



# The Chinese in Africa – *Curse or Opportunity for Wildlife?*

*By John Ledger*

*The Chinese have moved into Africa in a big way, and wherever they are involved, illegal wildlife activities seem to accompany their citizens, prompting a recent diplomatic confrontation in Namibia. Illegal trade in ivory and rhino horn is at the top end of the business, but many other wildlife products are also in demand. What this clearly demonstrates is a lucrative Chinese market for African resources that is currently being met through illegal channels, mainly because of the activities of CITES. What if some of this financially significant demand could be met legally, for the financial benefit of Africans and the continent's wildlife?*

In December 2016 the Namibian Chamber for Environment sent a strongly-worded letter to the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Namibia, reproduced in full in this issue of *African Hunting Gazette*, because it is a very important document.

Since Chinese nationals moved into Namibia in numbers, the illegal exploitation of wildlife and other natural resources has escalated exponentially. Namibians don't like that one bit, because they have fought long and hard to develop one of the most successful wildlife management policies in Africa, based on the concepts of sustainable utilisation, and proprietorship over wildlife resource by landowners, whether communal or private.

The implementation of this policy has seen a huge expansion of land under conservation management, a massive increase in the number of wildlife species in Namibia, and considerable financial benefits to those who own the resource. All this has been achieved at great personal cost and sacrifice by many individuals and organisations. One such individual is Garth Owen-Smith; his book called *An Arid Eden* documents some of the history of this success story, and is highly recommended to our readers. You can get it here: <https://www.amazon.com/Arid-Eden-Personal-Conservation-Kaokoveld/dp/1868423638>.

The bad Chinese behavior that Dr Chris Brown has described so eloquently in his letter has been replicated in many other African countries where the Chinese have turned up to make their mark. The new airport terminal in Maputo, Mozambique and the new parliament buildings there; the new parliament on the top of the hill in Maseru, Lesotho; new power stations here, new dams and bridges and railways there - the smiling Chinese are everywhere. Africa is being recolonised, and once more the assets and resources of the continent are being stripped, notwithstanding the national legal measures in place to protect these resources.

If other African countries had similar strong civil societies like Namibia, with eloquent representatives like Dr Brown, comparable letters would probably have been sent to the Chinese Ambassadors in Angola, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and others. However, I suspect those countries lack the capacity, let alone the will, to take on such a challenge to their 'benefactors'.

So what is to be done about this threat to Africa's wildlife resources? Can some of the products so avidly sought by the Chinese be supplied on a sustainable basis and for good prices? While overfishing, over-consumption of bush meat, and the killing of Carmine Bee-eaters are certainly not sustainable

activities, the demand for ivory and rhino horn could probably be addressed through a well-controlled market. **The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is supposed to regulate the international trade in endangered species, but since it has been infiltrated and increasingly subverted by the international animal rights movement, it has increasingly shut down trade instead of regulating it.**

At the close of the CITES CoP 17 in Johannesburg, Eugene Lapointe, Chairman of the IWMC World Conservation Trust made the following forceful speech:

*Madam Chair,*

*Please allow me to associate myself with previous speakers in congratulating all those having contributed to the organization of CITES CoP 17.*

*Madam Chair, due to the important increase in poaching and in related illegal wildlife activities, the international community has reinstated the Inquisition in order to identify the witch or witches responsible for this drama. The Inquisition quickly identified trade as the culprit and therefore the witch to be burnt.*

*However we cannot burn trade, it is a concept – most likely the most important concept in the history of humankind that has allowed societies, communities and peoples to link together. So we decided instead, to burn the symbols of the concept i.e. ivory tusks, rhino horns and other confiscated wildlife specimens.*

*But while the bonfire was on, we threw in it the history book that tells us that prohibitions do not work, have never worked, and will never work.*

*By the same occasion we threw in the bonfire, the dictionary of definitions to replace it by our own definitions. As such, the definition of a hunter and a poacher is the same. There is no different definition between legal trade and illegal trade: harvesting a wild animal is called murder; a skilled ivory carver is considered a forger; bribery to a poor game warden is corruption; bribery to a senior official or politician is commitment to environment; and so on.*

*All those new definitions mixing legalities with illegalities together then fall under the general definition of 'wildlife crime', a message that celebrities, crowned or not, are too happy to carry throughout the world.*

*Finally, Madam Chair, we also threw in the bonfire, the Charter of Human Rights and quickly replaced it by the Charter of Animal*

*Rights and the Poachers' Charter. And this with dramatic consequences for people.*

*Madam Chair,*

- *When I hear the comments by the Distinguished Delegates of Japan and of the Democratic Republic of Congo complaining of harassment because of their political stands on certain issues;*
- *When I hear the emotional appeal from Swaziland completely ignored for obscure reasons;*
- *When I realize that the advice from the FAO on proposals related to marine fish species are being completely ignored; and*
- *When I hear the call for help, understanding and support from Madagascar being replaced by a call for punishment from the developed world, including from a major NGO;*

*Then, Madam Chair, I realize that CITES is getting away from its mission to conserve wildlife for the benefit of people as clearly stated in the Preamble of the Convention.*

*Madam Chair, there is a wrong perception of CITES. I can hardly understand the 'chanting and dancing' taking place whenever a new species is listed on the Appendices. If a species is listed in the Appendices for valid reasons – and we have recommended several of those – there is certainly no reason to rejoice: to the contrary, it is a sad day for humanity indicating its failure to take care of nature. However, if the listing has for objective 'the listing itself' – with no consideration whatsoever for the effects on conservation and on people – then 'chanting and dancing' is certainly inappropriate...*

*But at the end, Madam Chair, we came here in South Africa to listen to the people and to learn from them. After all, it is in this part of the world that the real relationship between humans and the other living creatures has been developed. We had everything to learn from South Africa and its neighbors. It is very unfortunate that there were only a few to listen to your voices.*

*Thanks to the Chairs of Committee I and of Committee II, but mainly thanks to you, Madam Chair. You are a perfect reflection of your people: charm, warmth and wisdom.*

*Thank you.*

*Eugene Lapointe  
Johannesburg, 04.10.2016*

**It is my view that CITES is probably the greatest threat to wildlife in Africa. When an international body can unilaterally**

## The Wildlife Game

**take wildlife ownership rights away from Africans, banning instead of encouraging the trade that benefits these landowners, and rendering African wildlife resources valueless to those who are its custodians, then we are in deep trouble. The sooner Africans rethink their relationship with CITES the better, and the reasons for withdrawing from CITES must be even more convincing following CoP 17 in Johannesburg than they were several years ago when that nearly happened.**

Is it possible that alternative arrangements could be made for sustainable, legal, controlled and profitable trade in wildlife products between African and Asian countries? Of course, anything is possible! This could be the major shift in thinking that is required to provide an alternative to the stifling impact of CITES. Africans should have proprietorship over their wildlife, be able to negotiate the best prices for their wildlife products, and make their land economically viable. Any international or government institution that

interferes with this process is complicit in engineering the ultimate demise of Africa's rich wildlife heritage. ♡

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### OPEN LETTER TO AMBASSADOR XIN SHUNKANG OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA TO NAMIBIA

21 December, 2016

Dear Ambassador Xin Shunkang,

During the past few weeks, several Chinese nationals have been apprehended and charged with wildlife crimes, including illegal possession of rhino horn, ivory and pangolin skins and scales. Your embassy is on record stating that "it will not allow a few of its nationals who have been arrested in connection with poaching to tarnish its country's image". While we recognize that not all Chinese nationals are involved in wildlife crimes, Namibia's environmental community believes that the situation regarding Chinese nationals committing wildlife crimes in Namibia is far more serious and broad-based than you have acknowledged. The fact is, unless effective action is taken now to halt wildlife crime, your country will get an increasingly bad name. And you and your country are best placed to address the problem.

Until the arrival of Chinese nationals in significant numbers in Namibia, commercial wildlife crime was extremely low. As Chinese nationals moved into all regions of Namibia, setting up businesses, networks, acquiring mineral prospecting licenses and offering payment for wildlife products, the incidence of poaching, illegal wildlife capture, collection, killing and export has increased exponentially. Chinese nationals have been involved in, and/or are the commercial drivers behind:

- the escalating poaching of rhinos and elephants in Namibia and the illegal export of rhino horn and ivory,
- the capture, trade and export of pangolins,

- the import of Chinese monofilament nets in industrial quantities via Zambia to the northeast of Namibia, which are destroying the fisheries of the Zambezi, Chobe, Kwando and Okavango Rivers,
- the unsustainable commercialization of fisheries in these north-eastern rivers and wetland systems for export to cities and towns in neighbouring countries,
- the capture and killing of Carmine Bee-eaters at their breeding colonies by means of nets,
- the rise in bush-meat poaching wherever Chinese nationals are working on road construction and other infrastructure, including tortoises, monitor lizards, pythons and any other form of wild meat, including from protected and endangered species,
- the illegal collection of shellfish on the Namibian coast,
- the illegal transit through Namibia and attempted export of poached abalone from Cape waters through Namibian ports.

We are also aware of long-standing interests by some Chinese nationals to start a shark fin industry in Namibia, a practice that has caused widespread damage to shark populations in many parts of the world, including in South Africa.

And more recently, Chinese nationals have proposed to capture marine mammals and seabirds for the Asian aquarium market. The Namibian scientific and environmental communities have strongly rejected this proposal on sound conservation and ethical grounds, as has the Namibian public.

We are concerned by an apparent total disregard by some Chinese nationals for Namibia's wildlife, conservation, and animal welfare laws and values. Namibians are proud of their environmental heritage, their rich wildlife resources and the institutional mechanisms that are in place to sustainably manage them. Namibia as a nation has worked hard to protect and nurture these natural assets. Namibia's wildlife management provides an international example for good conservation and sustainable use. We have not made these investments so that some Chinese nationals, or anyone else, can pillage them.

The illegal commercial interests of some Chinese nationals towards Namibia's protected wildlife has exploited the vulnerability of poor Namibians and divided societies. It undermines local ownership of natural resources and the empowerment of communities to manage their wildlife wisely, for long-term communal benefits. It undermines Namibia's globally acclaimed Community-based Conservancy programme, and it does considerable damage to Namibia's international conservation and sustainable development reputation.

The recent announcement by the Chinese business community that it is contributing N\$30,000 to counter rhino poaching, while acknowledging that Namibians are deeply concerned about the situation caused by some Chinese nationals, totally fails to understand the economic scale of the problem. Indeed, it is an insult to the environmental sector in Namibia and to Namibia's environment. An initial very conservative estimate of the extent of the losses to Namibia's wildlife and ecosystems caused by Chinese nationals is about N\$811 million. And this does not include the significant additional resources that Namibia's government, donors, communities, private sector, and NGOs have had to commit to combat escalating wildlife crimes. These funds should rather have been spent on more productive activities such as continuing to develop the wildlife and tourism sectors to improve the lives and livelihoods of rural communities.

We do not claim to fully understand the relationship between Chinese nationals and the Chinese state. It appears that Chinese nationals are not at liberty to obtain passports and travel independently around the world, bringing their personal capital and starting businesses in their own names in whatever country would have them, independent of the Chinese state. As such, Chinese nationals in Namibia appear to be part of a state supported system. So, as the highest ranking Chinese official in Namibia, we would expect all Chinese nationals in Namibia to fall under your authority.

As such, we now call on you to put an immediate stop to the illegal wildlife crimes perpetrated, encouraged, funded, incentivized or otherwise committed and supported, by some Chinese nationals in Namibia. Further, we call on the Chinese government to make good, by investing in Namibia's environment sector in a transparent and internationally recognized manner, and in proportion to the damage caused, to help rebuild Namibia's wildlife populations, ecosystems, management systems and reputation.

This letter does not represent only the views of the 40 environmental organisations listed below, but also represents the views of countless members of the Namibian public and our international friends. The

sentiments expressed in social media over the past months, from across a broad spectrum of Namibian society, and their outrage at the leading role that Chinese nationals play in wildlife crime have surely been noted by you and members of your embassy. You will also be aware of the sentiments expressed by our President, by the Minister of Environment and Tourism, and by the Namibian Police Inspector General as reported in the local media.

The time for inaction is over. China has a policy of non-intervention and yet these actions by some Chinese nationals, and the apparent inaction of your embassy to address the problem, are direct and indirect interventions that have disastrous impacts on our policy and legal framework, on our environmental culture and ethics, on our natural heritage and on our national conservation and development programmes. They also have huge negative impacts on our people and their livelihoods, and on our international reputation.

In late 2014 the out-going US President Barack Obama, in an interview with the *New York Times*, accused China of being a "free rider" for the last 30 years in not taking on more of its international obligations. In the last couple of years, particularly under the leadership of your President Xi Jinping, China has taken a decidedly more active leadership role in global issues. It is time to extend that leadership to natural resources and in particular, to wildlife conservation. Indeed, the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, almost 2,000 years ago, may have been amongst the first to advocate for ecological sustainability within a philosophy of coexistence between man and nature. If China is to live up to its stated aims of having positive interactions between peoples and countries then this, for us in Namibia, is a critical issue.

We support our government's policy of attracting foreign investment to stimulate growth, employment and development. And we counter all forms of xenophobia and profiling. However, we expect foreign investors and their nationals to abide by Namibia's laws, and to embrace Namibia's cultures, ethics, and values. Too many Chinese nationals have abused Namibia's environmental laws, and this is causing growing resentment and anger amongst Namibians. By their criminal actions, some Chinese nationals have drawn attention to themselves and their nationality through their blatant disregard of Namibia's legal and environmental values. We are also concerned at how little action the Chinese embassy in Namibia appears to be taking to address the problem.

We as concerned Namibian Environmental NGOs and businesses, who it should be stated, are pro-sustainable use, stand ready to work with a China that willingly takes on greater responsibility and leadership in addressing the illegal trade in wildlife and, in particular, commits to putting an immediate stop to all wildlife crimes in Namibia by its Chinese nationals.

*Yours sincerely,  
Dr Chris Brown*

*CEO: Namibian Chamber of Environment*

*Representing 31 Namibian Chamber of Environment Members plus nine other Namibian environmental organisations supporting this letter*