

Between Ecology and Economy: How to Profit from Wild Animals without Exploiting Them

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Abstract

The wild animal trade is a large-scale and profitable business. We understand that it is a business that generates economic income, and people actually profit from it. However, it comes with many negative implications, starting with the practice itself, which is deemed unethical and harmful to animal welfare. Excessive practice leads to biodiversity loss, nature imbalance, and even the spreading of infectious diseases. It begs the question: is profiting from wild animals worth all the negative implications to the ecology? What if there were other ways to generate income from wild animals without physically exploiting them? This paper tries to answer that question. Utilizing the literature review and exploratory descriptive methods It is done by researching similar issues, such as tree cutting for timber, which causes deforestation. And how people can earn money by preserving trees rather than cutting them down, through the carbon offset mechanism. The results showed that it is possible to profit from wild animals without physically capturing and selling them. It is suggested that we can develop a means of ethical wild animal tourism. Instead of selling the animals, we are selling the experience of finding them and watching them doing their natural activities in national parks. The more numbers of wild animals preserved in their natural habitat, the more abundant they are and the more appealing they are as a tourist destination. In a way, profits could potentially be higher and more effective than selling individual animals.

Keywords: Wild animal, welfare, ethics, ecology, economy

Introduction

The act of removing wild animals from their natural habitat for the purpose of selling or buying is known as wild animal trade. One would argue about the ethics of this practice, as wild animals are not domesticated animals or pets to be kept as possessions. Yet, this does not stop people from conducting it anyway. Wild animal trade—both legal and illegal—is currently the subject of concern on a global scale, as billions of species of wild animals are captured to be sold (Wyatt *et al.*, 2021). The illegal wild animal trade is one of the world’s four major crimes, ranking just beneath drugs, arms, and human trafficking (Doody *et al.*, 2021).

The illegal wild animal trade is also closely linked to deforestation and biodiversity loss (Symes *et al.*, 2018) of multitudes of species, even driving some of them to extinction, such as elephants (Wittemyer *et al.*, 2014), tigers (O’Kelly *et al.*, 2012), and rhinoceroses (Haas *et al.*, 2016). Biodiversity loss is a concern because it will affect the natural balance of the environment in producing fresh water, healthy soil, clean air, crop pollination, the ability to combat and adapt to climate change, as well as the ability to lessen natural disasters (The European Parliament, 2020). However, that does not justify the “legal” wild animal trade either.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme and the International Livestock Research Institute (2020), both legal and illegal wild animal trade pose the same risk of increasing infectious disease transmission due to the close proximity of many different species of wild animals. Such close interaction between wild animals and humans can trigger emerging disease events with higher pandemic potential. There has actually been a long history of infectious diseases transmitted by wild animals (Devaux *et al.*, 2020), with the latest case being the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientists believed the COVID-19 pandemic emerged from the wild animal trade of bats (Andersen *et al.*, 2020) and pangolins (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). As a result, the issue is not about legality but about the practice of wild animal trade itself, be it legal or illegal. In

fact, at the moment, scientists aim for the long-term idea of ending wildlife trade altogether (D’Cruze *et al.* 2020).

In the last two years, wild animal trade has become a very popular trend in Indonesia. For example, in the case of “pet” monkeys, there was a rise in early 2020, around the same time several local celebrities went viral for owning monkeys (International Animal Rescue, 2021; Maulana, 2021). The number of “pet” monkey posts on social media rose higher than in the two previous years and has continued to rise exponentially ever since (International Animal Rescue, 2021). Even though during the same time, the world was facing a pandemic believed to be sourced from the wild animal trade. The trend of keeping wild animals as pets has become so popular that it has become the subject of social media posts. Unfortunately, not in a positive light.

The Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition (2021) published a report that stated Indonesia is the number one producer of animal cruelty content. Most of the wild animals used as pets on social media have cruelty themes that went unnoticed by the general audience, likely due to low education on animal welfare knowledge. Contents range from the ambiguous and unintentional to borderline sadistic (The Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition, 2021). Therefore, the negative impacts of wild animal trade have snowballed into the territory of mainstream social media animal cruelty (Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition, 2022). The normalization of wild animal trade, especially when endorsed by public figures, also causes harm to conservation efforts (Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition, 2022). There are so many negative consequences from wild animal trade as an act of exploitation towards wild animals that there must be a way to generate profit from wild animals without physically selling, buying, and using them for contents.

Materials and Methods

The methods used in this study were a literature review and an exploratory descriptive approach. They are used to explain the circumstances or phenomena that occur based on the discussion. In this case, the research tried to explain the possibility of an alternative to economically profiting without physically exploiting wild animals while still maintaining a healthy, undisturbed ecology. The research will start by searching for similar issues that already have an alternative solution to them; data that is deemed fitting to be used as a literary review would then be gathered. Afterwards, the data would be analyzed as a means to replicate the core idea of that solution to the issue of wild animal trade and exploitation.

Results and Discussion

A similar issue is researched with the core idea that wildlife is taken out of its habitat for the sole purpose of being sold to generate profit, and the issue must have an example of an alternative solution. I found a similar case, though in another form of wildlife. The wildlife used in comparison is not in the form of fauna or wild animals but in the form of flora, which is a tree. Trees have been long utilized as a natural resource in the form of timber, which people can generate income from. Trees are cut from the forest, their timber is taken out of the forest, and then they are sold for profit (National Geographic Society, 2022). The practice of cutting down trees to sell the timber is a business-as-usual practice that has occurred all around the world for a long time. The practice also causes a problem; generally, it contributes to deforestation (Subramanian, 2018).

In recent years, there's been a new method of utilizing trees without cutting them at all. In fact, people can now generate income and gain profit by planting trees. The more trees planted, the more profit they get. This method is in the form of a mechanism called "carbon offset."

The idea is that, instead of selling the physical form of the tree, what is being sold is the tree's natural ability to absorb carbon, so individuals or companies are paying for such activities, including tree planting (Collins English Dictionary, 2011). As we know, the world is facing climate change in the form of excess carbon in the atmosphere (Jorgenson, 2018). Therefore, there needs to be a way to reduce the amount of carbon produced daily. Trees can offer a solution for that issue, as trees are natural and efficient carbon absorbers (Macauley and Shih, 2010). It is estimated that around 31–46 trees are able to absorb as much as 1 tonne of carbon from the atmosphere (Kilgore, 2022). That amount of carbon absorbed would then be priced, and those who wish to remove a certain amount of carbon could pay accordingly.

Through this method, technically, you can gain profit without cutting and selling the tree. Instead, you get paid for preserving as many trees as you can. The more the tree population, the greater the profit. This is a good compromise between maximizing economic profit and protecting the ecology. With that core idea in mind, I would then analyse the similar principle to be applied to the wild animal exploitation issue. How we can profit from them without actually taking them out of their habitat and selling them physically. These are the basic outlines from the carbon offset core idea, in order to gain profit, the wildlife:

1. Must not be taken out of its habitat.
2. Must continue performing their natural behaviour undisturbed.
3. Must be thriving in population, the more they are, the better.

We can apply these principles to the wild animal exploitation issue in order to analyse it. The research tries to make a comparison to a form of popular wild animal tourism, such as zoos. However, it is decided that these practices, though profitable, do not fit the qualifications of

the principles. Wild animals in zoos do not live in their natural habitat, but rather in a man-made environment. It does not line up with Principle 1. Zoos put wild animals in enclosures to be seen and interacted with by visitors (Wild Welfare, 2022) or even perform tricks for entertainment. Those practices are not natural wild animal behaviour (Daly, 2019). Zoos are essentially man-made; thus, space is limited and you can only have a certain number of animals. In limited enclosure space, wild animals often cannot perform their natural behaviours (Smith, 2014). Therefore, these practices do not align with Principles 2 and 3.

We then look at another alternative of wild animal tourism, in a form of national parks. National parks as defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) are “Large natural or near-natural areas protecting large-scale ecological processes with characteristic species and ecosystems, which also have environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities” (Dudley 2008). National parks can be seen as a place where wild animals can live in a natural setting while still having the ability to be utilized for recreational purposes with income-generating potential.

In national parks, wild animals can live freely in their habitat. It is in line with Principle 1. The wild animals in national parks do not live in enclosures and can live freely. This is in line with Principle 2. National parks are essentially protected areas to preserve wild animals; therefore, it is expected for wild animals’ populations to grow.

This fact is in line with Principle 3. As of now, we have a general idea of where our practice will be located: in a national park in the form of wild animal tourism.

National parks as a tourist destination are already a common practice in Indonesia. The Indonesian government put national park tourism as one of its priorities, as it is a competitive practice with the ability to generate income sources (Eddyono *et al.*, 2021). When managed

sustainably, it can also be beneficial to rural communities by increasing their livelihoods; thus, alleviating poverty (Purnomo *et al.*, 2020). Tourists could visit a national park, enjoy the nature, and see wild animals in their natural habitat. In turn, local communities can derive income from it. Therefore, it is not a new practice. However, this research suggests that perhaps there are ways to improve this existing practice so that it is more efficiently profitable while also contributing more to the conservation of wild animals in their habitat.

One method is to find a certain amount of leverage in order to achieve the best result with the least amount of effort. It is possible to target a specific group of audience members that are more willing to spend a good amount of money simply to experience national park and wild animal tourism than just casual tourists. We can look at cases from overseas, for example, bird watching. Bird watchers have been known to be quite passionate about the hobby, and the practice of bird watching in the United States has managed to generate \$41 billion of income yearly for the United States economy (Catalano, 2021).

It is also known that bird watching, can help conservation efforts. Birding ecotours in the United States can provide a 2-week tour for birding and bird photography enthusiasts, for as much as \$5,000 or \$10,000 per person (Catalano, 2021). Even the slightest percentage from that fee, can be significant as donation to conservation efforts. Research also showed that when birding ecotours are managed well with increased services, visitor satisfaction will also increase that also leads to a higher willingness to pay (Lee, 2010). Indonesia is already among several countries cited as the best destination in the world for birding (Bullen, 2022). As a result, it is safe to assume that the market exists and that there is room for further development to attract the right visitors with higher willingness to pay; perhaps, international ones.

However, it is worth to note that wild animal tourism has a history of being unethical. The majority of wild animal tourism have substantial negative animal welfare and conservation

impacts (Moorhouse *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the practice of wild animal tourism, though intended to generate income, must put ecological ethics above economic gain. It can be done by applying strict guidelines and regulations. Daly (2019) recommends to avoid “red flags” such as when wild animals are being chained, performing, interacting with tourists, giving rides, posing with them, and being washed by them, as these are not natural behaviours.

The red flags mentioned also does not in line with Principle 2. Therefore, it is a very strict and serious aspect to consider in practicing wild animal tourism in national parks. There needs to be a guarantee that such red flags will not occur. Aside from ethical perspective, the measures are applied also for both human and wild animal safety in preventing the transmission of diseases. In doing so, it is encouraged that management would educate the visitors to practice ethical behaviour. Specifically for wild animal photographers, they must be advised to always keep a safe distance with the wild animal, do not interact, do not take selfies, and preferably only took photos of the wild animals only (IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group, 2021).

This ethical wild animal tourism, targeted at a specific audience with a high willingness to pay, can be applied to an existing national park tourism industry as a means of improvement. It could also be applied as a possible solution or alternative to existing issues, such as wild animal conflicts. One of the most common forms of wild animal conflict is crop raiding (Gemeda and Meles, 2018). Farmers are upset that wild animals would eat their crops for many reasons. Wild animals could be driven out of their habitat because human settlements are too close to wild animal habitat or because food in the forest has become scarce. This is surely a problem that often results in the wild animals being killed (IUCN SSC HWCTF, 2022). Or even in some cases, the wild animals are taken and sold due to them being regarded as “pests” (Lewis, 2022). We can apply the same non-exploitative measures to this issue. Instead of killing or capturing the wild animals, perhaps we can turn the problem into an opportunity. Instead of lamenting the

loss of crops, we can capitalize on the current situation by attracting wild animal enthusiasts, photographers, and tourists just to see wild animals eat. With proper management, this loss can be turned into profits. Instead of relying solely on crop sales, farmers can now sell the experience of a wild animal encounter to willing tourists.

In conclusion, it is possible to generate income and profit from wild animals without taking them from their habitat and physically selling them. It is done by preserving them as much as possible in their natural habitat, preferably in a national park. Then, what is sold is the experience of finding and seeing them in nature through ethical wild animal tourism. The tourism can be targeted at a specific group of tourists, such as wild animal enthusiasts and wild animal photographers, or even foreign tourists with a higher willingness to pay. These are the types of people who would appreciate seeing wild animals thrive in nature and would pay a good amount of money just to experience that. Locals would then work not to capture wild animals but to preserve them. This way, locals can generate income without needing to capture wild animals. Instead, they would allow wild animals to live as nature intended and profit from it. In turn, both the wild animals and their habitat are thriving and protected.

Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organization related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

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