

# Covid-19 and the collapse of tourism: developing a platform for sustaining conservation and communities in Africa

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## Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has plunged the world into an extraordinary situation, creating seemingly limitless shocks and hitherto inconceivable disruptions to the way society works: the near total suspension of global travel is one of these. Where global tourism revenues have been helping simultaneously to deliver biodiversity conservation and local livelihoods, the pandemic has dramatically altered the trajectory of some national and many local economies.

Despite a dearth of pertinent data, the local and readily observable impacts that arise from the startling truncation of wildlife-based tourism are clear to everyone who is familiar with this system, and it is no exaggeration to say that the collapse of wildlife tourism threatens to compromise decades of development and conservation work in nature-rich and emblematic parts of Africa. Given this critical situation, and the likelihood that it may take a significant time to recover, there is an urgent need to:

- a) Deploy emergency relief funds to support local communities, civil society, and small-scale enterprises as compensation for lost jobs and revenue, in order to prevent a rush to the unsustainable harvesting of natural resources.
- b) Develop a 24-month stimulus package to support the physical and social infrastructure that makes wildlife tourism possible so that it can quickly resume once the pandemic is alleviated.
- c) Research longer term measures to improve the resilience of African conservation strategies.

All of these activities would benefit from targeted data gathering, consensus-building and the co-production of strategies, plans, budgets and responsibilities. A siloed, function-by-function approach is unlikely to yield the rapid results needed, and so to assist in this process we are promoting the development of an open collaborative Platform for knowledge sharing, research, data development, joint planning and communication.

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## Wildlife tourism and its demise

In 2018, global wildlife tourism accounted for US\$120bn in the global economy and directly provided 9 million jobs worldwide. To put this in perspective, this value is at least 5.2 times higher than the annual revenue generated by the illegal wildlife trade, estimated between US\$7-23bn. By 2030, developing countries, which contain most of the world's biodiversity, were expected to receive over 57% of international tourist arrivals, amounting to over 1 billion visitors per year.

The African Union has suggested that the cost of Covid-19 on the African travel sector may be \$50 billion with calamitous impacts on livelihoods. Detailed data on the contribution of nature-based tourism in Africa to national and regional economies, and to direct incentives for wildlife conservation, are sparse, but it has been estimated that 14 African nations generate at least US\$168 million in direct revenue from tourists visiting protected areas. Furthermore, wildlife tourism is said to make up 88% of the annual revenue of specialist tour operators on the continent.

All of this economic activity was brought to an abrupt end in March 2020 when the world responded to the Coronavirus with an almost total global shut down of commercial passenger flights. No sector has been spared – foreign-led photographic and hunting tourism were both obliterated and then local tourism was decimated by national lock-down strategies designed to protect citizens from the virus. While the prospects for recovery in the tourism sector are a matter of intense speculation, it is possible, and indeed likely, that it will take years to see a return to levels of economic activity equivalent to 2018.

### **Why does this matter?**

The revenues from wildlife-based tourism create financial incentives to conserve important wildlife populations and the ‘wild lands’ where they live – particularly where these financial incentives are shared and conspicuous at the local community level. When tourism stops, so too do the benefits of conservation. Coexisting with wildlife has significant costs (think ‘human-wildlife conflict’) and the erosion of direct financial incentives arising from the business of wildlife tourism will often sharply tip the balance away from conservation.

In the short-term, marginalized communities living side by side with nature, along with laid-off workers in lodges, safari camps and wildlife reserves, may have little alternative but to turn to the unregulated and unsustainable extraction of wild resources to sustain life. In the long run it is also more likely that wildlife-rich lands will be commandeered for farming and other economic purposes.

While the relationship between global tourism and wildlife conservation has its critics, and the motivation for conserving nature is not driven by economic interventions alone, clearly the economic activity associated with tourism at the national, regional and local levels is critical for the maintenance of protected areas, and the conservation of wildlife both inside and outside of these.

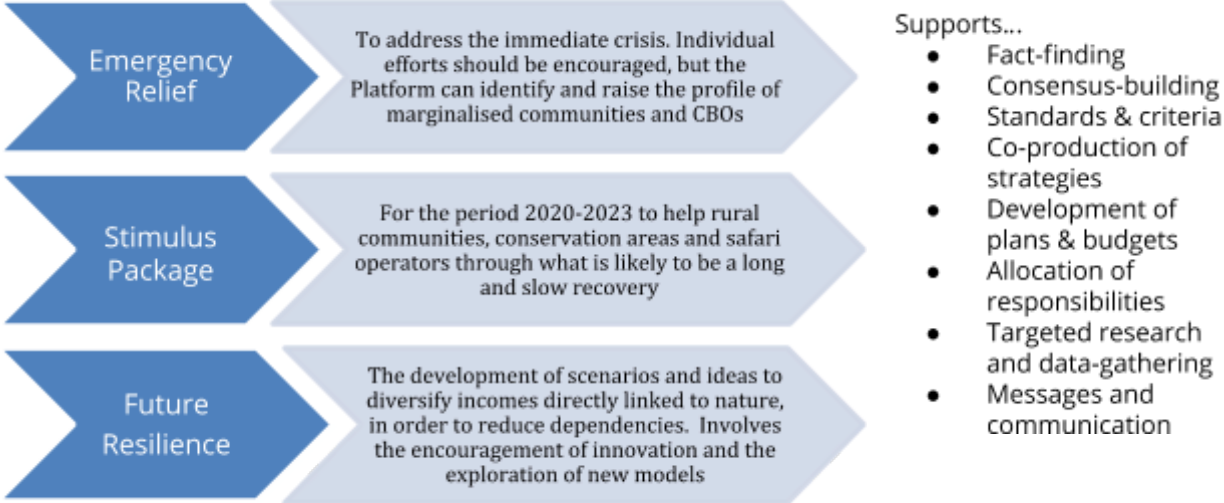
### **Remedial action**

At the moment there are numerous energetic and important initiatives to raise grants and loans for well-known wildlife areas and their associated safari tour operators, but there is much less focus on supporting marginalized rural community stakeholders who are the custodians of the landscapes and wildlife on which tourism depends. We believe that a new Collaborative Platform can address this shortcoming while helping to amplify existing fundraising efforts. An African community with one united voice stands a far greater chance of pushing this issue up the global agenda, where it is currently competing with literally thousands of other impacts ranging from health to employment, than do myriad individual exhortations.

The Collaborative Platform that we envisage would not interfere with any present or future initiatives and would be broad enough to encompass all those actors in the wildlife tourism sector who need support to survive the current disruption, whether they are private sector or community-based.

Our current thinking, which is shared with, and draws on the ideas of several other important stakeholders, is that the platform should put a wrapper around the following:

**Open Collaborative Platform:**



**Getting there**

On the one hand, circumstances are dire and our responses need to be swift, but on the other, these ideas need to be examined, discussed and developed as a community. We hope that together we can develop a process to examine the idea of a Collaborative Platform that will be able to balance these dissonances. We intend to start with a virtual consultation and if successful, this is likely to move on to the development of working groups for strategy, research and data gathering.

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**What is the Luc Hoffmann Institute?**

The Swiss-based Luc Hoffmann Institute is dedicated to driving societal change for people and nature to thrive together. We help create the conditions for transformational new ideas and approaches to emerge, grow and deliver impact. Dr Luc Hoffmann was a pioneer in nature conservation. He recognized the importance of protected areas and species conservation, but also understood that these did not always address the human concerns that are critical to success. Today, the Institute is led by Dr Jon Hutton, a conservation leader who studied wildlife management at the University of Zimbabwe and spent more than 20 years in southern Africa engaged in wildlife conservation and community-based natural resource management. He joined the Luc Hoffmann Institute in 2016 after spending 10 years as Director of the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

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