

APHA's President Weighs in on Hunting and Conservation in Africa



APHA President Jason Roussos stipulates that successful conservation efforts must not be judged by the fate of individual animals but by the species' overall population trends. Trophy hunting should be assessed in the light of demonstrable results on wildlife populations. Roussos criticizes lobby groups and governments from developed nations for making decisions that restrict what Africans can and cannot do with their wildlife. He urges that the debate look past emotions and focus on best practices and conservation outcomes.

Unless you have been to Africa and ventured beyond the well-travelled roads and comfortable accommodations found in many of the continent's great national parks, you will never understand the real reason why Africa's precious wildlife is in such peril. You will never see firsthand what poor rural Africans must deal with to just survive on a day-to-day basis, often in direct conflict and competition with wildlife. You will never understand the persecution that African wildlife is facing at the hands of illegal poachers. But above all, you will never see how much habitat is being destroyed every day to sustain the booming human population.

There is absolutely no doubt that the future of African wildlife is bleak. Habitat loss threatens to destroy all forms of biodiversity, while unselective and indiscriminate illegal poaching adds to it.

Only a coordinated effort that incorporates a diversity of scientifically sound management practices will reap long-term solutions. There is no one "fix-all" strategy to conserving African wildlife. The only way

by Jason Roussos, President, African Professional Hunters Association

to achieve success is to implement multiple conservation and management practices that work together for one common goal - the continued survival of wildlife and habitat protection.

No matter how distasteful certain practices or techniques may be to some individuals or organizations, if they achieve conservation success then they cannot be shunned. How successful a conservation effort is in an area must be judged not by the survival of individual animals but rather by the species' overall population trend. If over time some animals are killed, but the overall population of a species in that area remains stable or increases, then that conservation practice must be deemed successful.

Conservation must be viewed as a brick wall where each brick represents a different management technique or practice. Hunting, photographic safaris, game breeding, and zoos that educate visitors about wildlife are all examples of the various "bricks" in the conservation wall. Anytime a brick is removed, it compromises the overall stability of the wall.

Unless both non-consumptive management (where wildlife is not killed) and consumptive management (where wildlife is killed) are utilized side-by-side, conservation will never reach its full potential. Areas such as national parks are set aside for non-consumptive use and are safeguarded from a national level specifically to protect wildlife and wildlife habitat. As the cornerstone of the conservation wall, African national parks play a critical role in conservation. Nonetheless, national parks only cover a fraction of the landmass where wildlife exists in Africa. In fact, in many African countries it is the areas outside these nationally protected lands that harbor more wildlife - not by density, but by total count. In Tanzania, for example, only 7% of the country's land mass is allocated to National Parks, whereas hunting areas make up 32%, thus harboring a much greater wildlife population.

The countries that have adopted and implemented a multiple-use approach to wildlife management are the ones that have succeeded the best at conserving their wildlife resources. Namibia is a prime example of how a country that utilizes both consumptive and non-consumptive wildlife management has seen its wildlife numbers increase in recent years. Kenya, on the other hand, only utilizes non-consumptive management practices and has seen wildlife numbers outside of protected areas plummet over the same time frame. Globally, the country that currently manages its wildlife resources in the most successful and scientifically-sound manner is the United States of America, where multiple-use is the fundamental driving force behind that success.

Over the last few years, African nations that utilize multiple-use conservation practices, especially in regard to high profile species like lion and elephant, have been specifically targeted because of their use of trophy hunting as a consumptive management tool. Trophy hunting is one of the many types of consumptive management practices that occurs in a multi-use system. Other consumptive management practices include meat hunting, trapping, and culling. People who hunt for subsistence or for meat are not facing the same backlash that trophy hunters are. Trophy hunters are portrayed as killing for "sport" or for "fun", and for people who do not fully understand the critical role it plays, this understandably stirs up very strong emotions against the practice. However, what is most relevant when discussing trophy hunting and its role in conservation should be none other than its final outcome on wildlife populations.

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In simple terms, trophy hunting is utilized when it is necessary to have a minimal biological impact on the overall wildlife population, while at the same time maximizing the money generated to conserve that species. The only way to achieve this is to selectively harvest only old males, many of which are far past their reproductive prime, while charging top dollar to do so. Meat hunters, on the other hand, do not pay large amounts of money to shoot an animal and are far less selective than trophy hunters when harvesting an animal. The reality is that meat hunters often harvest females as well as younger animals. This is perfectly acceptable in circumstances where a wildlife population needs to be controlled or reduced. Trophy hunting, however, is utilized when dealing with a wildlife population that managers are trying to increase, hence the need to generate large amounts of money for conservation efforts while at the same time only affecting a species' overall population by a negligible amount.

With all the recent hype surrounding trophy hunting, the most important conservation consideration to discuss has unfortunately been sidelined by a torrent of emotionally charged rhetoric from both sides. That consideration should be the final outcome that trophy hunting has on a population in an area and what happens to that wildlife population and its habitat when trophy hunting is stopped. In 1993, for example, elephant hunting in Ethiopia was prohibited. The tropical rainforests of the Gurafarda region harbored approximately 3,000 elephants of which between 10 and 15 were harvested a year. Within the 10 years following the ban there was no rainforest left in the area, let alone any elephant, as is the case today. This scenario would, unfortunately, be the outcome for most African hunting areas following a total ban on hunting or trophy importation.

Critical to the whole trophy hunting debate is to discuss what alternative management practice would be implemented to replace the conservation and financial void that would arise if trophy hunting was stopped. Only in very rare circumstances would non-consumptive tourism be able to replace the money spent by trophy hunters since most hunting areas cannot compete with National Parks when it comes to accessibility, infrastructure, and wildlife density. As a result, they are far less attractive for photographic tourists. The reality is that following a hunting or trophy importation ban, most hunting areas would be left abandoned with no form of protection or wildlife and habitat management in place. This is an outcome that nobody, hunters or anti-hunters alike, would want.

I would urge everyone who is involved in the trophy hunting debate to look past their initial emotions stirred up by the fact someone is legally and intentionally killing African wildlife, and instead focus on the critical conservation brick that is filled by this practice. If trophy hunting is stopped throughout Africa, wildlife will still survive in national parks and other highly protected areas. However, in the areas outside of these places it would be ravished. The question should be as simple as: "Is that a good result for conservation or not?".

Finally, I would challenge anyone who does not live in rural Africa and does not have to deal with dangerous wildlife on a day-by-day basis to refrain from making decisions that restrict what Africans can and cannot do with their own wildlife. Imagine if the populous of Great Britain, or any other densely populated developed nation, had to deal with man-eating crocodiles in its rivers, hungry lions around its cattle farms, and elephants that harass and trample people while knocking down trees and ravishing farms throughout the countryside. Now imagine on top of all of this, the government being told by foreign nations that they were not allowed to manage, utilize and fully benefit from their wildlife in the

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ways they deemed fit, not only for the species but also for their citizens. I guarantee the outlook of how to manage these species in those countries would be changed dramatically.

Wildlife is a renewable resource that needs to be properly managed in our increasingly crowded world. If any conservation practice that is proven to work in certain areas is stopped, then we have all failed at doing our part to protect our planet's wildlife, and another valuable brick has been lost from the conservation wall.

Born and raised in Ethiopia, Jason Roussos graduated with a degree in wildlife biology from Colorado State University in 1999 and is now a full-time Ethiopian professional hunter and safari operator. Roussos also co-founded The Murulle Foundation that conducts research and conservation in sub-Saharan Africa. After serving as Vice President/Secretary General of the African Professional Hunters Association (APHA), Roussos was recently elected President. APHA represents the top African professional hunters and safari operators. This open letter was also published in The Daily Maverick on June 9, 2019.