

Hunting for a way to save our wildlife

Rights activists oppose it, but the argument's rational

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TWO issues have created a deep division among conservationists across South Africa.

● Is recreational hunting an honourable source of revenue for wildlife conservation?

● How should we deal with poachers?

More conservationists say hunting is a useful wildlife management tool and poaching is inevitable until rural people benefit from the wildlife around them.

The protectionist lobby would like to ban all hunting. Its strategy regarding rhino poachers is simple – shoot the bastards.

It is a strategy that has developed into a lethal bush war that conservationists – and the rhinos – are losing.

Looking at the plight not only of rhino but wildlife populations as a whole, scientists are concluding that game hunters have more practical answers, and more humane ones, than the animal rights lobby.

If the rapid decline in wildlife north of the Limpopo is to be stemmed, sustainable and ethical game hunting for both trophies and meat and skin production should be a vital conservation tool.

Why not south of the Limpopo? Because here, in South Africa and Namibia, where hunting is encouraged, there has been no decline. Quite the opposite.

Environmental historian, Professor Jane Carruthers, has estimated South Africa had about 500 000 large wild mammals in 1966 – the number had risen to 18.6 million by 2007.

South Africa hasn't had that much game in the last 100 years.

The number of game farms – where recreational hunting is often used to keep game numbers within the farm's carrying capacity – is increasing annually. Professor John Hanks former South African head of the World Wide Fund says the number has risen from fewer than 5 000 in 2002 to more than 12 000 today.

Hanks, a scientist, believes conservationists must recognise the positive role hunting is playing in South Africa and Namibia.

They are the only two African countries that have shown substantial growth in wildlife populations.

South Africa's hunting industry – now bringing in more than R8 billion annually – is injecting funds into conservation and communities on a scale never before experienced.

Kenya, once Africa's No 1 tourist destination, especially for hunters, has lost its position to South Africa.

Kenya banned hunting in 1977. Seventy percent of its wildlife is now gone. Rural dwellers poach areas where once hunting safaris provided meat, money, jobs and anti-poaching surveillance.

In Zambia where the government has withdrawn funds for fighting livestock diseases, rural dwellers have turned to poaching.

Zimbabwe's hunting industry too, lacking government interest in the overall wildlife picture, is in disarray.

Hanks says conservation scientists have provided "substantiated evidence of the ecological and socio-economic benefits" stemming from hunting when compared with livestock farming in marginal land.

"Game farms in South Africa generate revenue from a combination of ecotourism, the sale of live animals and several forms of hunting, with meat as a by-product," he said.

"Hunting makes the largest contribution, earning R7.7bn in 2011: R3.1bn from 250 000 South African biltong producing hunters; R2.1bn from 15 000 foreign trophy hunters; and the balance from services like accommodation and food.

"Government-owned national parks and reserves rely on game farmers for help," said Hanks.

In 2011, after days of debate, 1 000 members at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature assembly, confirmed "well-managed recreational hunting has a role in the managed sustainable consumptive use of wildlife populations".

Ecologist and resource economist, Professor Brian Child of the University of Florida, says the game ranching economy – as opposed to cattle ranching in Africa, "is a legitimate option that should be supported by those serious about the future of Africa's biodiversity".

Ironically the big game animal that is bringing the most wealth to impoverished communities is the rhino. But that's only because of the demand for rhino horn and the enormous amount of money Far Eastern criminals are paying poachers.

Yet the rhino could have been bringing in extraordinary wealth but for pressure from northern hemisphere protectionists.

According to Hanks: "A quarter of South Africa's 20 900 rhinos – that is more than the entire rhino population outside South Africa – is on private land."

Were it not for overseas pressure, some of these could be hunted.

And if trade in rhino horn were to become legal, at least 1kg could be harvested annually from each of these animals without a single one having to die.

Even this is opposed by most in the protectionist lobby.

Yet the hunting industry has been responsible for re-introducing rhino as well as sable and roan that are now being bred by game farmers and re-introduced to where they were once common.

Had South Africa been left to establish its own wildlife strategy and allowed the sustainable hunting of rhino and the harvesting of horn, had hunters been allowed to export their trophies, the animal would probably be in less danger.

Protectionists claim trophy hunters, by pursuing trophy animals, are depleting the gene pool. But according to the records, trophy heads today are about the same as they were 50 years ago.

Hunters have also been blamed for depleting game numbers by going for males in their prime. The opposite is true.

During the culling of hundreds of impala in the overstocked Mkuze Game Reserve, rangers took out several trophy-sized rams that had harems of up to 60 ewes. These old buck could fend off young rivals, but they could impregnate only a few of the females. As soon as they were removed, the population shot up because the young buck divided the females among themselves and all became pregnant.

Award-winning environmental journalist, Glen Martin, in his 2012 book, *Game Changer: Animal rights and the fate of Africa's wildlife*, compares Kenya's failing wildlife protectionist policy with developments in Namibia and South Africa.

"Unfortunately, an objective assessment of conservation benefits is rarely the primary concern of animal rights groups," he said.

Some say it's as a deep-seated need

WHY DO men hunt?

The pleasure is in the pursuit, the physical challenge, a love of the outdoors, in stalking prey.

Some say humans are hard-wired to hunt. It's the reason humans survived in Africa.

Our ancestors were forced to abandon the retreating forests and, fangless, clawless and not fleet of foot, had to compete with the great predators of the plains for meat.

For four million years humans and pre-humans did just that. Only in the last 10 000 years did some of

our forebears settle.

Hunting's in our genes, so can photo safaris and other forms of eco-tourism become a substitute?

Wilderness Safaris says: "Ecotourism on its own can't ensure the conservation of Africa as a whole.

"We share the views of respected academics who have applied dispassionate analysis to Africa's hunting industry and conclude that: trophy hunting is of major importance to conservation by creating economic incentives."

Zimbabwe

THE US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) used the poisoning of 300 elephants in Hwange National Park last year to justify a ban on elephant products to America.

It has severely curtailed legitimate hunting, yet, it was professional hunters who raised the alarm. The poachers were arrested and imprisoned for a minimum of 15 years each.

Hunting outfits claim their operations along the Zimbabwe/Botswana border have been the only effective deterrent to poaching up to now.

The sport-hunting quota of elephants is between 30 and 35 elephants a year. This produces 70 tons of meat and has been sustained for more than 20 years.

Eighty-five percent of the hunting fees in Zimbabwe goes back into community projects.

It is argued that if hunting ceases, villagers will be tempted to co-operate with poachers and poach themselves for bush meat.

Former game warden, Ron Thomson, says Hwange should carry no more than 2 500 elephants. It now has between 30 000 and 50 000.

Botswana

THE GOVERNMENT has banned all hunting. Yet in the north with its wildlife-filled Okavango Delta, dramatic scenery and wildlife, trophy hunting is seen as the only alternative to unsustainable agriculture.

Conservation scientists argue the ban was a hasty response to the decline in species other than elephants, but the decline in fauna, according to wildlife experts, is due to poaching.

It is also because of the loss of migration corridors between dry season and wet season areas as well as invasive commercial ranching and the failure of the Community-Based Natural Resource Management system.

Hunting has prospered on a quota of elephant and buffalo. These two species have been increasing in the hunting areas.

Wildlife ecologists say hunting also lowered the human death rate and crop losses due to human-wildlife conflict and hunters supported the community programmes.

At least 500 employees in the industry are now expected to migrate to South Africa.

Namibia

IN THE 1970s there was a worldwide ban on the importation of cheetahs. Sheep farmers who were losing stock to them began shooting them on sight, leaving their now worthless bodies to rot in the veld. The event was the catalyst that persuaded three of us (Clive Walker, Neville Anderson and myself) in 1973 to form the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to fund research into endangered animals.

EWT's research revealed an alarming dip in numbers following the ban on hunting.

The ban was lifted and cheetahs recovered. Farmers found the financial loss because of sheep being killed was more than compensated for by the collection of hunting fees.

Elephants then numbered fewer than 5 000. There are now 20 000 despite big game hunting.

Wildlife populations are increasing steadily in Namibia.

The financial returns they gain from safari hunting are a key factor in improving how they protect and manage their wildlife. Community conservancies cover a fifth of Namibia.