



# War, by Conservation

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that there has been a critical shift towards war by conservation in which conservation, security and counter insurgency (COIN) are becoming more closely integrated. In this new phase concerns about global security constitute important underlying drivers, while biodiversity conservation is of secondary importance. This is a significant break from earlier phases of fortress conservation and war for biodiversity. In order to develop a better understanding of these shifts, this paper analyzes the existing conceptual approaches, notably environmental security which seeks to understand how resources cause or shape conflict, and political ecology approaches that focus on the struggles over access to and control over resources. However, this paper indicates the limitations of these existing debates for understanding recent shifts, which require a fresh approach. I chart the rise of the narrative I call poachers-as-terrorists, which relies on the invocation of the idea that ivory is the white gold of Jihad, a phrase which is closely associated with an Elephant Action League (EAL) report in 2012 which claimed Al Shabaab used ivory to fund its operations. This narrative is being extended and deepened by a powerful alliance of states, conservation NGOs, Private Military Companies and international organizations, such that it is shaping policies, especially in areas of US geo-strategic interest in Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result conservation is becoming a core element of a global security project, with significant implications for conceptual debates and for conservation practice on the ground.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores a new phase of conservation which combines biodiversity losses with concerns about with global security, such that there has been a shift to what I characterize as *war by conservation*, in both discursive and material terms. Political ecologists have already produced an interesting and substantial analysis of the relationships between conservation, violence and conflict (see for example Peluso, 1993; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011; Lunstrum, 2014; Neumann, 2004; Fairhead, 2001; Ybarra, 2012; Pearson, 2012). However, current shifts in conservation mean these important debates need a thorough a re-examination. This is not just a 'back to the barriers' or fortress conservation movement, which implies a retreat behind the fences of heavily defended protected areas. This is an 'offensive position' in certain locations whereby conservation is the intervening aggressor, not simply the defender of wildlife; war by conservation is a proactive, interventionist militarized response that is spatially amorphous and extends well beyond protected areas and into the land and communities surrounding them. While political ecologists have highlighted the ways that conservation

strategies can be violent, this new phase of war by conservation differs because it combines anxieties about global security, with environmental concerns and counter-insurgency (COIN) techniques. One of its main driving objectives is security and stabilization of areas that are of geostrategic interest to the US-led War on Terror. Furthermore, this new phase can be characterized as war by conservation because conservation agencies themselves are becoming engaged in use of force against people they identify as poachers and as members of terrorist networks.

There is an increasing tendency to discursively frame poaching via reference to terrorism; this has been extended and embedded via invocation of the idea that ivory is the *white gold of jihad*, a phrase which is closely associated with a 2012 report from Elephant Action League (EAL) (Kalron and Crosta, 2012; White, 2014). The narrative of what I call *poachers-as-terrorists* renders the complexity of poaching invisible; further it has the effect of displacing alternative, longer standing approaches to poaching which seek to understand the very different reasons why different people engage in illegal hunting in a range of locations. It also distracts attention from the well documented ways that states, political patronage networks, standing armies and private companies engage in or collude with poaching (see Duffy and Humphreys, 2014; Ellis, 1994; Reeve and Ellis, 1995). The narrative of poachers-as-terrorists resonates with wider conceptual approaches of environmental security which

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aim to understand how groups engaged in violent conflict utilize natural resources to fund and support their operations (for example see [Le Billon, 2008](#); [Berdal and Malone, 2000](#)).

However, in this paper I argue that framings of poachers-as-terrorists and casting ivory as white gold of jihad are simplistic and poorly evidenced; yet, they have gained traction because they intersect with pre-existing concerns about global security, specifically anxieties about the expansion of 'terrorist networks' post 9/11. Further, this discursive production of poachers-as-terrorists has material effects, especially in areas that are of geo-strategic interest for the US-led War on Terror. The material outcome is that it has become more possible to consider greater use of force, including COIN, for any perceived or actual threat to certain iconic species (notably elephants). As such, war by conservation also represents a conceptual shift in current thinking in political ecology and environmental security about the links between natural resources and conflict. While this paper focuses specifically on the debates around the potential link between ivory poaching and Al Shabaab in East Africa, the rapidly shifting dynamics in the conservation sector have parallels elsewhere (see [Ybarra, 2016](#); [Lombard, 2016](#)).

These shifts deserve greater critical analysis. First, I examine the relevant debates from environmental security and political ecology; second, I sketch out the recent redefinition of poachers as terrorists; and finally I offer an analysis of how this is shifting practice towards war by conservation. The purpose is to explore the theoretical and evidential bases of the ways narratives around poaching are being reconfigured to combine with, deepen and extend global security concerns. This paper also demonstrates how those narratives have material effects and are producing a new phase of *war by conservation*.

## 2. Shifting from war for biodiversity to war by conservation

I argue that we are witnessing a shift to a new phase of *war by conservation*, but first it is important to note that this builds on earlier approaches to conservation, notably fortress conservation and war for biodiversity. War by conservation represents a continuity of some aspects of previous conservation practice, since there has been a long and well documented history of the use of force against people to protect wildlife and militarization of protected areas, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (see [Neumann, 2004](#); [West et al., 2006](#); [Smith and Rotshuizen, 2013](#); [Ellis, 1994](#); [Reeve and Ellis, 1995](#)). In order to understand how this current phase differs, it is useful to provide a brief explanation of these earlier approaches.

There is already a substantial analysis of the significance of the fortress approach to conservation ([Brockington, 2002](#); [Brockington et al., 2008: 17–86](#); [West et al., 2006](#); [Peluso, 1993](#)) and the ideas and practices of war for biodiversity ([Neumann, 2004](#); [Duffy and Humphreys, 2014](#); [Peluso, 1993](#)). Fortress conservation denotes a model of protected areas, produced via removal, eviction or displacement of local communities to provide separate territories for wildlife; it is closely associated with the historical extension of the model of national parks provided by Yellowstone National Park in the USA (see [Brockington, 2002](#); [Brockington et al., 2008: 17–86](#); [Adams, 2004](#)). War for biodiversity denotes the sense that wildlife is under threat and therefore conservation agencies need to engage in more forceful approaches to protect wildlife, to such that it was commonly referred to as a *war* to save them ([Duffy and Humphreys, 2014](#)). This was accompanied by greater degrees of militarization of protected areas, especially across Sub-Saharan Africa ([Smith and Rotshuizen, 2013](#); [Reeve and Ellis, 1995](#)). War by conservation represents a break with this earlier phase because it is characterized by a much fuller integration of conservation objectives with global security concerns, specifically the US-led

War on Terror and COIN, such that conservation is relegated to a position of secondary importance. Furthermore, conservation agencies are increasingly engaged in using force to tackle those identified as poachers and as members of terrorist networks. As such conservation and security concerns are combining in new ways.

This shift has been facilitated by a series of factors. One of these is the rises in poaching wildlife, especially of elephants and rhinos in Sub-Saharan Africa (see [Duffy et al., 2015a,b](#)). Data from the Monitoring Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE)<sup>1</sup> database indicates that rates of illegal killing of elephants across Africa rose from 0.6–2.1% of the total population in 2005, to 3.5–11.7% in 2011 ([CITES, 2012: 5](#); also see [Wittemyer et al., 2014](#)). An estimated 15,000 elephants were killed in 42 MIKE monitored sites in 2012 ([Nellemann et al., 2014: 32](#)). Rates of rhino poaching have also increased substantially since 2008, with the majority of rhinos poached in Zimbabwe and South Africa; in 2007 approximately 50 rhinos were poached in South Africa alone, yet in 2013 over 1000 were illegally killed ([Nellemann et al., 2014: 37](#); also see [Standley and Emslie, 2013: 6](#); [Milliken et al., 2009: 4](#); [Ayling, 2013](#)).

The drivers behind such rises in poaching and trafficking are complex and wide ranging, but a key factor has been the rise in wealth in existing consumer states (such as China in the case of ivory) and a mix of rising wealth and shifting cultural norms in new markets (as in the case of rhino horn consumption in Vietnam) (see [TRAFFIC, 2008](#); [Milliken and Shaw, 2012](#); [Challender and MacMillan, 2014](#); [Duffy et al., 2015b](#)). The figures do indicate a genuine rise in poaching of rhinos and elephants, rather than simply an increase in detection rates. The rises have led to calls from Governments and conservation NGOs for a more aggressive approach to anti-poaching by state conservation agencies, private sector wildlife managers and conservation NGOs alike; this is especially the case in areas of Sub-Saharan Africa where concerns about security (notably concerns about Al-Shabaab activity) coincide with rises in organized forms of poaching. The development of this dynamic has allowed conservation and security to combine in ways that require a fresh examination of existing conceptual approaches. The link between conservation and conflict is an increasingly important area for global policy. For example, Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UNEP recently stated in a joint UNEP and INTERPOL report that 'even the security and safety of countries and communities is affected...wildlife and forest crime, including charcoal, provides potentially significant threat finance to militias and terrorist groups. Already recognized as a grave issue in DRC and Somalia by the UN Security Council, the assessment reveals that the scale and role of wildlife and forest crime in threat finance calls for much wider policy attention.' (opening statement in [Nellemann et al. \(2014: 4\)](#))

Environmental security analysts investigate the link between natural resources and violent conflict. The approach is closely identified with the works of the Toronto Group and Thomas Homer-Dixon ([Homer-Dixon, 1999, 1994, 1991](#)). [Homer-Dixon \(1994\)](#) argues decreasing supplies of controllable resources, such as clean water and good agricultural land will provoke interstate 'simple scarcity' conflicts or resource wars; that large population movements caused by environmental stress will induce group identity conflicts and especially ethnic clashes; and that severe environmental scarcity will increase economic deprivation and disrupt key social institutions which would cause deprivation conflicts such as civil strife and insurgency (also see [Homer-Dixon, 1991, 1999](#); [Theisen et al., 2013](#); [Collier and Hoeffler, 2005](#)).

<sup>1</sup> MIKE Database <http://www.cites.org/eng/prog/mike/index.php>. (accessed 13.09.14).

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