



Surveys

Elephant poaching & ivory trafficking problems in Sub-Saharan Africa: An application of O'Hara's principles of political economy



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex social problem of African elephant decimation using a political economy approach. This paper applies five principles of O'Hara's political economy (POPE): historical specificity; circular and cumulative causation; uneven development; heterogeneous agents; and contradiction. POPE provides a practical tool for scrutinising the interdependent aspects of a problem. The culture of conspicuous consumption for ivory is a key historical driver of demand. Yet a core, integrated factor that helps explain the current crisis relates to the principle of uneven development. The role of uneven development can be indirect, through lack of human development causing high crime and corruption rates, weak policy frameworks and conflicts in land ownership. Further, heterogeneity of agents adds to the complexity of the networks engaged in the decimation of elephants. Linked to the poaching–trafficking circuit of heterogeneous agents, this paper identifies two specific elephant contradictions between the market forces of durable fixed capital and environment–elephant capital. This study contributes to the literature by analysing the interlinking, cumulative processes of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking networks, which previous studies in the economics literature tend to ignore.

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Elephants are not beetles, not simply because they do not look like beetles, but because they do not behave like beetles.

[Poole and Thomsen 1989:189]

1. Introduction

Significant numbers of species are being lost to wildlife poaching and trafficking, and in recent years the trafficking has become more organised and commercialised than ever before. The magnificent African elephant is one of the key species under serious threat. It would be hard for us to imagine what a future would look like dispossessed of such majestic creatures roaming the beautiful landscapes of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The good news of late is that there is an active presence in the international community of enthused people from diverse perspectives—conservation biologists, ecologists, economists, journalists—that are attempting to get to the root of the problem of African elephant decimation.

To name a few, *Elephants in the Dust – The African Elephant Crisis* (2013) produced by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) et al. is a critical 80-page report detailing the “greatest crisis in decades”, due to surges in poaching, the illegal ivory trade and accelerating habitat and range loss. Interviewing human agents entangled in

the predicament on his visit to Africa, Jeffery Gettleman, an investigative journalist working for the *New York Times*, wrote several touching pieces on the poaching problems in Central Africa and Kenya. Elsewhere, regular and perceptive blog contributions can be found on the *National Geographic* website under the ‘A Voice for Elephants’. Countless daily e-news stories on the topic have been circulated, thanks to Melissa Groo's service from *Save the Elephants*. Numerous studies from the biological sciences have been written on elephant ecology and human–elephant conflict in leading journals such as *Conservation Biology*, *Pachyderm*, *Phil. Trans. of the Royal Society of London B*, and *PLoS ONE*, *PNAS*, and so on. And several fascinating papers study the economics of the ivory trade (e.g. 't Sas-Rolfes et al., 2014), albeit the proposed market solutions are not without controversy (Nowak, 2014).

Yet only a few papers in the literature study the African elephant poaching–trafficking problem from the approach of political economy. Political economy is useful to provide a deep and applied analysis of real world problems. The particular contribution of this paper is to examine the complex issue of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking in SSA using Phillip O'Hara's principles of political economy. Principles of O'Hara's political economy (POPE) provides a practical tool for scrutinising the interdependent aspects of a problem. O'Hara has provided a broad understanding of the related problems of crime and ecological destruction. An objective of this study is to provide valuable political economy insights into the *specific* problem of the decimation of African elephants.

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This paper focuses on the species decimation of African elephants and the crime and corruption associated with it. Elephant poaching and ivory trafficking are complex social problems that deal with a number of different aspects. Interactions are not merely limited to demand and supply factors. Due to the complicated and multi-dimensional nature of the problem, other variables need to be studied as well—such as human consumption *habits*, levels of development, elephant social distinctiveness and so on. POPE framework provides a structured approach that helps to delineate the key multi-facets of the African elephant problem. The paper is divided into four sections. The contributions of the existing economics literature and of O'Hara's applied analyses are succinctly reviewed in Section 2. Section 3 applies five of O'Hara's principles to the African elephant problem. Some policy prescriptions are put forward in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. A Short Survey of the Economics Literature on Ivory Trade and O'Hara's Approach to Political Economy

We delimit the scope of the literature survey to ten (selected) journal articles in 1995–2010 on the *economics* of elephant poaching and ivory trafficking. The relevant literature seems to fit broadly into the following key themes: effectiveness of the ivory ban; expected utility derived from poaching; implications of property rights; and imperfect knowledge. Note, prior to 1989 international trade in ivory and other African elephant specimens was regulated but legal. In 1990 a ban on trade in ivory was imposed at the 7th Conference of the Parties (CoP) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES is a global treaty, and it was agreed at the 7th CoP to list the African elephant on 'Appendix I', which prohibits trade in ivory products.¹ A key focus of discussion in the literature is on the association between CITES policy and trends in illegal ivory trade.² While some scholars are inclined towards supporting the CITES ban, others argue that the ban does not have a major impact on deterring poachers as illegal markets will continue to proliferate.

Several environmental economists have attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of the CITES ivory trade ban: Khanna and Harford (1996); Bulte and van Kooten (1999a,b); van Kooten (2008). These studies are important as each study tends to focus specifically on one or two aspects of the problem (e.g. property rights and political instability). What is lost in such analyses is an appreciation of the *complexity of the historical processes* of ivory trade. Several traditional economists (McPherson and Niewsiadomy, 2000; Messer, 2000) have applied economic theory to the "elephant problem", but they make several strict assumptions when modelling the possible outcomes. Some of the economic models utilised are based on several contentious assumptions such as the notion of 'optimality', and operate on the norm of separating dependent from independent variables. For example in McPherson and Niewsiadomy (2000), results of their study determine that while holding "all" other factors constant, countries that have property rights programmes experience a 19% higher annual elephant population growth rate compared to countries that do not. This *ceteris paribus* assumption is somewhat useful but not realistic for understanding

complex social problems from a holistic perspective, which consist of *multiple cumulative factors* acting simultaneously.³

Other studies have recognised the complex characteristics of *some* heterogeneous agents (e.g. rural people vs. government officials; consumers and poachers) involved in the "elephant crisis". Moore (2010) focuses on the perceptions of rural populations and Fischer (2004) focuses on the final consumers of ivory products. Agents are not homogeneous; multiple actors are involved with cumulative impacts. While these studies are good at capturing the complexity of some socioeconomic factors and addressing the role of asymmetric information; they are limited to studying the interactions of only one or two actors involved in the process. These studies are excellent at stressing the important role of asymmetric information; yet they do not offer a holistic account of the multiple cumulative factors and actors involved in the process. While all these studies provide important foundations, most fail to recognise the multiple interrelated factors that are involved in the predicament.

Political economy provides an alternative approach to interpret a complicated world. Between the 1960s and 1970s the postwar era boom began to dissolve, this then directed an evolutionary view of growth and development within the historical context of capitalism. Core problems had surfaced which required broader visions to study the key processes that were involved. Consequently, scholars sought to come up with a holistic social science to examine these major problems (O'Hara, 2012a,b,c,d). Various schools of thought began to emerge or develop further, including post-Keynesians, neo-Marxists, social economists, institutionalists, radical feminists and environmentalists. Economic theories based on socio-historical methods were proposed where political economists assigned dominant roles to history, institutions and the interaction between social classes. Political economy digs deep to examine all the levels of economic activity including the relationships between macroeconomic factors, as opposed to the view of individualism that neoclassical economics tends to apply.

Fred Lee [1949–2014], Marc Lavoie, Tony Lawson and Phillip O'Hara are key scholars who have attempted to link the various heterodox schools of economic thought using different methods. Lee (2009) brought social and environment scholars together. In Lavoie's (1992) technical analysis of aggregate demand, money and uncertainty, closer links between post-classical scholars were made. Similarly, Lawson (2006) noticed the ontology of realism between schools. Furthermore, O'Hara came up with a set of principles to link these schools. O'Hara (2012a:2) states that "the main differences between the four authors relates to international, environmental and development political economy". He goes on to explain the fact that Lavoie and Lee ignore these trends, whereas Lawson and O'Hara try to link some of the core themes of the different schools of thought to the political economy paradigm.

The major authors of political economy that primarily influence O'Hara are Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, John Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter; plus their followers; feminism; and so on. For instance, O'Hara's principles of 'historical specificity' (including culture) and 'contradiction' are based on Marx, Veblen, Keynes, Schumpeter and Polanyi. His other main influence is contemporary heterodox political economists. Hence, there are a number of sub-principles, or concepts; such as habit, institution, instincts; economic surplus, rate of profit, accumulation; class, gender, ethnicity; uncertainty, innovation, waves, cycles and so on. Above all, O'Hara is influenced by the problems of the real world and the need to scrutinise them holistically, in an evolutionary fashion and through institutions. His core general principles are synthesised in an original manner so that they are coherently used to explain phenomena.

O'Hara's development of a core set of principles is a pragmatic tool in helping to analyse real world problems. He develops these principles in richer detail (O'Hara, 2007c). Specifically, principles of O'Hara's political

¹ In 1997 at the 10th CoP, there was a change in the CITES listing of the elephant populations in Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The three Southern African nations were now listed on 'Appendix II', which allows limited international trade in elephant ivory. This down listing was extended to include South Africa in 2000.

² The other area of focus relates to the licensed one-off sales of ivory. Have changes in the one-off ivory sales had an impact on elephant poaching? The answer is controversial. Conservationists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Save the Elephants and the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), argue that one-off sales stimulate ivory demand and elephant poaching (Nowak et al., 2013; Rice, 2012). However, Stiles (2004:309, 2012) believes that there is little evidence to support these claims. Orenstein (2013:ch.17) provides an overview of the contested issues.

³ Other authors raise limitations, e.g. Stiles (2004:315) explains that "none of the formal economic modelling exercises have captured the complexities and vagaries of the real world of elephant killing, ivory ownership, ivory trading and consumer behaviour".

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