

by Gerhard Damm

The Lion's Share? On The Economic Benefits Of Trophy Hunting

Dr Cameron K. Murray of Economists at Large Pty Ltd from Melbourne, Australia is the lead author of the report "The lion's share? On the economic benefits of trophy hunting". This report was commissioned by Humane Society International (HSI). HSI hails the report with the article "New report reveals big game hunting makes minimal contribution to African economies and jobs - Trophy hunters' inflated claims debunked; trophy hunting 'insignificant' to economy". The report concludes that hunting brings in just 0.78 percent or less of the overall tourism spending and has only a marginal impact on employment in Botswana, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, providing approximately 0.76 percent or less of overall tourism jobs. The total economic contribution of is at most an estimated 0.03 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), the HSI report said.

Let us for a start compare two similar sized areas - one in South Africa (Sabi Sands Game Reserve SSGR of 68,000 ha with an 50km unfenced boundary to Kruger National Park) and one in Zimbabwe (Savé Valley Conservancy's 65,000 ha Sango Ranch).

About 42 commercial lodges operate in SSGR (a quick search on the internet confirms this). The daily capacity in visitor beds is about 780 guests. Several private lodges are also located in the reserve. Boreholes provide an abundance of water throughout the year and hold wildlife in the area. The entire Sabi Sands is used exclusively for photographic safaris - consumptive use, for example to provide meat rations from the abundant impala herds, or hunting is not permitted.

In addition to the tourists, there are constantly about 1,400 to 1,500 lodge employees present in the reserve, plus the SSGR workers maintaining the SSGR infrastructure. There is also considerable daily traffic from outside to deliver supplies to the lodges. The high end lodges offer amenities like air conditioning, wine cellars, luxury spas, gyms, individual splash pools and so on. During full occupancy (Christmas, Easter and other school holidays) round about 120 vehicles may be busy on morning and evening game drives. Light pollution at night (spot-lighting), time limits of 10 to 15 minutes per vehicle at 'special' sightings (leopards, wild dogs, lions, etc), constant radio traffic to exchange sighting locations, speeding with game drive vehicles to reach sightings, and off-road driving are common occurrences.

The privately owned Sango Ranch in Savé Valley Conservancy (SVC) operates on a combination of hunting, falconry and photographic safari basis. Sango accommodates 8 visitors in the main lodge and 8 in the tented camp. Through the initiative of the SVC landowners, wildlife numbers have grown exponentially. The SVC now holds more than 4,000 buffalo, 1,600 elephants, over 160 black and white rhinos, abundant lion and leopard populations plus a wide variety of autochthonous antelope species in healthy numbers. Artificial water points are kept to a minimum. Annual quotas for hunting as well as for meat provisions for staff and surrounding communities are significantly below the annual population

by Gerhard Damm

growth rates. Quotas are established with the aid of aerial surveys and scientific ground surveys. Hunting – both daily rates and fees for hunted animals – provides an important contribution to the Sango Ranch budget. Game capture of overabundant species and relocation to depleted areas outside the conservancy are usually done on a pro-bono basis and add cost instead of providing income.

It is obvious that the annual revenue from wildlife tourism of the lodges in the Sabi Sands is vastly greater than the combined tourist and hunting revenue of Sango Ranch. The ecological foot print of several scores of visitors and hunters on Sango is minimal. In contrast, the abundance of lodges in Sabi Sands, the dense network of roads and tracks, the high annual number of visitors (ca.100,000 per year, based on 40% occupancy) and the presence of probably around 60 game viewing vehicles (based on average occupancy) leave a broad and lasting ecological foot print.

Despite the vastly diverging revenue, the use model applied on Sango is highly important for conservation of this out-of-the-way land and its entire flora and fauna. It is also of paramount significance for the communities living on the borders of Sango Ranch – for employment and family income, meat supplies, empowerment through conservation education, and so on.

Whilst Sango Ranch is in a remote part of Zimbabwe, the highly accessible Victoria Falls area receives 150,000+ tourists a year. Not 10 km away is Zambezi National Park visited by only a tiny fraction of these tourists; the park barely generates sufficient income to cover operating expenses. The distance of Kazuma National Park to Victoria Falls is ca. 100 km; hardly any tourists visit this park. Similarly, very few photo-tourists come to the Hwange CAMPFIRE communal area; income from tourists is minuscule compared to the income from selling hunting rights. Regulated hunting takes place in the Matetsi Safari Area on the doorstep of the Victoria Falls Tourist Mecca. Matetsi generates sufficient income from hunting to cover its operating expenses. One of the hunting blocks was converted to a photographic only block some years ago; despite significant investments it is still struggling to find its feet.

In Namibia many conservancies engage in hunting AND photographic tourism. Peer reviewed research shows that if trophy hunting were to cease, photo tourism operations would no longer be economically viable. Naidoo et. al. (2016)² analyzed 77 CBNRM registered conservancies in Namibia; without hunting revenue only 16% of the conservancies would survive economically. The impact would

be increased vulnerability of some 50,000 km² of wildlife habitat. Without photo tourism revenue, 59% of conservancies remain viable.

A win-win solution – not only in Namibia – would be the combination of consumptive (extractive) and non-consumptive (non-extractive) tourism under strict interaction protocols. Adequate importance needs to be placed on an ecologically acceptable foot print of all safari operations, rather than the either/or proposition forwarded by animal rights extremists.

Hunting revenue remains a sustainable way to fund public agencies like Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife and the Wildlife Department in Tanzania. This is also valid for Namibia, Mozambique and Zambia; the agencies cover the lion's share of their operating budget from hunting fees. Consequently hunting helps conserving the wildlife enjoyed by photo tourists and hunters alike. Hunting also provides most and

by Gerhard Damm

efficient community engagement in the greatest number of remote areas of Africa, where tourists do not venture!

Most hunting safari operators field anti-poaching units within their hunting concessions costing them millions of dollars annually. Zambeze Delta Safaris in Mozambique and the Dande Anti-Poaching Unit in Zimbabwe, as well as the safari operators in Tanzania are standout examples³.

Another little-known Africa conservation success story is the relationship between safari hunting of mountain nyala, local communities and the conservation of Afro-montane forests in Ethiopia. The mountain nyala is one of the most highly prized big game species in Africa, and safari hunting plays a vital role in the conservation and management of the species and its habitat in rather remote areas not frequented by the average tourist. Even where the habitat had been altered by settlement and agriculture over the years hunting operators remained and assisted in regenerating the endemic heather and mountain forests which are essential for mountain nyala. Murulle Foundation⁴ initiated potential mountain nyala habitat surveys and developed triple-bottom line conservation programs. Community benefits and ownership all but eliminated poaching. Large populations of mountain nyala are now found outside of national parks in the hunting concessions of the Bale, Arsi and Harrar mountains.

Hunting areas in east and southern Africa are usually situated in marginal areas with monotonous landscapes, drab vegetation, and low wildlife carrying capacity. They are viable for hunting, but simply not suitable for nature based tourism. Landscapes with diversified natural scenery and abundant game herds are not typically found in hunting areas – such draw-card reserves have long since been converted into exclusive photo safari concessions. This is rarely admitted by those who oppose hunting.

If nature based tourism were a viable business in hunting areas, it is likely someone would be engaged in it. The fact that there is no engagement of the “eco-tourism” sector says everything. Most of Botswana’s former hunting concessions fall into this category. Photo safari operators failed appallingly taken over most hunting blocks after hunting was closed in 2014. The cost of this failure fell upon local communities, who were deprived of their livelihood.

Murray’s report falls abysmally short looking at the entire picture when it comes to the wildlife-based economies of the countries he surveyed. He compares the economic contribution of hunting with

the economic contribution of tourism⁵. This approach is full of serious methodological flaws and Murray’s macro-scale-based conclusions are grossly and probably intentionally misleading, since he omits important micro-scale dynamics and fails to look at the important local impact of hunting-generated revenue.

Murray interprets legitimate WTTC figures in a worryingly manipulative manner. As to be expected, his conclusions fully reflect the line of thought of his contactors from Humane Society International, an organization with a stated anti-hunting agenda. Murray’s report has so many glaring shortcomings that it cannot be viewed as comprehensive, objective or credible, and its conclusions cannot be accepted as valid.

by Gerhard Damm

The relevant comparison basis should be the proportionate revenue from hunting and from other tourism flowing to local landowners and land custodians, wildlife managers and communities. It is this funding which conserves land and wildlife! Taking total tourism as the comparison is quite ridiculous⁶. Moreover Murray fails to recognize that high-end eco-tourism is only feasible in a limited range of areas. It requires proximity to transport routes, scenic landscapes, iconic wildlife at sufficient densities, political stability, absence of disease risks, infrastructure, capital, training, etc. Murray is silent on the limitations of eco-tourism and does not offer any solutions as how to generate benefits and incentives for conservation in the vast African wildlife areas where tourism is not practicable.

It is problematic to get into a debate about the economics of hunting in the first place, as hunting will never make impressive economic contributions to a country at GDP level. As indicated, Murray should rather look into the changes to incomes of African communities as a welfare measure. Using the welfare economic metric will take into account the non-financial benefits accrued by many communities from hunting, including the community development work required from hunting operators under concession agreements in many countries.

Murray and HSI miss recognizing the real conservation challenge in Africa: wildlife and wild land needs to be made profitable for as many local people as possible! Rural communities cannot be expected to just be custodians; they have to be invested shareholders and beneficiaries.

Regulated and conservation-conscious hunting positively influences landowner attitudes and values towards wildlife by providing traditional community and private owners with incentives to live with wildlife and promote wildlife as a land-use. Such attitudinal changes are fundamental for keeping wildlife on the vast tracts of habitat outside Africa's national parks that will never be suitable for tourism. Murray's report fails to provide alternative suggestions how these immense tracts of land currently managed for hunting can be financed or justified as wildlife habitat in economic terms, if hunting was not permitted.

Unfortunately, it does not matter how many times Murray's flawed paper (not peer-reviewed, and unlikely to survive a standard academic peer review process) is refuted by experts. It will be quoted again and again by those on the mission supported by the paper's contractors. HSI - totally opposed to any form of hunting - misses the real context of conservation in Africa and will be spreading Murray's report to a broad general audience. I am afraid that it will be believed uncritically by most of readers.