

by Jane Flowers

A Great Divide Between Poachers and Ethical Hunting the Media Will Not Talk About

Transforming devastated habitat through sustainable and ethical hunting in Mozambique

Hunting and conservation are words often described in the media as an oxymoron. Many articles circulating around the world describe the activities of legal hunters and then launch into the devastation to wildlife caused by poachers.

The divide and the vast differences between legal hunters and poachers are ignored. Activists and media far too often lump hunting operations into the same bracket as poachers.

“This is far from the truth,” says Neil Duckworth of Rio Save Safaris (RSS). Talking about Coutada 9, an area in Mozambique where the combined efforts of RSS, Mokore Wildlife Investments, Gajogoland Safaris, and Western Safaris have transformed devastation into paradise, Neil believes it is a fine example of how conservation can be achieved through ethical hunting.

Prior to 2002, Coutada 9, like all other wilderness areas in Mozambique, had been through over twenty-five years of civil war and rampant poaching. This massive area (4,333 square kilometres) was left virtually devoid of wildlife. Furthermore, the area suffered serious habitat destruction. It was subjected to annual late season bushfires and the indiscriminate cutting of trees through “slash and burn” agricultural practices.

In 2002, Rio Save Safaris took over the concession and set out to rehabilitate the area to its former glory. Their first priorities were to take control of the massive poaching epidemic and to provide surface water for the very limited remaining wildlife.

Over the past 13 years, RSS has drilled 22 boreholes and constructed 12 large dams, which provide permanent surface water for the wildlife in Coutada 9. This water is essential for life and all species benefit, including birds, smaller mammals as well as insects.

Since 2003 RSS anti-poaching teams have consistently removed over 1000 gin traps per year, caught on average 150 poachers per year and confiscated numerous homemade muzzleloader rifles as well as a few modern assault weapons like AK 47's from poachers. For every weapon confiscated, poacher apprehended or trap removed, RSS have paid an incentive bonus to the anti-poaching units. Due to these continuous efforts, the wildlife has thrived and flourished, to the stage where most populations have reached sustainable population densities.

Some species populations were so low that RSS set out to re-introduce them. “This was an achievement when you consider that no importation of wildlife or inter-area game transfers had ever taken place in Mozambique before,” Neil said. After 18 months of tireless negotiations, RSS imported 10 lions in

by Jane Flowers

September 2009 from Phinda Game Reserve in South Africa. They were transported and successfully released them into Coutada 9 over 1600 km away. They have settled and are breeding well in the Coutada.

Waterbuck numbers, a species that once thrived in Coutada 9, were down to a mere handful after the civil war. RSS made a deal with Gorongosa National Park (GNP) to swap 20 Zebra and 40 eland for 146 waterbuck. GNP got to increase their eland and zebra populations and Coutada 9 received 146 waterbuck in September 2013. Waterbuck are now seen daily and they are breeding well. A key priority from the outset was to boost the local remnant buffalo population. After more than 10 years of trying to source buffalo from surrounding countries as well as within Mozambique, RSS was finally granted permission from the Mozambique government to capture 50 buffalo as a trial from the Zambesi Delta reserve. This was finally achieved in 2015. The 50 buffalo are safe and sound in Coutada 9 with plans now to capture a further 250 next year.

These projects and all other developments such as building road networks, safari camps and staff accommodation to date have been funded through trophy hunting. RSS operates on a strict sustainable off-take quota where a small percentage, normally 2-5% of a population, is harvested. These animals are usually males past their prime and their removal has little impact on the overall species population.

All funds raised through trophy hunting to date, have gone back into the conservation and development of this magnificent area as well as to support the local communities. Unfortunately due to the remoteness of the concession and thick bush, photographic tourism is very limited and not a feasible option for this area. Of the animals harvested, 25 % of the trophy fee received from foreign hunters goes directly to the local communities. RSS also supplies most meat to the community either directly through delivering it to the local villages or indirectly through issuing it to the staff working within the Coutada. The meat from all animals harvested is fully utilized.

“Poaching, as opposed to legal trophy hunting, is indiscriminate, without regard to age, sex, or species of animals killed. There is no respect for boundaries or numbers of animals harvested and if not constantly policed there will be no wildlife left,” says Neil. “The general modus operandi of the poachers in this region is hunting with homemade gin traps or snares, which is very cruel. When RSS initially arrived in Coutada 9 almost every animal harvested by hunters was missing a foot from these traps.”

Once trapped, the animal will drag the trap around for up to four days until the poachers catch up to it and kill it with an axe or spear. Some species such as lion, buffalo, leopard and elephant that they cannot kill with axes due to the danger aspect, are left to drag these traps around for weeks until the animal dies either from starvation or from infection. Sometimes the animal's foot rots, breaks or is bitten off. These survivors are then crippled for life, or slowly lose condition and die. One male lion had three of its four limbs injured from traps. Thanks to hunter-supported anti-poaching efforts, there are far fewer cases of injured animals but it is still a continual problem. The only donations received to date have been from the hunting organisations, Dallas Safari Club and Safari Club International. Neil says that they are very grateful to them because they are helping RSS to save the animals and the habitat on Coutada 9

by Jane Flowers

“Yes,” says Neil, “a massive ‘thank you’ to all the hunters who, following their passion for adventure in wild Africa are helping to save our wilderness”. It is the hunters, says Neil who “have saved thousands of animals in Coutada 9, provided employment, and income for many families as well as fed thousands of local villagers over the past 13 years. None of the animals here have names but hunters are the only ones fighting to save these remote and wonderful areas and their wildlife. The continued support of sustainable hunting is greatly appreciated.”

This article with many more photos was originally published at TheNewshub.com