



OPINION PIECE



# The militarization of conservation: a different perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** Is the increased use in wildlife conservation of techniques derived from military and security services appropriate? One aspect of this issue that remains poorly considered is whether all actors engaged in conservation projects that have a security orientation are engaged primarily in conservation. Western intelligence agencies are known to have used non-government aid organizations (NGOs) as cover for clandestine operations. Does this happen in conservation? In one example, a previous US President expressed concern that ivory trafficking represented a national security threat to the USA, following a report claiming that ivory trafficking was funding terrorist networks in Africa. Coincident with this new reason for concern regarding elephant poaching, a US-based conservation NGO employed staff from US military intelligence to develop and run an intelligence fusion center with the Kenya Wildlife Service. After a few years, the head of the operation left the NGO and returned directly to her career in military intelligence. Without access to classified information, it is impossible to determine if this was coincidence. Analytical tools, including some developed by the intelligence community, could be used to better assess whether some conservation programs are cover for clandestine operations. In the meantime, conservation professionals need to consider the possibility that there could be serving officers of intelligence agencies inside conservation NGOs. In order to ensure the security of conservation workers and the acceptance of conservation programs worldwide, all national governments should offer unequivocal guarantees that conservation NGOs are not being used for covert intelligence operations.

**KEY WORDS:** Securitization · Human impact · International wildlife trafficking · Poaching · Covert operations

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In wildlife conservation, legitimate disagreements arise regarding the best way to achieve conservation goals. An important aspect of this discussion now is assessing whether the move to increasingly use techniques derived from military and security agencies is appropriate (Barichievy et al. 2017, Kiik 2019, Rytwinski et al. 2021, Duffy & Brockington 2022). These concerns extend beyond terrestrial conservation. Geopolitical concerns have been raised by the use of militarized Marine Protected Areas (De Santo 2020).

The current discourse on the militarization and securitization of wildlife conservation gives the impression of presupposing (e.g. Duffy et al. 2019, Duffy 2022, Duffy & Brockington 2022) that all actors using security techniques are primarily motivated to achieve conservation goals; that is, that the stated aim of projects (that is, the conservation of wildlife) is invariably the primary, and sole, aim of these projects. There are hints (e.g. Duffy 2022) that some discussing these issues are aware that this may not be the case.

What if our preconceptions regarding the real aim of a conservation program are wrong? Given the im-

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portance of environmental management in international relations, could the primary aim of a conservation program be to insert intelligence officers into an area of interest, rather than to protect wildlife? Western nations using non-government aid organizations (NGOs) as cover for intelligence officers is certainly not novel (McCarthy 2000, Bacon & Nash 2003, Anonymous 2014, Cole 2017). Were this to happen in a conservation program, the way conservation professionals assess the costs and benefits of different approaches to conservation would require reconsideration.

## 2. PROJECT TENBOMA

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) is a large international NGO, focusing on conservation of charismatic megafauna and companion animal welfare. It also has employed people with careers in US military intelligence. While the US military is so large that military veterans are not uncommon in many walks of life, IFAW's 'tenBoma' project was overseen by a military intelligence officer who was working full-time with the military prior to working at IFAW, remained a reservist while running the project, and then returned directly to her military career.

The tenBoma project is a novel approach to elephant conservation in Kenya. It uses modern surveillance technology aimed at detecting poaching activity before poachers kill animals, and at tracing poaching networks. It is described elsewhere (e.g. Meekan et al. 2017, Büscher 2018, Duffy 2022) as an exemplar of using the technology of security agencies to engage in conservation. The process is described as getting to the 'left of kill' (Hankins 2017, see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFaSd5F1O00>), derived from the expression 'left of bang' (or boom) used by the military and intelligence communities to infer getting ahead of (i.e. to the left in a timeline) a catastrophic event (e.g. Lester & Moore 2020, Baker 2021). This initiative was promoted by IFAW's senior staff (Downes 2015, 2017). It was presented as a collaborative partnership with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to use intelligence techniques to disrupt poaching networks (IFAW 2015) and described as 'a counter-wildlife crime intelligence fusion center' (Letham 2016).

The tenBoma project was initially, and until relatively recently, overseen by Lieutenant-Colonel Faye Cuevas, an officer in the US Air Force Reserve. In 2015, Lt Col Cuevas left the US military's Special Operations Command in Africa, where she was an

intelligence officer, for a senior position at IFAW and was tasked to run the tenBoma project in Kenya (Joyner 2017). By 2020, she had moved back to the Pentagon as an Africa Regional Strategy Officer (<https://www.wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Combating-Corruption-in-Environmental-Crimes-Program.pdf>). During her time at IFAW, Lt Col Cuevas remained assigned to the Joint Reserve Intelligence Support Element at the Pentagon (Joyner 2017).

In an interview in the official magazine of the US Air Force Reserve (Joyner 2017, p. 9), Lt Col Cuevas' background was described: 'As an intelligence specialist with the Reserve, Cuevas has spent more than half of her 19-year military career helping U.S. and allied forces track down terrorists in the Middle East and Africa, working with Air Force Special Operations Command and Special Operations Command Africa'. She described her approach to her work at IFAW as 'Being an intelligence officer really shaped the way I think about everything, so it was only natural for me to take an analytical intelligence approach to things when I took this job with IFAW in 2015 (Joyner 2017). The tenBoma project also employed other staff with a career background in US military intelligence (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFaSd5F1O00>). IFAW also worked, at least a short time, with Agile Analytics Group on the project (Letham 2016), a company self-described as 'specializing in Intelligence and Operations life-cycle services to Government, Commercial and Non-Profit clients positioned around the world.' (<http://www.agileanalyticsgroup.org/about>), and whose employees are 'intelligence professionals [who] combine tactical, operational, and strategic experienced gained throughout the world, in combat and non-combat theaters of operation' (<http://www.agileanalyticsgroup.org/intelligence>).

## 3. INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING (IWT) AND THE US NATIONAL SECURITY COMMUNITY

In July 2013, the Obama White House issued an Executive Order 'to address the significant effects of wildlife trafficking on the national interests of the United States' (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/01/executive-order-combating-wildlife-trafficking>). The White House then launched a 'National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking' in early 2014. It states that 'Wildlife trafficking is both a critical conservation

concern and a threat to global security with significant effects on the national interests of the United States and the interests of our partners around the world' (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nationalstrategywildlifetrafficking.pdf>). There is a tendency to conflate programs addressing IWT with conservation programs, although these two aims are not necessarily in perfect alignment (Duffy 2022). Reducing targeted killing of endangered species can clearly have conservation benefit, and programs to address IWT are referred to as conservation work, as shown by the quote above.

IWT was specifically identified by the US President as a security threat impacting US national interests. This interest was triggered by a report claiming that ivory trafficking was funding terrorist networks in Africa (for background, see Duffy et al. 2015). However, by 2015, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a venerable UK think tank specializing in military and security matters, published work demonstrating that ivory is not, and was never, an important source of funding for terrorist networks in Africa (Maguire & Haenlein 2015). Since then, further work has reinforced this finding (Felbab-Brown 2018).

Nevertheless, following the promulgation of this Executive Order, the US Intelligence Community (IC) demonstrated professional interest in IWT issues. For example, in mid-2016 the IC ran the 'first presidential task force symposium with the IC (Intelligence Community) at the helm. It was cosponsored by the U.S. Departments of State, Interior and Justice' (Hankins 2017). The perspective of the US IC was outlined by Lt General James Clapper, then US Director of National Intelligence (DNI), who stated 'Organized crime and rebel groups in Africa and elsewhere are likely to increase their involvement in wildlife trafficking to fund political activities, enhance political influence and purchase weapons' (Murphy 2016). Also from the meeting, the Office of the DNI's national intelligence manager for Africa was quoted stating, 'Due to the global nature of this problem, the IC must stress the importance of the topic of convergence as wildlife trafficking intersects multiple national security issues, such as financial and criminal networks, the critical importance of leveraging resources across the IC and our ultimate role—to enable multiple IC missions' (Murphy 2016, emphasis added). The tenBoma program started in 2015, and Lt Col Cuevas' move from the Pentagon to IFAW occurred in the same year.

#### 4. COSTS?

Without access to classified information, which, by definition, could not legally be made public, it is impossible to know whether it was coincidence that Project tenBoma employed a serving intelligence officer at a time when the US intelligence community was interested in poaching, or her employment was a front for intelligence collection. Regardless, Project tenBoma demonstrates some of the problems that have been identified with using the tools of intelligence agencies in conservation (e.g. Duffy 2016, Duffy et al. 2019).

If resources are being made available to support wildlife conservation efforts, whether or not they include addressing IWT, should it matter what the underlying rationale for the program is? There are several problems with ignoring rationales, apart from the argument, as has been reasoned previously, that the current move towards increasing use in conservation of techniques taken from the military and intelligence organizations can be bad conservation policy and practice (Duffy et al. 2019). Substantial resources have been expended on Project tenBoma. For example, from IFAW's public filings to the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Lt Col Cuevas was paid approximately US\$1.2 million over 4 yr from 2016 to 2019 (IFAW's IRS tax filing Form 990s, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/311594197>). IFAW's webpage on the tenBoma project (<https://www.ifaw.org/projects/tenboma-wildlife-security-africa>) indicates that it was funded by the TUI Care Foundation (see also Strehl 2019) and the European Union. The funding support from external agencies (TUI, EU) to tenBoma likely displaced money for other programs. Another resource that Project tenBoma absorbed was publicity. Lt Col Cuevas' work in Kenya attracted substantial media attention in the US and internationally. Examples include *PBS Newshour* (Ferguson 2017), the premiere episode of *Sunday Night with Megyn Kelly* (<https://www.nbcnews.com/video/into-africa-960116291944>), *Business Daily* (Biko 2019), *Associated Press* (Kazziha 2017), *Forbes* (Chiu 2019), *Vice* (Rogers 2017) where Lt Col Cuevas was a 'Human of the Year' in 2017 (<https://www.vice.com/en/topic/humans-of-the-year?page=2>), and *The Independent* (Watt 2019). In all these examples, the work carried out as part of Project tenBoma is referred to in terms of conservation or working to prevent the extinction of elephants. On the other hand, none of these media outlets reported on Lt Col Cuevas' move back to military service. This substantial, positive coverage reinforced the idea that using

the techniques of security agencies makes for good conservation, while also reducing the likelihood that other, less telegenic, conservation programs would attract publicity.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Clandestine intelligence operations are, by definition, deceptive. Deception operations work by playing to peoples' cognitive biases (Stech & Elsässer 2004, 2005). That being so, there is also a set of conceptual and computational tools developed by the intelligence community for counter-deception studies (Heuer 1999, Stech & Elsässer 2004, Pope et al. 2006). These tools, along with other computational approaches (e.g. Burke 2020), could assist in detecting instances of conservation programs that could possibly be operations with the primary purpose of supporting intelligence collection. While these operations may be legal, their clandestine nature makes it likely that, were they to be identified, they would be discontinued.

However, as authors on counter-deception note (Heuer 1999, Pope et al. 2006), an important first step is recognizing that we might be being deceived and checking on our presuppositions. To begin to understand whether there is a problem with clandestine operators working in conservation, first we must acknowledge the possibility that they work among conservation professionals and consider the problems that their activities could engender.

In the meantime, there are steps that could be taken immediately. After revelations that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) used a hepatitis vaccination program in the hunt for Osama bin Laden (Reardon 2011), a previous President announced that the US would no longer use vaccination programs as a cover for clandestine operations (Anonymous 2014). A similar guarantee needs to be extended to conservation and IWT programs, and it should be made by all nations.

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