

by Catherine Semcer

Reopening Botswana To Trophy Hunting Depends On U.S. Support



For nearly a year, momentum has been building in Botswana to reform the nation's wildlife sector to increase its economic productivity and, the options available to manage the country's large elephant population. Last April's election of President Mokgweetsi Masisi, a mild-mannered scion of one of Botswana's political dynasties, created the space to challenge the policies of his predecessor, Ian Khama. This includes Khama's near-complete closure of the country to trophy hunting enacted in 2014. Calls to overturn the hunting ban were made in parliament shortly after President Masisi assumed office and a cabinet-level subcommittee recently supported that proposal. The continuing progress of pro-hunting voices has generated opposition inside Botswana by the country's well-connected photo tourism operators and by international animal rights campaigners. It has also fed divisions within the Botswana Democratic Party to which both Presidents Masisi and Khama belong.

One key voice that has so far remained silent is the United States, where the bulk of the world's trophy hunters reside, and which possesses the import permitting authority that can make or break Africa's trophy hunting industry and, the success of any decision to allow hunting to return to Botswana. Recent history suggests that U.S. support for such a return is not a given and that the domestic politics of the

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world's largest hunting market may risk undermining the Masisi Administration's aspirations for reform.

The United States has a history of engagement with trophy hunting and wildlife conservation in Botswana, beginning with the creation of the latter's community based natural resource management (CBNRM) program in the 1990s. Developed with funding and technical assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the CBNRM program established both the system of Communal Hunting Areas and Community Based Organizations around which most of Botswana's trophy hunting industry was historically centered and, to which many of its economic benefits were given.

It was this system that was disrupted in 2014 when then President Ian Khama made the decision to close Botswana to trophy hunting, undermining and in some cases destroying the livelihoods of the 500,000 rural Batswana who are part of Community Based Organizations. The decision came during the height of international concern over widespread poaching of African elephants and rhinos, concern that some NGOs had leveraged to build political opposition to trophy hunting in the global north. It was also prescient of the explosion of western public opposition to trophy hunting that would emerge in the wake of the killing of Cecil the Lion in Zimbabwe the following year.

It is notable that the United States greeted President Khama's effective shuttering of a program the U.S. had invested so much in developing with little comment, save for then President Barack Obama making a general statement after the ban's imposition that "[Khama's] leadership in wildlife protection and environmental conservation sets an example for the region and the world." Whether this relative silence was an attempt to avoid interfering in Botswana's internal affairs or a de-facto expression of support for the Khama Administration's action is presently unknown. What is known is that the silence echoed in the context of a visible deterioration of U.S. support for trophy hunting in Africa and increasing politicization of decision-making about the importation of hunting trophies into the U.S.

The same year Botswana's hunting ban went into effect, the U.S. enacted an import ban on elephant trophies from Botswana's neighbor, Zimbabwe, a move that eventually resulted in a thirty percent decline in Zimbabwe's safari industry. The decision to lift a "non-detriment finding," an administrative opinion made under the U.S. Endangered Species Act that a nation's hunting programs do not jeopardize the survival of legally protected species, was made without consulting with the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority or U.S. NGOs with experience working in the country. It was also made based on anecdotal reporting and at a time when the United States was leveling sanctions on the government of former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, opening the door to speculation that the ban was politically motivated.

Challenged in U.S. courts, judges eventually ruled that the agency had acted improperly by not consulting with their foreign counterparts, or the U.S. public, as required U.S. law, so that its decision might be based on stronger information.

In attempting to lift the import ban to comply with a settlement in the case, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service encountered unexpected obstacles as the protests of animals' rights activists eventually became amplified by populist U.S. political pundits. These voices eventually reached U.S. President Donald

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Trump who issued a tweet second guessing the agency's actions and effectively chilling the process. In the time since, efforts to resume importation of Zimbabwean elephant trophies into the U.S. have remained in limbo with the USFWS judging permits on a "case by case basis" and leaving many U.S. hunters unable to obtain approval of the permits they require.

All of the above points to increased politicization and decreased stability of the world's largest trophy hunting market. According to the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the United States is home to slightly more than seventy percent of the world's trophy hunters, making it essential to the success of any effort to reopen Botswana to the hunting trade.

A repeal of Botswana's hunting ban will represent a severe setback for international animal rights NGOs and will likely inspire the kind of political outcry that has shown itself capable of reaching a White House with a demonstrated antipathy to trophy hunting and willingness to politicize agency decision making. Even before a decision has been made in Gaborone, activists have engaged in an international media campaign to highlight a widely disputed report that Botswana faces a new poaching crisis. In doing so they are shaping the political environment in which any decision will be made. They are also supplying agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with a document that, though possibly dubious, could be used to justify any decision not to allow hunting trophies from Botswana to be imported in the U.S and tie up the effective resumption of trophy hunting in Botswana in U.S. courts.

Complicating matters further is the fact that whatever decision the US makes it will effectively be picking sides in the ongoing schism within the Botswana Democratic Party that has emerged between the Masisi and Khama camps based in a conflict between reform and the status quo.

This conflict will come to a head in April's national election where the Khama wing is running a candidate in hopes of unseating Masisi. While it is not clear that the U.S. is supporting either faction it is likely that a preference will emerge and that it will be for whoever can best help the U.S. achieve broader strategic goals such as countering China.

In this regard the Masisi camp has two advantages stemming from its efforts to reopen Botswana to trophy hunting. First, the size of the U.S. trophy hunting market is something that increases ties between the United States and African nations in a way that China lacks the capability and capacity to match. Second, U.S. support for hunting in Botswana stands to increase positive perceptions of America among the roughly 500,000 rural Batswana who are part of Community Based Organizations and whose lives and livelihood would be positively impacted by such reform. It is not clear that the status quo embraced by Khama supporters can offer anything similar.

For better or for worse the size of the U.S. trophy hunting market will play a key role in the outcome of any effort to allow the practice to return to Botswana. With both popular and presidential sentiment aligned against the killing of elephants and other African wildlife, a decision out of Gaborone to once again embrace sustainable use will represent a high-profile political test for Washington as it seeks to deepen its relationships across Africa. Recent history suggests that supporters of hunting in Botswana should take nothing for granted when it comes to U.S. policy and that any challenges on the road ahead can best be navigated by engagement and appeals to the wider context of American engagement on the

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continent.

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