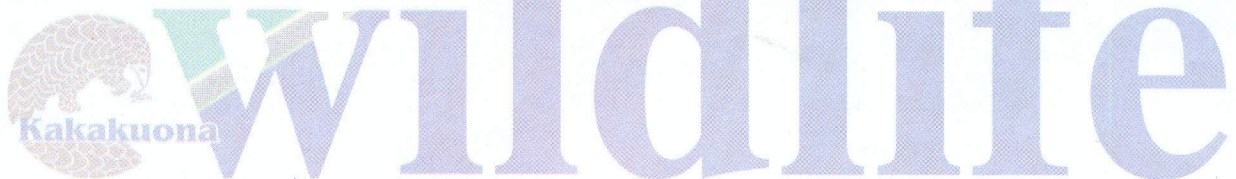
Secondly, there are no areas remaining devoid of poaching that is referred to by the author as 'safe heaven'. Even in the heavily protected areas (National Parks) where armed rangers and Community Conservation Service strategies are

on daily operation yet still, they experience heavy poaching. For instance, studies have shown that between 40,000 -160,000 migratory and resident wild animals are illegally harvested annually in the Serengeti National Park and associated areas. Further, a most recent study reports consistent decline of large mammal populations in the East and West compared to the South African reserves where population monitoring and protection are regularly being carried out (see Journal of Biological Conservation:10.1016/j.biocon.2010.06.007). It is rare to have unprotected areas, yet free of poaching and other threats existing in our rangelands.

Thirdly, species introductions are prohibitively expensive in terms of the personnel and financial resources and should be done only when necessary. The introduction failures cited by the author, such as of the oryx (*Oryx gazella*) in Saadani NP, the wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*) in Mkomazi NP (then game reserve) and other species elsewhere in Tanzania is perhaps a consequence of human hubris and clearly provides lessons of the difficulties associated with such conservation strategy. These examples also tell us that there are huge risks involved not only in the species capture and translocation processes but also there is still limited understanding of the species habitat needs and the consequence of introduced species on ecosystem functions. Thus, evacuating wild animals to other areas simply to avoid poaching is as good as failing to protect them from their original habitats. I recommend establishing of WMAs and application of other appropriate conservation measures in Kichi Hills, Kichonda forest reserve and similar areas facing poaching and other threats to serve sable antelopes and other species from further declining.

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