



COAL MINING FUELS HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT IN HWANGE

By Simiso Mlevu Posted August 29, 2020 In Blog, Campaigns

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Hwange is known for coal mining, as well as being a haven for the country's wildlife. The coal and wildlife rich district of Hwange measures 21,956 sq. km of which 75% of it is under the Hwange National Park and several safaris. Human settlements and mining industries share the remaining 25% of the land. The national park, has an estimated 85,000 elephants and over 500 lions as some of the problem animals in conflict with humans today.

In the past five months, communities in and around Hwange have been grappling with the increasing menace of problem animals roaming around human settlements causing social problems. Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) is a perennial problem for most communities that live on the edges of animal habitats but for Hwange, the problem seems to be driven by increased mining which is disturbing animal habitats, thereby affecting animal behavior. Although climate change induced droughts, elephant overstocks and strict CITES measures have been blamed for human wildlife conflict, this article argues that an increase in mining and mining related activities and in human population is displacing animals from their natural habitats to human settlements, leading to frequent human-animal confrontations.

Mining in Hwange

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In the past decade, there has been an increase of mining activities in Zimbabwe's mineral rich regions. According to the Ministry of Mines and Mining Development, 85 coal prospecting applications were received between 2010 and 2019. As of March 2020, 28 mining licenses had been granted in the Safari areas of Hwange, Lower Dete and Gwayi Conservancy^[1]. To date there are at least 10 coal mining and coking companies in Hwange. However, apparent lack of mitigation plan to minimize impacts on socio-ecological systems has placed Hwange communities in danger. Expansion of coal mining is a direct result of the 12-billion-dollar mining roadmap launched by the government in 2019, which expects coal to contribute USD1 billion. The demand for coal has also been increasing because Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) is expanding its thermal electricity generation capacity.

Generally, mining close to animal habitats pollutes the air, water and foliage, and obstruct animal corridors. Noise from mines mask acoustic signals that animals rely on and, in doing so, hindering inter- and intraspecific communication among animals^[2]. Coal dumps result in perennial fires that have burnt and agitated animals in and around Hwange. In response, many animals change their behavior in an attempt to overcome the signal and cue-masking effects of the noisy environments^[3]. Wounded animals are always dangerous. Animals can react to the noise by moving away from the source of the noise (either temporarily or permanently) – temporally adjusting their own activities to avoid the noisiest times of the day, or increasing their anti-predator behaviour.^[4]

Investigations by CNRG have shown that Makomo Resources, Zambezi Coal Gasification Company, Hwange Colliery Company Limited western area and mostly Chinese led companies are located closer to animal conservation areas and as a result, forcing animals to stray into human settlements as they move away from the noise. Recently it emerged that Billy Rautenbach will start mining operations closer to the sacred Bumbusi ruins at Sinamatella in Hwange.

Population changes around Hwange National Park



Although Zimbabwe's population growth rate has declined to 1.4% since its peak in 1984 (3.7%), a study that was conducted by Guerbois et al (2013) revealed that there has been an increase in population on the edges of Hwange National Park[5]. In Hwange rural area, there was a 0.21% population increase from 2002 to 2012[6]. Reporting to parliament on the 28 June 2020, the Minister of Environment, Climate, Tourism and Hospitality, Nqobizitha Mangaliso Ndlovu indicated that population growth in some wildlife areas is one of the factors hampering conservation efforts[7]. The research by Guerbois et al (2013) attributed population growth partly to economic crisis that started from early 2000s. Zimbabwe's economic crisis has been escalating, pushing people from towns to rural areas due to unemployment and worsening urban economy.

The social and human costs of Human Wildlife Conflict in Hwange

There has been increased frequency at which wild animals are now straying into human settlements, as observed by Hwange residents in July this year. This is scaring commuters and mine workers. Elephants have reportedly destroyed water pipes as they search for drinking water in Hwange town. In the past three months elephants have caused havoc in Number 1, 2 and 5 suburbs of Hwange town as well as Chibondo and Shangano villages of Hwange rural.

Over the years there has been an upward trend in HWC fatalities as reported by Minister Nqobizitha Mangaliso Ndlovu. Twenty-six people were killed by elephants in 2016, 40 in 2017, 20 in 2018 and 42 in 2019[8]. More than 50 people have been killed in HWC incidences since January 2020.^[9] According to Zimparks spokesperson Tinashe Farawo, "this is a sharp rise in such cases compared to all of last year." Elephants accounted for 50 percent of the killings followed by crocodiles at 40 percent, and lions and buffaloes at 10 percent respectively.^[10]

CNRG Director, Farai Maguwu said losing 50 people to wildlife in 6 months is completely unacceptable. "All the 50 deaths are avoidable. Government need to ensure natural habitats for wildlife are left untouched by mining. In addition, government must carry out safety awareness campaigns in communities neighboring national parks so that people avoid walking into harm's way and also giving them skills of how to manoeuvre from charging animals".

In January this year, a marauding problem elephant bull killed 81-year old Elizabeth Ngwenya of Deka village while she was walking to a nearby school in Hwange from her home. In March 2020, a young boy (12) was seriously injured by a crocodile inhabiting one of the pits dug by Hwange Coal and Gasification Company about 100m close to human settlements[11].



In April, elephants completely destroyed a homestead belonging to Bhekimpilo Nkiwane in Mafa area of Lupane, one of the boundary communities to the Hwange National Park. In May 2020, Zimparks had to gun down a problem elephant in Victoria Falls that was terrorizing residents of Mfelandwonye suburb and killed an unidentified homeless man in the tourist town. On the 27th of July, 91-year old Siancumbi Mungombe from a village just outside Hwange town was trampled to death by an elephant while rounding up his cattle.

Due to limited forage in the national park, elephants are now encroaching into crop fields where they destroy large hectares of crops in Hwange and other districts in Matabeleland North Province. In addition to routine crop management tasks, farmers bear the cost of protecting their crops from wild animals during the farming season. Women are compelled to abandon some of their household chores and economic activities to protect their fields from wild animals during the farming season.

Residents of villages surrounding Hwange National Park have reported increased loss of livestock to lions and leopards. In the past four years at least 462 cattle, 544 goats and 94 donkeys from villages around Hwange National Park were lost to predatory animals[12] from the game park.

Women have not been spared by the problem. Of the 50 people who have been killed by animals since January, more than 25 are elderly women owing to their custodianship of the rural economy. Extensive mining operations in Hwange and around the national park have been driving animals into places where women fetch firewood in the dry forest for household purposes[13].

In conclusion, the following recommendations would ensure that communities are protected from HWC.

- There is need for the government, rural district councils and non-state actors to strengthen integrated conservation initiatives that build wildlife-based economies in communities around animal protected areas. This enhances the value of wildlife conservation for local communities.
- CAMPFIRE should stick to its original objectives of promoting rural livelihoods and meaningful involvement of local communities in financial decision making of the programme.
- The government must stop issuing licenses for mining in national parks. Where necessary, mining licenses already granted to companies operating in animal habitats and corridors should be withdrawn.
- Environmental Impact Assessments for extractive companies should be comprehensive and protective, taking into consideration the full cascade of effects of extractive operations on wildlife and humans.
- The Zimbabwean laws should allow for compensation of victims of HWC and promote accountability of both wildlife institutions and government to communities affected by the wildlife enterprises.
- The effects of coal are disastrous to local communities and the globe. The government should begin to scale down coal mining, focusing on renewables and reserve Hwange solely for wildlife economy.

[1] <https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/coal-mining-flooding-threats-for-hwange-game-reserves/>

[2] <https://environmentalevidencejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13750-019-0165-3>

[3] <https://environmentalevidencejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13750-019-0165-3nn>

[4] <https://doi.org/10.1890%2F120183>

[5] Guerbois, C., Dufour, A-B, Mtare, G. and Fritz, H. 2013. Insights for Integrated Conservation from Attitudes of People toward Protected Areas Near Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. *Conservation Biology* 27. 844-55.

[6] <https://www.citypopulation.de/php/zimbabwe-admin.php?adm2id=503>

[7] <https://www.parlzim.gov.zw/national-assembly-hansard/national-assembly-hansard-18-june-2020-vol-46-no-47>

[8] <https://www.parlzim.gov.zw/national-assembly-hansard/national-assembly-hansard-18-june-2020-vol-46-no-47>

[9] <https://africasustainableconservation.com/2020/08/03/zimbabwe-50-people-killed-in-human-wildlife-conflictsince-january/>

[10] <https://www.herald.co.zw/just-in-50-elephants-killed-in-human-wildlife-conflict/>

[11] CNRG interview with the boy's parents on 8 March 2020

[12] <https://www.parlzim.gov.zw/national-assembly-hansard/national-assembly-hansard-18-june-2020-vol-46-no-47>

[13] Interview with a community monitor in Hwange, 7 August 2020

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