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WILDLIFE RANCHING

Resilience in times of crisis

Private wildlife ranches are considered a mechanism to conserve biodiversity and support livelihoods. Now, a study examines the relative resilience of South African wildlife ranches during the disruptive times of COVID-19.

Marja Spierenburg

Wildlife production and conservation on private land is growing worldwide¹. Given the ambitious target of the UN 2030 Global Biodiversity Framework to increase protected areas to cover at least 30% of our planet, private wildlife ranches are believed to offer important contributions towards reaching this target. But how resilient is this form of land use during times of crisis, given that private wildlife ranches cannot rely on the safety nets afforded to public protected areas? A recent publication by Clements et al² in *Nature Sustainability* assesses how wildlife ranches, farms and protected areas in South Africa responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on their adaptive capacity.

South Africa was particularly hard-hit by the pandemic, with extended travel bans and protracted lockdowns during which international tourism came to an almost complete standstill. Its wildlife economy is substantial, with an estimated 14–17% of the country occupied by private wildlife ranches.

The study is based on semi-structured questionnaires, administered by trained field assistants. The researchers assessed the extent to which 78 wildlife ranches in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa were impacted by the pandemic and the strategies owners and managers deployed to respond to revenue loss.

The researchers show that both impacts and responses varied, depending on the business model particular wildlife ranches relied on. The authors distinguish four different business models in their sample: (1) trophy hunting ranches (45% of the sample) cater predominantly to international trophy hunters; (2) mixed wildlife ranches (16%) combine trophy hunting with local hunting for meat, venison sales and ecotourism, mainly catering to South African visitors; (3) mixed wildlife/agriculture ranches (23%) generate just over half of their revenues from agriculture (mostly livestock), which is combined with ecotourism focused on local South African visitors; and (4) ecotourism-focused ranches (16%) cater mainly to international visitors.



A public road passing between two farms, now part of one wildlife ranch in South Africa.

The majority of the trophy hunting and ecotourism ranches lost more than 75% of their revenues in 2020–2021, while mixed wildlife ranches lost 50–75%. By contrast, the mixed wildlife/agriculture ranches lost less than half, and 12% of the ranches even increased their revenues during the lockdown.

The coping strategies also differed. The trophy hunting and ecotourism ranches mainly focused on cutting costs, such as by decreasing the number of staff, while trying to attract more local visitors. A quarter of the trophy hunting farms also turned to agriculture to compensate loss. Mixed wildlife farms increased the sale of venison, also focusing on the local market. Such strategies were less common among mixed wildlife/agriculture ranches, which were less impacted.

The researchers argue that just as diverse ecosystems are more resilient, so

are businesses relying on diverse sets of revenue-generating activities. Nevertheless, they conclude that, overall, wildlife ranches have adapted well to the COVID-19 crisis. The researchers note that some adaptation strategies, such as reducing staff numbers, may have negative social impacts. This deserves more attention given the staggering unemployment rates in South Africa's rural areas and the high poverty levels, especially in the Eastern Cape Province.

Wildlife ranching in South Africa is promoted — especially by its powerful national association, Wildlife Ranching South Africa — as a win-win strategy for conservation and development. While the researchers cite some literature critiquing private wildlife ranches, which are predominantly owned by the minority of white South Africans and foreigners,

as entrenching apartheid legacies and racial inequities^{3,4}, they support the claim that wildlife ranching results in more and better paid jobs than agricultural ranches. However, most of the studies cited as proof are based on self-reported data by wildlife ranch owners or managers^{5,6}. These studies do not consider that the creation of most wildlife ranches — especially trophy hunting and ecotourism ranches — generally involves the amalgamation of several properties and do not account for labour opportunities lost when various agricultural properties are merged into one wildlife ranch⁷. The impacts of trophy hunting and ecotourism wildlife ranches have been particularly devastating for farm workers and dwellers, for whom the farms

historically not only were places of work but also home — farmers were able to keep wages low by allowing farm workers to live and cultivate on their land. With wildlife ranches, many workers are instead forced into the expanding informal settlements dotting the South African countryside^{1,3,4,6}. It is quite dangerous to argue that wildlife ranching in general seems to be a resilient form of land use when the social costs of the adaptive strategies of especially hunting and ecotourism ranches are so high. □

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.