

Ecology versus poverty: The loser is ...

**Author:**Johan M. van der Merwe¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Johan van der Merwe,
johan.vdmerwe@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 18 Feb. 2026

Accepted: 15 May 2026

Published: 12 June 2026

How to cite this article:

Van der Merwe, J.M., 2026, 'Ecology versus poverty: The loser is ...', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47(1), a3811. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v47i1.3811>

Copyright:

© 2026. The Author.

Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

In the battle between ecology and poverty, ecology will always be the loser. This statement is proved in this article by using the Kruger National Park in South Africa as an example. In recent times, poaching of rhinos, snaring of other wildlife, and the poisoning of vultures have become a serious threat to the wildlife in the park. This is because of the immense poverty of people living adjacent to the park. The best way to address this ecological challenge is to find solutions to poverty. It is widely acknowledged that the government alone cannot solve this problem. Partnerships with other stakeholders are therefore a significant part of the solution. This is where the church, as an agent of change, can play a crucial role in this struggle against poverty and, by doing so, contribute to saving the ecology. After discussing the ecological crisis in the Kruger National Park, the article continues by defining and describing poverty in South Africa. It then explains how the church, as an agent of change, can play a crucial role in preserving the ecology.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article is based on a literature study of relevant scholarly articles, government reports, and newspaper articles. The author also incorporates paragraphs from a previously published article on poverty in South Africa. The statistics on poverty, however, have been updated.

Keywords: poverty; ecology; Kruger National Park; South Africa; poaching; snaring; church; agent of change.

Introduction

I once bought a sticker in the Kruger National Park. It read as follows: 'Save the rhinos – shoot the poachers'. A minister, working in the Dutch Reformed Church congregation in Skukuza, confronted me about this statement when he asked: Will you really kill a human to save an animal? He then continued by saying, 'Not the best army in the world will stop the rhino poaching while the people living next to the park are extremely poor'. Apart from the difficult ethical question his remark posed, it confronts us with a further important question: What is it that leads to the poaching of rhinos, one of the prime examples of ecological destruction? It falls outside the scope of this article to discuss the ethical question, but the article addresses the second part of his remark. It leads to the thesis of the article, which is that poverty is primarily responsible for the exploitation of the ecology. This is the subject of the article. The author will argue that when people live in extreme poverty, the environment will always come second. In the fight between ecology and poverty, ecology will always be the loser.¹ This must change, and the author will argue that the church, as an agent of change, can play a crucial *part in giving ecology a fair chance* in the battle against poverty.

To support this statement, this study will discuss poaching and snaring in the Kruger National Park in South Africa as an example of ecological destruction. The fact is, when people are poor, they will do anything to stay alive and will not care about the environment. The solution to the ecological crisis lies in addressing poverty. This is where the church plays a crucial role. It is part of the *missio Dei*² of the church. By addressing poverty, the church must also acknowledge its role in combating ecological exploitation. Churches must therefore be challenged to incorporate ecological awareness into their programs to fight poverty. By doing so, the church can play a crucial role in the fight against ecological exploitation in Southern Africa.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

1. It is not the purpose of this article to provide detailed solutions for the problems of poaching and snaring in the Kruger National Park. That calls for a well-planned research project.

2. The *missio Dei* of the church refers to the calling of the church. For more details, see the discussion under the paragraph: The church as agent of change.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Ecotheology in Southern Africa' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze, Prof. Kenneth R. Ross and Dr Gertrude A. Kapuma.

Recent examples of ecological destruction in the Kruger National Park, South Africa

The geography of the Park

The Kruger National Park spans across two of South Africa's nine provinces, the Limpopo and the Mpumalanga provinces. It covers over 19455 km² and is 350 km long from north to south and 60 km wide from east to west. The entire eastern boundary of the park is situated on the border with Mozambique, while its northern border is defined by the Limpopo River and the shared border between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Several major rivers cut through the safari park, including the Letaba, Limpopo, Sabie, and *Umgwenya* [Crocodile] Rivers. The landscape is mostly plains, which are occasionally broken up by the Lebombo mountain range that runs along the Mozambican border from north to south (Siyabona Africa 2026).

The Park was founded after Jakob Louis van Wyk introduced a motion in the Volksraad of the (former parliament) of the old South African Republic (ZAR) in 1895 to create a game reserve, which would become the Kruger National Park. The motion resulted in the proclamation of the park by Paul Kruger, president of the ZAR, on 26 March 1898. This 'Wildlife Park' would later be known as the Sabi Game Reserve and was expanded into the Kruger National Park in 1926 (Rhino Africa 2025).

One of the biggest challenges to the park is the presence of poor communities living adjacent to it. The extent of this problem and its relationship to poaching was already highlighted in 2017 when permanent delegates representing Mpumalanga in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) met with park management at Skukuza to discuss the extent of rhino poaching (Mokoena 2017). At the meeting, it was emphasised that communities living around the Kruger National Park, in Mpumalanga Province, must benefit from economic activities within the Kruger Park to alleviate poverty and discourage people from these communities from being easily recruited by rhino poaching syndicates (Mokoena 2017). The park's chief ranger, Mr Nicholas Funda, told NCOP delegates that wildlife crime, such as rhino and elephant poaching, was exacerbated by high rates of unemployment and poverty, which makes it easy for organised syndicates to recruit poachers from communities near game reserves. Funda continued by saying that poaching was an ecological, security, economic, and social challenge in the impoverished Nkomazi region and that the best way to protect the wildlife in the park was 'If communities around the park were benefiting from the economic activities, that will generate a sense of ownership and a need to protect the park' (Mokoena 2017). He also stated that the park has the potential to create much-needed jobs for the people living nearby. While that was the dream, and still is the dream, poaching and snaring have become a way of survival for many living next to the park.

Rhino poaching³

Although the poaching of rhinos in the Kruger National Park started slowly, statistics showed a dramatic rise in 2015 when 826 rhinos were killed in Kruger alone (Poaching Facts 2025). As poaching increased, the population of White rhinos decreased from an estimated 10621 in 2011 to only 1850 in 2022. This happened despite investing in access control, air support, training of security staff, specialised detection technology, K9 units, dehorning, and ranger training (Africa Geographic 2025). The latest statistics show that the Kruger National Park lost 45 Rhinos between January and June 2024. This represents a slight increase compared to 2023, when 42 were lost simultaneously. In May 2025, the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment (DFFE) announced that 103 rhinos had been poached countrywide in the first 3 months of 2025. He remarked that this number is a stark reminder of the relentless threat to the country's wildlife (Anon 2025b). Although these numbers indicate a significant improvement compared to 2015, and that targeted interventions are yielding results, a key reason for the decline in numbers is the dwindling population of rhinos (RSA 2024). There are just fewer rhinos that can be poached, and it becomes more difficult to do so. This is confirmed by Shaw when he says: 'Rhino populations, particularly in key strongholds such as Kruger National Park, in South Africa, have fallen dramatically. They've had no time to recover from the ruthless poaching that has taken place throughout the last decade. The long-term impact of the poaching crisis and the extended periods of drought are taking their toll. Without urgent action, their numbers could dwindle' (Save the Rhino 2025; Rhino Africa 2026).

That is why snaring has now become one of the main ways in which impoverished people surrounding the park are devastating the ecosystem.

Snaring

According to the former minister of Environment, Barbara Creecy, snaring has increased on the boundaries of the Kruger National Park since 2020. She based this statement on the fact that 2407 snares were removed in 2020, 4450 snares in 2021, and 7270 snares in 2022 (Walters 2023). The numbers are still climbing. Commenting on these numbers, she made the following important remark: 'We notice the increase coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic and increased poverty among communities adjacent to the Kruger National Park' (Bega 2023). This is confirmed by a 95% increase in snaring from 2022 to 2023, with 9739 snares found in Nxanatseni South and North alone (Hyman 2024). The reason for this is that more and more villagers are building their homes right next to the Kruger's fence. This allows those who lay snares to easily enter and exit the park under the cloak of darkness. Some villagers also cut the park's fences to supply wire to make snares and to allow wild animals to walk into residential areas where they are

3. General (ret) Johan Jooste explains the strategy against Rhino poaching in his book *Rhino War* which was published in 2022.

killed (Anon 2025a). As a result, one consequence of snaring is that the bushmeat trade is booming, driven by economic hardship. In the words of one of the dealers: 'I charge from R700 upwards for a whole buck depending on the size of the animal, while a carcass of the same size would fetch R2800 at a legal butchery' (Anon 2025a). Another poacher said, 'I understand very well that what I am doing is very wrong and unacceptable', but he continued, 'because I am endangering myself'. The animals are supposed to be protected; that is why they have a fence. But I was forced by poverty to join the business. Many people are buying meat from poachers because it is cheap. At the butchery, with R700, you only get a small portion of the meat, while from the poachers, they get the whole animal and can also sell the skin, head, and legs to local traditional healers. Buyers of bush meat claim they are not stealing from anyone but merely supporting the poachers who are taking animals that were created by God to be eaten (Anon 2025a).

At a two-day national snare mitigation symposium held in Pretoria in September 2024, the following important statement was made: 'Snaring is motivated by complex socio-economic and cultural drivers', as the symposium explored snaring from a myriad of angles and viewpoints. Information gained through the symposium highlighted that animals are snared largely for personal or commercial use. Sadly, many species, including leopard, lion, hyena and other predators, are killed as by-catch in snares originally set for bushmeat' (Anon 2024). It was further stated that (Anon 2024):

A key takeaway from the symposium is that we need a less 'fortress' mentality and more 'community and sustainable use interaction' among stakeholders towards achieving positive outcomes for this threat to wildlife. Communities living with wildlife, as well as those involved in snaring, need to be an integral part of the solutions being proposed and implemented. No solution will be credible without the involvement of the relevant community voices in the co-development of solutions. (n.p.)

The extent to which this problem of snaring has become significant is confirmed by Don English, regional ranger in Xanatseni North, who states that snaring is no longer about obtaining meat for survival. It is now much more money-driven. A traditional healer in the Bushbuckridge area, who specialises in poaching big cats and selling their skins and organs, claimed he uses the organs, hides, teeth, and bones for muthi. He also sells them to other traditional healers. He stated that adult big cats are in great demand, while juveniles are not wasted. Their skins, livers, teeth, and bones are still sold (Anon 2025a). He said:

I hunt lions, leopards, and cheetahs for their skins and organs. Many of my customers are from beyond our borders. They mostly buy whole carcasses. On the other hand, local people tend to buy organs, hides, and body parts, mostly for different types of muthi. I am not sure what the other traditional healers outside South Africa do with the meat. I only care about the money they pay me. (n.p.)

Another dealer said he sells a cat for approximately R2000, depending on the cat's size (Anon 2025a):

I use snares to catch them, but I must also carry a gun with me in case they decide to retaliate. It takes a week or two to catch one of them since they are very clever. Once the animal has been killed, it takes a day or two to cut the meat. (n.p.)

He further described how some of his customers eat lion livers because they believe it keeps them safe during dangerous situations when committing criminal acts. Others even use it to make them fearless at work or in business. Lion's phlegm is highly sought after among individuals in positions of power, whether in politics, business, or the music industry. 'It helps them to be heard when they speak or sing and strikes fear in the hearts of their opponents' (Anon 2025a). The lion's head is popular among people who want to be leaders, *especially in the church* or politics, as well as among polygamous men. Leopards are poached almost exclusively for their attractive skins, while cheetahs are desired by those who wish for a speedy escape from danger (Anon 2025a).

The picture became even darker over the past few months when poachers started poisoning carcasses, which led to the death of hundreds of vultures.

Poisoning of vultures

On the morning of 06 May 2025, a team consisting of the SANParks rangers and staff from the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) found a carcass of an elephant laced with highly toxic pesticides in a remote part of the park. They had responded to an automated alert for suspicious activity. The critically endangered white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) was the most impacted, with 112 found dead at the scene. The IUCN, the global authority on wildlife conservation, estimates that the species has lost 81% of its population in just under 40 years (Hanbury 2025). The reason for this is closely linked to poaching and snaring. Poachers increasingly use poisoned carcasses to eliminate vultures – either to harvest their body parts or to prevent them from revealing the location of illegal activities by circling above kills. Yet another mass poisoning of vultures has occurred in Mpumalanga. More than 100 critically endangered raptors have been found dead, their carcasses strewn around a poisoned warthog in Lion Spruit Game Reserve, adjacent to the Kruger Park.

This poisoning was the latest in a string of deliberate killings and has triggered alarm among conservationists, who now believe these attacks are part of a coordinated effort by criminal poaching syndicates to wipe out vultures – nature's watchmen – before launching a wave of poaching activity. 'We are genuinely terrified of what's next', said Kerri Wolter, chief executive officer of VulPro, a vulture conservation organisation. 'This is no longer isolated. This is ecological warfare' (Pinnock 2025). The death toll was 92 white-backed vultures (90% of them breeding adults), nine hooded vultures, and a single adult white-headed vulture. There were no survivors. This represents a devastating blow to populations already listed as critically endangered (Dibakwane 2025).

It is clear from the above examples that in the war between ecology and poverty, ecology is losing the battle, and poverty is a significant contributing factor. To understand why, it is important to understand what poverty is.

Poverty in South Africa⁴

Poverty defined

Van der Merwe (2020:3) explains that before examining the extent of poverty in South Africa, it is essential to understand what poverty entails. The late President Nelson Mandela set us on the right path with his speech on behalf of the Make Poverty History campaign in London in February 2005. Mandela said: 'Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the action of human beings' (Murdach 2005:2). Even if we take these words seriously, it is not as easy to define 'poverty' as it seems. Knight (2017:7) explains the challenge: 'A key challenge is the word poverty itself'. He emphasises that despite research on poverty that stretches over hundreds of years, 'there is little agreement about the definition, measurement, causes and solutions' of and to poverty (Knight 2017:7). Govender (2007:1) uses the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* to provide us with a composite definition: 'Poverty is the state of lacking adequate means to live comfortably and the want of things or needs indispensable to life' while Bradshaw defines poverty as: 'in its most general sense the lack of necessities' (Bradshaw 2006:4). He explains further: 'Basic food, shelter, medical care, and safety are generally thought necessary based on shared values of human dignity' (Bradshaw 2006:4). Valentine (quoted by Bradshaw 2006:4), in his search of a definition, defines the essence of poverty as 'inequality'. To my mind, the most complete definition was developed by Peter Townsend (quoted by Knight 2017), which forms the basis of much of the poverty research today and reads as follows:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. (p. 7)

Van der Merwe (2020:3) concludes that poverty defined as such has two sides. On the one hand, it refers to different forms of deprivation; on the other, it refers to inequality, which concerns the distribution of well-being within a population group.

He explains that in South Africa, these two aspects of the definition of poverty are like two sides of the same coin. Poverty means deprivation on the one hand and inequality on the other. If we define poverty in this way, it explains why ecology is losing the battle against poverty. It is not only about food but also about a way of living (Van der Merwe 2020:3).

⁴This part of the article on poverty is an extract from an article by the author published in 2020: Van der Merwe (2020).

One of the previous presidents of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, emphasised in 2004 the importance of understanding poverty in the South African context. He stressed that widespread poverty, which is endemic to South Africa, will have a huge influence on the future of South Africa, which includes the ecology (The Measurement of Poverty in South Africa Project: Key Issues, 2007:4). Just over 20 years later, his warning is becoming a reality before our eyes (Van der Merwe 2020:3).

Poverty in South Africa in numbers

One of the main issues that leads to poverty, as defined, is food security. Food security is about ensuring that everyone has access to nutritious, affordable meals. This remains out of reach for millions of people in South Africa. Even when food is available, many households struggle to afford it, and what is accessible often lacks the essential nutrients needed for healthy growth and development (Limpopo Provincial Treasury 2025). This is one of the key reasons why bushmeat has become a significant source of food security.

A recent report by Statistics South Africa, 'Food Security in South Africa in 2019, 2022 and 2023: Evidence from the General Household Survey' (Statistics SA 2025), highlights the scale of the issue:

In 2023, approximately 19,7%, which amounts to roughly 3,7 million households, faced moderate to severe food insecurity, while 1,5 million endured severe hunger. With economic pressures and rising food prices, ensuring food security remains a key challenge for the country. (p. 24)

The situation worsens, as further statistics indicate that millions of South Africans rely on social grants as their primary means of subsistence. 'What is important is that the proportion of grant-reliant households experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity increased from 20.2% in 2019 to 21.8% in 2022 reaching 26.6% in 2023' (Statistics SA 2025:25). These statistics are confirmed by reports of the World Bank that states that approximately 55.5% (30.3 million people) of the population is living in poverty at the national upper poverty line (~ZAR 992) while a total of 13.8 million people (25%) are experiencing food poverty (World Bank 2025). The report continues by stating that:

Household participation in agriculture is often seen as a solution to food security, but recent data suggest the problem is more complex. In 2023, 25,5% of households engaged in agricultural activities still faced moderate to severe food insecurity, compared with 18,5% of non-agricultural households.

In the report by Statistics South Africa (Statistics SA 2025), it is therefore correctly concluded that:

The triple challenge of poverty, inequality, and unemployment remains a major barrier to addressing household food security in South Africa. These interconnected socio-economic issues continue to exacerbate the struggle for many households, leaving millions vulnerable and in need of lasting solutions. (n.p.)

It is therefore not surprising that poor people living in rural areas do not care about the environment. Their struggle is not

to save the environment. Their struggle is to stay alive! How this struggle impacts the ecology is evident from what is happening in and around the Kruger National Park.

A possible solution to the struggle

The role of the church as an agent of change

The church's response to the challenge of poverty is shaped by its understanding of what the church is. Van der Merwe (2020:3) quotes Emedi (2010:17), who explains that the word 'church' in the New Testament originates from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means 'called out ones'. He emphasises that the church is viewed as a people called out to belong to the Lord. Emedi further emphasises that: 'when attempting to understand what the church is, it is also important not to lose sight of what the church is "called" to do'. He states that the church is doubly called. He correctly states that 'the church is "called out" of the world to become church into the world where the purpose of its calling is found' (Emedi 2010:17). This point of view is confirmed by Gelder (2004:87), who explains the double calling as a double movement of being 'called and sent'. Karl Barth identified this action of God as the *missio Dei* (Hancke 2006:38). By this, he meant that the church's reaching out to the world in its suffering is not, in the first place, an action of the church but an attribute of the sovereign God who uses His church as an instrument in the world (Van der Merwe 2020:3).

This is in line with the thinking of Jürgen Moltmann, one of the greatest theologians of our time, who says with regard to poverty (Naude 2006):

In the vicious circle of poverty, it can be said: God is not dead. He is bread. In the vicious circle of force, God's presence is experienced as liberation for human dignity and responsibility. In the vicious circle of alienation, his presence is perceived in the experience of human identity and recognition. (p. 950)

If this is our understanding of the church, the church can be nothing other than an agent of change not only in the lives of people but also in the whole of creation, including ecology.

It is the point of view of the author that Pillay makes an important contribution when he states that the church adhered to this calling through the centuries of history when he says that emphasis on the church as an agent of transformation and change is not a new concept or understanding of the role of the church (Pillay 2017 quoted by Van der Merwe 2020:3). Pillay continues that, the New Testament sees the ministry of mercy not only as an individual obligation but also as a corporate endeavour of the church, to be carried out by the church itself (Pillay 2017 quoted by Van der Merwe 2020:3). In the time of the Reformation, for example, Calvin saw poverty as a very serious problem and that it was part of the responsibility of Christians to address the problem. Pillay (quoted by Van der Merwe 2020) then emphasises that:

The Reformation movement did not only renew and change the church, leaving the world uninvolved. This movement intervened dramatically in the lives of all and brought about radical changes in the social, political, and economic aspects of a developing world. It gave rise to a new epoch in the history of humankind. (p. 3)

The history of South Africa serves as an excellent modern-day example of how the church played a pivotal role as an agent of change in society, particularly in the struggle against apartheid. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it as follows: 'The struggle of the church in South Africa was fundamentally how to bring about a more just society where differences of race, colour and culture were seen to be irrelevant and without theological significance' (De Gruchy 2004:ix). Pillay confirms this when he writes that living under apartheid challenged the church to fight for most of the people of South Africa who were poor and oppressed. The church was challenged to, by living the gospel, to attempt to transform society and to improve the quality of life of the poor and oppressed (Pillay 2017 quoted by Van der Merwe 2020:3). This understanding of the identity of the church is confirmed by the fact that the Christian church has 'always been involved in the transformation of society, especially as it took sides with the poor and oppressed' (Pillay 2017:11 as quoted by Van der Merwe 2020:4). He continues by stating that today, with the rise in poverty, violence and injustice, the Christian church is called upon to 'embrace engage and continue with its task of being an agent of transformation and change' (Pillay 2017:11 as quoted by Van der Merwe 2020:4). This also applies to the destruction of the ecology, God's creation. The question is: How can this become a reality at grass roots level?

Biblical stewardship

Magazi (2024) points us in the right direction by using the concept of biblical stewardship as a 'nexus' for environmental protection. He argues that 'Christians are custodians of God's creation' and therefore should manage the environment responsibly (Magazi 2024). This means, in the words of Le Roux (2017:205), that the Church is consequently well-positioned to make a significant contribution in addressing the environmental crisis by developing, preaching, and practising a holistic spirituality that promotes a custodial ethic towards the natural world. Le Roux (2017:205) emphasises that: 'To care for the environment as part of a Christian believer's Christian stewardship is biblically founded'. He emphasises that the vast number of people who call themselves 'Christians', and belong to different churches makes the church an ideal platform for reaching out to people across communities and educating them about environmental stewardship as part of their Christian-calling. The church must preach and teach the importance of environmental stewardship. This alone is unfortunately not enough. Good sermons and smart lessons do not fill tummies! Stewardship for the ecology will have to become part of the struggle against poverty. Instead of being opponents, the struggle

against poverty and the fight to save the environment must be partners in the church's mission. This is where the church can use the philosophy of Ubuntu to strengthen Christian stewardship. According to Ewoso and Hall, ubuntu is a moral philosophy developed by Africans, which means: 'I am because we are' (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng 2024:1). In a very important article, Kyei-Nuamah and Peng⁵ develop the notion of Ubuntu in ecology by explaining that: 'Ubuntu's concept of community must be "afro -eco -communitarianism"' (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng 2024:16). They continue by saying that: 'a community must be taken to include persons, ecology, and all animate beings' (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng 2024:16). This means that in the community, all entities are essential to establishing collective harmony (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng 2024:16). This means that the struggle against poverty and the fight to save the ecology become one community-driven challenge that moves us away from a win-lose position, where both the struggle against poverty and the fight to save the ecology become winners.

Moving forward

For the church to play an active role in the struggle against poverty and its ecological impact, action plans must be designed to collaborate with other stakeholders in communities and to actively engage local community members. These plans should aim to improve the living standards of the communities. This point of view is confirmed by Gen (ret.) Johan Jooste, who led the counter-poaching initiative in the Kruger National Park with great success. Jooste and Park (2022) wrote:

Wearing my start-small hat, I would argue that we need to ensure a much-needed whole-government approach, as we address the root causes of the problem of poaching, including unemployment and poverty, to ensure lasting solutions. (p. 278)

Jooste and Park (2022) then continues:

When it comes to community ownership, many projects are being executed with too little coordination, focused mostly on education and awareness, which, of course, is much needed. However, there is a socioeconomic dimension where the state and the private sector (which includes the church) must join hands to address real and urgent needs in communities bordering wildlife areas, including issues such as water, infrastructure, and basic services. Local government does not have the resources and capacity to provide these. (p. 279)

Jooste proposes an important grassroots solution to the problem, which he calls 'the private-public partnership approach' (Jooste & Park 2022:279). This will require a mature relationship and customised structures to ensure good governance while allowing flexibility in execution by a multitude of role players (Jooste & Park 2022:279). This point of view is confirmed by Dr. Jo Shaw regarding rhino

poaching, who states that one of the challenges posed by the ongoing poaching crisis is that it diverts attention from other actions crucial for rhinos to thrive in the future (Save the rhino 2025):

While anti-poaching measures are still a high priority, it's important that we don't forget the other tools in the box: Biological management, community engagement, capacity building, national and international coordination, and putting in place the long-term sustainable financing needed for important rhino conservation programs. (n.p.)

Although Jooste points us in the right direction, it is essential not to fall into the trap of market-based conservation, as Thakoli, Koot and Büscher (2024) point out. Market-based conservation is marked by persistent environmental, socio-economic, and racial injustices. This is what is happening now, and that is why conservation and ecology are losing the battle against poverty. In line with this way of thinking, Mabele, Krauss and Kiwango (2022) also suggest, as previously mentioned in this article, that Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophy that centres ethics of care, can be implemented 'to facilitate a decolonial reimagining of conservation in southern Africa through its ethos of relationality and communality.'

This is where the church can play a massive role. It is the calling of the church not only to fight against poverty but also to save the ecology in doing so. The ecology will be cared for when food security improves, jobs are created, education is provided, living standards are enhanced within an ethos of relationality and communality, and, most importantly, millions of Christians discover their responsibility towards the ecology. Only then will ecological conservation become sustainable, and there will be no losers. To do this, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. Many current programmes exist through which organisations either join the struggle against poverty or fight to save the ecology. The church finds itself in a unique position to create hybrid programmes that address both challenges. Two current examples can be named that be used by churches in the specific area around the park. The first is the Local Ecumenical Action Network⁶ developed by the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which was born from the SACC COVID-19 pastoral plan to 'organize functional local public ministry structures that address crisis relief and pastoral care' (SACC 2026). What is important about this programme is the fact that it was developed as a COVID-19 response built on previous work performed by churches at the community level. The programme is focused on being one of the vehicles that drives the current SACC strategic plan, which includes healing and reconciliation, quality education, economic transformation, and anchoring democracy. It is specifically quality education and economic transformation that provides the opportunity for the church to combine the struggle against poverty and the fight to save the ecology in communities.

⁵.It falls beyond the scope of this article to discuss their work in detail. The complete article, titled Ubuntu philosophy for ecological education and environmental policy formulation, can be read at: Kyei-Nuamah and Peng (2024:1-2).

⁶.For full details of the programme, see: <https://sacc.org.za/leans/>.

A detailed educational programme based on Ubuntu has, for example, been developed by Kyei-Nuamah and Ping, which they call an 'Ubuntu-gogy for ecological education' (Kyei-Nuamah & Ping 2024:17). They describe it as follows: 'Ubuntu-gogy, as a tool, sees every educational institution as a community' (Kyei-Nuamah & Ping 2024:17), which means that the curriculum and pedagogy is holistically set. They continue: 'On this view, traditional ecological knowledge is fused with science-based resources to ensure a practical way of deploying community understanding to attain local solutions' (Kyei-Nuamah & Ping 2024:17).⁷ Another example of how to expand the content of the current LEAN programme can be found through the programmes of A ROCHA. Eden Creation Care in Nigeria is a 'faith-based, non-profit, conservation organisation based in Jos, Nigeria that helps communities to protect areas important for their biodiversity, through educational programmes and scientific research' (A ROCHA 2026). They are currently running two projects, namely the Rennajj Fish Farm in a demarcated wetland and Mushere Forest, with the aim of providing protection for one of Northern Nigeria's most severely threatened habitats: Forest (A ROCHA 2026).⁸ These examples illustrate that if churches adopt an approach to ministry that combines the LEAN programme with A ROCHA's programmes within the broader framework of Ubuntu, poverty will decline, and the ecology will be saved: A win-win situation for communities in general but specifically in the areas around the Kruger National Park.

Conclusion

It is full moon, and the campfire is burning in a private game reserve next to the Kruger National Park. 'Poachers moon', comments one of the people around the fire. Not long after, we hear a single shot from a high-calibre rifle echoing through the African bush. Another rhino has just been added to the 2024 statistics. Ecology is losing the battle against poverty. It is time for the church, as an agent of change, to actively engage in this fight. It is not optional; it is part of the church's calling.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a conference paper originally presented at the Ecotheology Conference, held at Kutchire Lodge, Malawi, on 12–15 August 2025. The conference paper, titled 'Ecology vs. Poverty: The Loser Is...', was subsequently expanded and revised for this journal publication. This republication is done with permission from the conference organisers.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

7. For a detailed description of the program, see: Kyei-Nuamah and Peng (2024:1–22) page 17 and following.

8. For a detailed description of the programmes, see <https://arocha.org/en/projects/araps/>.

CRedit authorship contribution

Johan M. van der Merwe: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- A ROCHA, 2026, 'Earth raise: protect, observe, inspire', viewed 10 May 2026, from <https://arocha.org/en/earth-raise-2026/>.
- Africa Geographic, 2025, 'Kruger rhino poaching update: 75% population reduction in 10 years', viewed 10 May 2026, from <https://africageographic.com>.
- Anon, 2024, 'Snare Mitigation Symposium entrenches greater collaboration to address the snaring crisis', *SANParks*, 13 September, n.p., viewed 22 May 2025, from <https://www.sanparks.org/news/snare-mitigation-symposium-entrenches-greater-collaboration-to-address-the-snaring-crisis>.
- Anon, 2025a, 'Poachers tell all: Shocking truth behind snaring of wild animals in Kruger National Park', *Mpumalanga News*, February 28, n.p., viewed 20 May 2025, from <https://www.citizen.co.za/mpumalanga-news/news-headlines/local-news/2025/02/28/poachers-tell-all-shocking-truth-behind-snaring-of-wild-animals-in-kruger-national-park/>.
- Anon, 2025b, 'Renosters: 103 in eerste 3 maande van die jaar in SA gestroop', *Netwerk24*, 05 May, n.p., viewed 20 May 2025, from <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/nuus/omgewing/renosters-103-in-eerste-3-maande-van-die-jaar-in-sa-gestroop-20250505>.
- Bega, S., 2023, 'Snaring on the rise in the Kruger, says Barbara Creecy', viewed 21 May 2025, from <https://mg.co.za/the-green-guardian/2023-10-09-snaring-on-the-rise-in-the-kruger-says-barbara-creecy/>.
- Bradshaw, T.K., 2006, *Theories of poverty and anti-poverty programs in community development*, RPRC working paper no 06-05, viewed 20 April 2025, from <https://newrivercommunityaction.org>.
- De Gruchy, J.W., 2004, *The church struggle in South Africa*, SCM Press, London.
- Dibakwane, W.T., 2025, *Poachers tell all: Shocking truth behind snaring of wild animals in Kruger National Park*, Conservation Action Trust, viewed 10 June 2025, from <https://www.conservationaction.co.za/poachers-tell-all-shocking-truth-behind-snaring-of-wild-animals-in-kruger-national-park/>.
- Emedi, P.T., 2010, 'The local church as an agent of social transformation in a poor community: A practical and methodical approach', Unpublished MA dissertation, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.
- Gelder, C.V., 2004, *Church growth lacks a sufficient view of the church*, published in *Evolutionary Church Growth Movement*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Govender, P., Kambaran, N., Patchett, N., Ruddle, A., Torr, G. & Van Zyl, N., 2007, 'Poverty and inequality in South Africa and the world', *South African Actuarial Journal* 7(1), 117–160. <https://doi.org/10.4314/saaj.v7i1.24511>

- Hanbury, S., 2025, 'Mass South Africa vulture poisoning kills 123; 83 others rescued', viewed 20 May 2025, from <https://news.mongabay.com/short-article/mass-south-africa-vulture-poisoning-kills-123-83-others-rescued/>.
- Hancke, F., 2006, *Ons is die plan* [We are the plan], Swift Print, Kimberly.
- Hyman, Y., 2024, 'Concern over increase in snaring in Kruger National Park', viewed 22 May 2025, from <https://www.citizen.co.za/lowveld/news-headlines/local-news/2024/05/02/concern-over-increase-in-snaring-in-kruger-national-park/>.
- Jooste, J. & Park, T., 2022, *Rhino war*, Pan McMillian, Johannesburg.
- Knight, B., 2017, *Rethinking poverty: What makes a good society?* Bristol University Press, Bristol.
- Kyei-Nuamah, D. & Peng, Z., 2024, 'Ubuntu philosophy for ecological education and environmental policy formulation', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 58(4), 540–561. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhae034>
- Le Roux, C.S., 2017, 'How environmental stewardship is viewed and evidenced in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa: An appraisal of students' lecturers' and ministers' perceptions', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3(1), 205–225. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n1.a10>
- Limpopo Provincial Treasury, 2025, *Overview of provincial revenue and expenditure 2025–26*, viewed 15 June 2025, from http://www.limtreasury.gov.za/lim_admin_trea/pages/sites/treasury_lim/documents/budget_statement/Overview%20of%20Provincial%20Revenue%20and%20Expenditure%202025-26.pdf.
- Mabele, M.B., Krauss, J.E. & Kiwango, W., 2022, 'Going back to the roots: Ubuntu and just conservation in Southern Africa', *Conservation & Society* 20(2), 92–102. https://doi.org/10.4103/cs.cs_33_21
- Magazi, C., 2024, 'Ecological crisis and the church: A proposal for biblical stewardship as a nexus for environmental protection', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3140. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3140>
- Mokoena, S., 2017, 'Kruger National Park Must Empower Local Communities', *Parlement of the Republic of South Africa*, n.p., viewed 19 May 2025, from <https://parliament.gov.za/press-releases/kruger-national-park-must-empower-local-communities>.
- Murdach, J., 2005, 'Concepts of poverty', viewed 16 May 2025, from <https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/methods/poverty/pdf/Chapter-2.pdf>.
- Naude, P.J., 2006, 'The Marks of the church in South Africa today – In dialogue with Jurgen Moltmann on his 80th birthday', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27(3), a196. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v27i3.196>
- Pillay, J., 2017, 'The church as a transformation and change agent', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), a4352. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4352>
- Pinnock, D., 2025, 'Fears of a syndicate plot to wipe out all Lowveld vultures after 100 more poisoned', 19 May, n.p., viewed 20 May 2025, from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-05-19-fears-of-a-syndicate-plot-to-wipe-out-all-lowveld-vultures-after-100-more-poisoned/>.
- Poaching Facts, 2025, 'Poaching statistics: rhino poaching statistics', viewed 19 May 2025, from <https://www.poachingfacts.com/poaching-statistics/rhino-poaching-statistics/>.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2024, 'Minister George welcomes downward trend in rhino poaching numbers in the last two months', Department of forestry, fisheries and the environment, n.p., viewed 19 May 2025, from https://www.dffe.gov.za/mediareleases/george_rhinostats.
- Rhino Africa, 2026, 'History of the Kruger Park', viewed 19 May 2025, from <https://www.rhinoafrica.com/en/destinations/kruger-national-park/facts-and-information/history-of-the-kruger/76511>.
- Save the Rhino, 2025, 'South Africa: A rhino poaching hotspot', viewed 19 May 2025, from <https://www.savetherhino.org/rhino-info/poaching-stats/>.
- Siyabona Africa, 2026, 'History and Geography of Kruger National Park', viewed 19 May 2025, from https://www.krugerpark.co.za/Kruger_National_Park_Regions-travel/history-geography-kruger-park.html.
- South African Council of Churches (SACC), 2026, 'Anchoring Democracy; Economic Transformation; Comprehensive Quality Education and Healing & Reconciliation', *LEANS*, viewed 13 May 2025, from <https://sacc.org.za/leans/>.
- Statistics SA, 2025, 'Food security in South Africa in 2019, 2022 and 2023: Evidence from the General Household survey', viewed 15 March 2026, from <https://www.gov.za/documents/annual-reports/statistics-south-africa-annual-report-20242025-01-nov-2025>.
- Thakoli, L., Koot, S. & Büscher, B., 2024, 'Introduction: Fallen from grace? The legacy and state of Southern African conservation', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 7(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486231222145>
- Van der Merwe, J.M., 2020, 'Poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to the church', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(1), a6221. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6221>
- Walters, T., 2023, 'Snaring in Kruger National Park spikes more than 200% amid socioeconomic crisis', viewed 20 May 2025, from <https://www.conservationaction.co.za/snaring-in-kruger-national-park-spikes-more-than-200-amid-socioeconomic-crisis/>.
- World Bank, 2025, 'Poverty and inequality update', viewed 20 February 2026, from <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/229ff18129687a785f08af7c9fb28e5e1-0350012025/original/WBG-Poverty-and-Inequality-Update-Fall-2025.pdf>.