

Wildlife Conservation in the Time of COVID-19



WHAT HAPPENS TO A COUNTRY'S PROTECTED FLORA AND FAUNA WHEN A PANDEMIC STRIKES AND LOCKDOWNS ARE ENFORCED?

Many conservationists have speculated on the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns, would have on wildlife and biodiversity conservation. While the reduction of human activity and its consequent impact on wildlife was seen as a benefit, conservation activities were impeded by the lockdown restrictions, impacting the protection afforded the country's biodiversity.

A [research project](#) funded by the National Research Foundation and the University of KwaZulu-Natal looked at this double-edged sword with the objective of developing mechanisms that could be implemented and ring-fenced to prevent negative environmental impacts and ensure that conservation is not affected by future global emergencies.

The researchers surveyed a number of conservationists and practitioners across South Africa using the International Union for the Conservation of

Nature's (IUCN) Threats Classification Scheme as a framework for its questionnaire.

According to the results, the four highest-ranking threats to biodiversity during the COVID-19 lockdown period were biological resource use; residential and commercial developments; human intrusions and disturbance; and invasive species, genes and diseases.

The researchers compiled a number of case studies derived from the data, which highlighted the impact on biodiversity during the lockdown.

CASE STUDY 1

This study centred around illegal hunting with dogs in the Eastern Cape Province. In the 13 months prior to the lockdown (January 2019 to February 2020), only four incidents of illegal hunting with dogs were recorded. This jumped to 45 incidents during the lockdown (March 2020 to December 2020).

CASE STUDY 2

This study looked at illegal land invasions in the Eastern Cape Province. The Grey Dell Forests, adjacent to the Umtiza Nature Reserve, are Controlled Forests and Natural Forests by the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and a portion of State farmland. Prior to 2019, no land invasions were recorded. However, in 2019, settlers started clearing indigenous forest and setting up shacks in the area. The situation was aggravated by the granting of an interdict by the courts against the State, preventing the removal of the settlers unless alternative housing was provided. This led to an increase in the number of settlements within the forest areas while, at the same time, lockdowns prevented their eviction. By December 2020, the number of informal houses had increased from seven to 200, and the settlers had illegally cleared about 50% of the 250 ha forested area.

CASE STUDY 3

Environmental offences recorded in KwaZulu-Natal Province formed the basis for this case study. While offences such as poaching, illegal entry, illegal

harvesting, firearms, arson, human-wildlife contact, dogs, property damage, permit and prohibited activity saw a general decrease during the strictest lockdown period, most rapidly increased as the lockdown period progressed. Poaching recorded the highest incidents, peaking over the three-months from October to December 2020.

CASE STUDY 4

The fourth case study looked at priority species monitoring by a conservation NGO. The funds available for monitoring priority species were drastically reduced during the lockdown in 2020, forcing monitoring teams to reduce fuel and time expenditure. Overall, there was a 37% reduction in the distance driven for conservation-related monitoring and interventions and a 39% reduction in time spent in the field inside protected areas compared to 2019. The researchers seek to use the lessons learned from the pandemic to ensure the success of future conservation research, monitoring and implementation, particularly during any such crises in the future. This requires political will; policy change; adequate funding levels; and recognition of conservation as a critical component of the mitigation against climate. 

