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Nicola Okes
TRAFFIC

Nicola Okes represents TRAFFIC International, based in Southern Africa. She currently works across the global TRAFFIC network to coordinate engagement on issues relating to the illegal wildlife trade, with a focus on rhinos and elephants. She has previously worked on marine conservation and trade, analyzing both legal and illegal trade with the purpose of providing sustainable solutions to environmental concerns.

Her Story

What does your role entail?

I engage government and non-governmental organization stakeholders on elephant and rhino conservation and trade. Together with offices across our network, I employ broad, evidence-based research and analysis at national and regional levels to inform mechanisms that can reduce illegal trade in these species.

What drivers or facilitators of corruption are you working to address?

I see corruption as a barrier to the success of many initiatives that aim to reduce or mitigate the impacts of illegal trade. The drivers and facilitators of corruption are highly complex and often cannot be tackled from siloed conservation or law enforcement initiatives. My work today focuses on the illicit rhino horn trade. My hope is that a better understanding of market dynamics and the conditions that facilitate corruption will lead to more focused and informed interventions. An essential first step is to understand where key vulnerabilities to corruption lie.

Is there a critical moment that set you on the course you're on now?

I began my career working on marine conservation and trade. In that space, the link between social and environmental dimensions is clear—without stable fish stocks, there can be no food security. That intersection is something I hadn't explored in the terrestrial environment until recently. In 2020, I started work on a Khetha Programme project, a partnership between WWF South Africa and USAID. The project aimed to build integrity into conservation law enforcement and understand the types of corruption that are relevant to protected areas in Southern Africa. As I assessed the state of knowledge of corruption and talked to experts in many fields (including experts on social and behavioral change), I learned that understanding people and their motivations is key to affecting change.

> "Corruption is ultimately about people, their needs and their choices. Empathy is key to fully grasping the complexities of how and why corruption occurs."
>
> **– Nicola Okes,** TRAFFIC

What's something unexpected that you've learned through your work?

Listening to and appreciating a wealth of perspectives and experiences has allowed me to think more broadly about the complex, daunting, and often taboo topic of corruption. People are at the core of corruption events, but they are also integral to any sustainable solution.

What would you say to other practitioners seeking to address corruption through their conservation programming?

Because of the complex nature of corruption, it can seem overwhelming to tackle. I would encourage conservation practitioners to seek out experts with different mindsets and skill sets to help assess risks and relevant approaches.

What gives you hope for the future?

The fact that many dedicated professionals are working to contribute their diverse skill sets and experiences from different backgrounds and fields (including conservation, criminal law, behavioral and social sciences) makes this an exciting field to work in. Being part of a broader community working on these issues is really encouraging. Broadening our engagement with different government agencies and regional bodies means there are even more opportunities to develop solutions.