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WILDLIFE, REFUGEES AND RELIEF AGENCIES: WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

Discussions about poverty-conservation linkages in recent years have paid significant attention to the – often disputed – roles and responsibilities of conservation organisations and development assistance agencies. A new report by TRAFFIC sheds light on an often overlooked sector in this debate – humanitarian relief agencies: the NGOs, UN agencies and government bodies that work on the ground with refugees, victims of natural disasters and so on. *Night Time Spinach* explores what happens when insufficient attention is paid to wildlife management and conservation in areas that have been designated for refugee camps, drawing on experience from Tanzania which, since 1993, has been host to one of the largest concentrations of refugees in the world.

For over a decade, relief agencies have recognised the need to address environmental management issues in and around refugee camps, recognising the dependence of refugee livelihoods on natural resources such as fuel wood, wood poles and local water sources. However, TRAFFIC finds that the contribution of wild meat towards refugee food security and well-being, and the impact of refugee camp management policies on the wildlife sector, are not fully recognized. Particular concerns include the location of refugee camps (in Tanzania, more than 20 major camps have been located close to game reserves and other protected areas), the inadequate provision of essential protein supplies in refugee rations (despite the best efforts of the World Food Programme, rations are often in short supply and do not include meat), and a government policy that discourages “self-reliance” in refugee camps (meaning that income-earning opportunities are few and far between). As a result, illegal hunting, trading and consumption of wild meat (referred to locally as “night time spinach” because of the covert, after-dark nature of the trade) have flourished.

The sheer number of refugees has led to extensive habitat degradation, while the hunting and trade of wild animals for meat has had a major negative impact on local wildlife populations. One outcome of this has been a decrease in income to local authorities as the refugee situation has undermined commercial hunting and tourism operations. Another has been decreasing availability of important livelihood resources to the resident local community as wildlife populations have dwindled. Despite this, TRAFFIC do not advocate a wholesale clamp-down on the refugees’ activities – though the report highlights that law enforcement will be essential to protect some endangered species such as chimpanzees and elephants. Of more concern is the fact that the trade is symptomatic of a failure by the international community to meet the refugees’ basic needs. Humanitarian relief agencies need to address inadequate food provision policies and sustainable wildlife use may be one option to consider more seriously – both as a source of protein for refugees and as a source of income for local communities.

The concluding message is nothing new – the situation demands urgent attention to increased dialogue and partnerships. The type of partnership is more novel – relief agencies have, to date not been part of the conservation-poverty debate. Now, it seems, their time has come.

SOURCE

Jambiya, G., Milledge, S.A.H. and Mtango, N. (2007). *'Night Time Spinach': Conservation and livelihood implications of wild meat use in refugee situation sin north-western Tanzania*. TRAFFIC East/Southern Africa, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The report is available to download from: <http://www.traffic.org/home/2008/1/22/lack-of-meat-for-refugees-causing-large-scale-poaching.html>

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