Is trophy hunting the best way to save Africa's wildlife?

'A trophy hunter brings in 1,800 times the revenue of a photo tourist' CREDIT: GETTY

By Brian Jackman and Graham Boynton

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Wildlife holds the key to alleviating poverty in Africa – but our experts have opposing views on exactly how

'Ecotourism is the financial bedrock of every park and game reserve in Africa'

Brian Jackman writes:

Holidays in pursuit of wild animals have never been more popular. They can also be a force for good. Last year, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), wildlife tourism in Africa employed 3.6 million people and was worth $29.3 billion (£24.7 billion). As the WTTC's president, Gloria Guevara, says: "Our message to tourism businesses, employees and visitors across the globe is that wildlife is worth far more alive than dead."

Ecotourism is the financial bedrock underpinning every park and game reserve in Africa. It has been estimated that a live elephant may be worth as much as $1.6 million over its lifetime, with income from "photographic" tourism far outweighing the fee paid by a trophy hunter to shoot it. Wildlife tourism also employs more people and pays higher wages than hunting outfitters.

Despite such evidence, hundreds of thousands of animals are killed by trophy hunters every year in the name of sport. Seldom has the practice caused greater controversy than the killing of Cecil in July 2015. He was the most famous lion in Zimbabwe, a 13-year-old pride male wearing a GPS collar and living in Hwange National Park where wildlife is protected – but neither could save him.

A Minnesota dentist with a passion for hunting was determined to collect his trophy – and a dead elephant was all that was needed to tempt Cecil out of the park. Then, having lain in wait until nightfall, the trophy hunter shot him with a bow. The arrow struck Cecil but not fatally, and it would be another 10 hours before the lion was finally put out of his misery.

Cecil the Lion at Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park before he was killed CREDIT: GETTY

Following hot on the heels of the killing of Cecil, the University of Chicago Press published Lions in the Balance – Man-eaters, Manes and Men with Guns by Craig Packer. Although Cecil died in Zimbabwe, it was Tanzania's trophy-hunting business that Packer had in his sights. In this shocking expose, he didn't just give the trade both barrels. He eviscerated its rotten carcass and left its hide pegged out on the savannah for all to see.

What gave his story weight was the fact that Packer believed trophy hunting could be a tool for conserving lions – provided hunters killed only old adult males. As for the sport itself, shooting lions lured to a bait was, in Packer's words, "not much harder than shooting fish in a barrel."

By the time I first visited Africa, the sun was already setting on the golden age of the professional hunters, as cameras took the place of guns. When Kenya banned licensed hunting in 1977, it marked the end of an era, swept away by a growing awareness of the need to conserve what remained of the continent's irreplaceable wildlife.

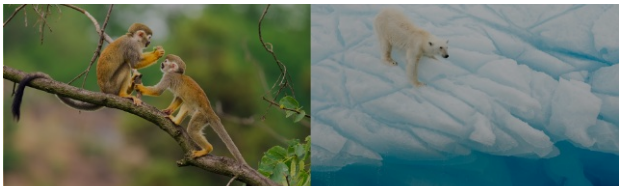
One of trophy hunting's most outspoken opponents is the Born Free Foundation, the charity established by Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers in 1984 to promote compassionate conservation. Less than two years ago, it commissioned an investigation to get at the truth about trophy hunting, including the economics.

"Most of the fees derived go to a few officials, outfitters and hunting guides," says Born Free president Will Travers. "Research suggests that little if any of it ever filters down to local communities."

The Masai Mara in Kenya CREDIT: GETTY

Nothing demonstrates the value of wildlife tourism better than the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association. In Kenya, an area equal in size to the Masai Mara National Reserve has been preserved by the creation of a unique collection of community-owned game reserves whose primary source of revenue is tourism – not hunting. Thanks to controlled livestock grazing and limits on the numbers of tourists and vehicles, wildlife is flourishing.

Instead of killing lions that prey on livestock, new ideas, such as building predator-proof stockades, have helped to reduce the age-old conflict between lions and the Maasai to the point where the Conservancies now have one of the highest densities of lions in Africa.



‘A trophy hunter brings in 1,800 times the revenue of a photo tourist’

Graham Boynton writes:

There are two sides to every story, but one is often heard louder than the other. That is certainly true of wildlife conservation in Africa. Dominating the news agenda are the animal rights lobbyists, unshakable in their belief that no charismatic wild animal should ever be hunted. Less well represented are Africa’s rural communities, who regard wild animals as unique assets that can help lift people out of poverty.

Having grown up in Africa and spent my life writing about conservation, I am firmly in the latter group. I believe wildlife and biodiversity can only be sustainable if the human beings who live among the wild animals benefit from that cohabitation. (Remember that, across Africa, between 60 and 70 per cent of animals live outside prescribed parks and among poor rural communities.)

In this respect, my allies are environmental scientists and African community leaders who are staring down the barrel of climate change, massive human population growth and diminishing rangelands, all of which threaten the very existence of wildlife.

New statistics from the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) state that wildlife tourism in Africa brought in $29.3 billion last year, suggesting an industry that is awash with money. The implication is that the local people who live among the wild animals are doing very well indeed. I find those figures misleading.

Without hunting in Namibia, more than 50 per cent of its conservancies would be unviable CREDIT: GETTY

Very few communities enjoy the trickle-down benefits of the WTTC’s estimated billions. In fact, “photographic” wildlife tourism (as opposed to the hunting type) is a fickle mistress, subject to the vagaries of fashion, economics and, as Kenya has found many times, security. It requires major infrastructure – air strips, graded roads, constant services from urban areas for the upmarket lodges and their high-paying guests – and only thrives in areas with marketable physical beauty. Much of Africa is too remote and unforgiving for Western safari tourists.

In those marginal places it is hunters who provide local communities with revenue, while also acting as an anti-poaching deterrent. A recent study by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) revealed that, if you took hunting out of the conservation mix in Namibia, more than 50 per cent of its conservancies would be unviable.

A 2016 study in South Africa’s Timbavati – a reserve adjacent to Kruger National Park – revealed that the average trophy hunter brings in 1,800 times the revenue of a photographic tourist. The reserve attracts 24,000 photographic tourists a year, compared with 46 trophy hunters, who hunt just 80 animals per year. Factor in the environmental impact of 24,000 visitors competing with local communities for water, regulated hunting wins hands-down in terms of efficient land use.

Most popular trophies | Species hunted in South Africa 2015-16

TOP 10 HUNTED SPECIES	TOP 10 INCOME EARNERS
1. Impala	1. Buffalo
2. Warthog	2. Lion
3. Springbuck	3. Sable
4. Kudu	4. Kudu
5. Blesbuk	5. Nyala
6. Zebra	6. Gemsbuck
7. Gemsbuck	7. Zebra
8. Blue wildebeest	8. Waterbuck
9. Bushbuk	9. Eland
10. Nyala	10. Blue wildebeest

Market analysis on more than 500 trophy hunters in South Africa

For these reasons, it must remain a significant contributor to conservation along with photographic tourism. The only way to save wildlife and maintain biodiversity in Africa is to reward local people for the inconvenience of living with wild animals. If animals are seen as assets, and rural communities benefit from them, they are far more likely to protect them.

What's more, countries that pursue an approach to wildlife management that includes hunting have a higher density of wildlife than those that adopt a protectionist approach. (And we are not talking about "canned" lion hunting here, which most legitimate hunting organisations hate.)

Namibia, whose government supports a sophisticated programme of sustainable use, has seen a six-fold increase in wildlife in the past 50 years. Kenya, which banned trophy hunting in 1977, has seen a decline of between 60 and 70 per cent.

All this explains why President Mokgweetsi Masisi, responding to criticism of his decision last year to reintroduce trophy hunting in Botswana, replied that he was merely acting on the demands of his constituents, the country's rural communities. Who are we in the rich "Global North" to argue with that?

Over to you

Which side of the fence do you fall? Should trophy hunting be banned or is it a necessary evil? Let us know in the comments box below.

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