

# The Revelator

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*Rangers on patrol in Kruger National Park, South Africa. Photo by Bernard DuPont (CC BY-SA 2.0)*

## Conservation Communication: Time to Rethink the Word ‘Poacher’?

Killing an endangered species is a heinous crime, but the language around the act requires a refocus away from colonialization.

### Editorials

(<https://therevelator.org/category/ideas/editorials/>)

*September 30, 2022 - by John R. Platt*

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A man sneaks into a protected forest, where he hunts and illegally kills an animal. He’s later caught and charged with a crime: poaching.

That’s a word those of us in the conservation community need to rethink.



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I'm a conservation journalist focusing on endangered species, and I've written about wildlife trafficking and used the term "poach" (or "poacher" or "poaching") hundreds of times, often in headlines. But for a while now, I've also found the word ... troubling.

You see, it dates back a millennium or so, to the era of William the Conqueror. Back then, many forest animals legally belonged to the king, and the Middle English term *pocchen* described the punishable-by-death crime of taking/hunting wildlife from the forest and hiding it in a "pouch" or bag.

Centuries later, the term "poacher" has a distinctly colonialist (and therefore racist) feel. It places all illegal hunters and trappers — some of whom are immoral profiteers, others of whom are just trying to feed their families — together at the bottom of the social strata. (<https://www.conservancy.org/2016/08/03/it-is-ethical-to-kill-poachers/>)

It also paints them with a collective brush: The word "poacher" describes them all as *criminal* — or even *evil*. (<https://www.conservancy.org/2016/08/03/it-is-ethical-to-kill-poachers/>)

That implication has consequences. It stirs up anger and hate. Anger can be a useful emotion for creating positive change, but hate leads to dehumanization and can result in further violence.

Case in point: Several years ago I wrote an article that asked, "[Is it ethical to kill poachers?](https://web.archive.org/web/20160804201321/http://www.takepart.com/article/2016/08/03/it-is-ethical-to-kill-poachers)" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160804201321/http://www.takepart.com/article/2016/08/03/it-is-ethical-to-kill-poachers>) It stemmed from the ever-increasing militarization of conservation and looked at the societal cost of asking wildlife rangers to use lethal force. The article didn't have any easy answers to the headline's question, but online commenters sure did. Upset at seeing images such as dehorned rhinos and blood-soaked elephants, they screamed a resounding, bloodthirsty "yes!"

In a lot of ways, that response proved the point of my article: Calling people "poachers" puts a target on their collective backs.

And they don't *necessarily* deserve that. In truth, while illegal hunting and trapping remain crimes, and the slaughter of an endangered species is especially heinous, the reasons behind these acts vary widely, as should our responses to them. Some "poachers" — the victims of oppression, racism, forced displacement, income inequality, climate change, colonialization and cultural disruption — deserve our compassion and assistance, not our condemnation.



So what do we do about this? Replacing the word “poachers” with “illegal hunters” or “illegal trappers” is one solution to righting the language, although even that has colonial overtones and ignores factors such as [traditional practices and income inequality](#) (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320718317658>).

Another angle extends the language of human law. In her 2019 book [The Crimes of Wildlife Trafficking](#) (<https://www.routledge.com/The-Crimes-of-Wildlife-Trafficking-Issues-of-Justice-Legality-and-Morality/Sollund/p/book/9781315550428>), criminologist Ragnhild Aslaug Sollund looks at things through the perspective of victimology and uses the terms “abduction” for taking animals from the wild and “theriocide” (the equivalent of homicide) for taking their lives. (<https://www.routledge.com/The-Crimes-of-Wildlife-Trafficking-Issues-of-Justice-Legality-and-Morality/Sollund/p/book/9781315550428>)

One other solution involves looking at the reasons for the behavior before naming it. In his 2020 paper “[Poaching Is Not One Big Thing](#)” (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0169534720300744#!>),” ecologist Robert A. Montgomery said we should ask if the plants or animals were illegally collected or killed to address the need for food (consumption), health (medicative) or financial gain (trophy poaching). If we do that, then we can also approach the behavior appropriately, both in our language and our mitigative measures.

No matter what choice we make here, the lesson is that language matters and the choices we make can affect public perception and even conservation outcomes. If we tell people they’re criminals for feeding their families or engaging in ages-old cultural practices, they’re likely to respond negatively to anything else the conservation community or government says or does about it.

There’s no easy answer or single word to replace “poach,” “poacher” or “poaching.” To me, though, there’s a need to be specific when describing these actions and make distinctions between things like subsistence hunting — which could be a social justice issue — and the for-profit illegal wildlife trade, which remains worthy of full condemnation ... as well as a few choice words.

## Previously in The Revelator:





## Wildlife Trafficking: 10 Things Everyone Needs to Know

These crimes threaten tens of thousands of species around the world, causing extinctions, hurting people and spreading disease.



Tags: [Hunting](https://therevelator.org/tag/hunting/) | [Poaching](https://therevelator.org/tag/poaching/) | [Wildlife Trafficking](https://therevelator.org/tag/wildlife-trafficking/)

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**John R. Platt** (<https://therevelator.org/author/john/>) is the editor of *The Revelator*. An award-winning environmental journalist, his work has appeared in *Scientific American*, *Audubon*, *Motherboard*, and numerous other magazines and publications. His “Extinction Countdown” column has run continuously since 2004 and has covered news and science related to more than 1,000 endangered species. He is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and the National Association of Science Writers. John lives on the outskirts of Portland, Ore., where he finds himself surrounded by animals and cartoonists. (<https://therevelator.org/author/john/>)

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