

by Mike Chambers

Big Game Hunting Still in the Headlines



Mike Chambers' balanced take on big-game hunting in Africa criticizes the often visceral, subconscious reactions of anti-hunting activists. His suggested way forward calls for a consensus among all who strive for bio-stability.

Conservation Force (CF), the pro-hunting NGO, and lobbyist, is in the news again for its “excessive influence” over the world’s key wildlife watchdogs, according to The Independent. At first glance, good-hearted people in The Independent’s wide readership, who care about biodiversity, must be nodding in agreement. Let’s keep the hunters from influencing wildlife policy. I agree and it is very important but let’s restrict their influence where it is negative not where they do good. Big game hunters are serviced by operators in the hunting countries that work with local communities and government. How they fit in might not change the result, but taking them into account seems a necessity if the result is ever to be fair.

One difficulty in establishing that fair perspective is a basic preconception. I have to admit I suffered from this preconception and only learned how to interpret this perspective fairly after years (or rather

by Mike Chambers

multiple decades) of living close to the issue in various African countries. That preconception is quite simple. The big game hunting model has two elements: the hunter and the hunted. The prey is an animal living its own life, in its own environment. There are many different species but the top tier are iconic representatives of nature itself. The elephant, the lion, and numerous other animals have a symbolic place in our minds. They represent the “primordial magnificence of nature.” It’s actually a very powerful idea that the mind and the heart latch onto with a certainty that doesn’t require a logical explanation.

I think it’s fair to say that the species held to be iconic by this wide swath of Western culture are the same as the species most targeted by trophy hunters. My personal feeling that it is distasteful and wrong to kill an elephant which is an emotional reaction on my part that comes from my “internal relationship” with nature. The Westerner whose internal relationship results in his wanting to kill the iconic species seems to me to be reacting to the same criteria that I am reacting to. My real argument here isn’t that we should organize ourselves better so that we can accommodate stable biodiversity. I care about and try to understand why people kill. For me it is personal.

I still maintain the emotional, almost visceral, kneejerk reaction to hunting elephants. But I need to hold myself to a fairer standard than my own prejudices. I don’t support that man should never kill other species. I eat meat. On the ground in Africa hunters are working together with communities to manage their relationship with wildlife. Farmers need their crops protected and hunters need wildlife to be controlled and protected, as it represents the future of their businesses. Bio-stability is a requirement for them.

It would seem oxymoronic that being against big game hunting makes you for big game but that turns out to be the easy way out. If you want to support biodiversity then we need a new reality on the ground where communities and the surrounding wildlife can find a balance. The fact is that death will always be part of that equation and if big game hunting fills this space then so be it. If big game hunting can play a balanced role bringing better lives to people in local communities and effectively empower them to protect those same species then it has a role.

What has to be avoided is a campaign against big game hunting based on a visceral, sub-conscious reaction derived from our own prejudices. I understand the abhorrence of activists and their revulsion at the joy hunters find in their success. But this question too important to be driven by our faintness of heart or cultural discomfort. You can keep Conservation Force at arm’s length. You can disagree or dislike their take on reality. But let’s come to a consensus because without it the elephants, and other endangered species, will surely die.

Mike Chambers is an experienced writer and social entrepreneur in East and Central Africa. He now focuses on fundraising for the Elephant Survival Organization UAV anti-poaching surveillance service in Tanzanian parks and reserves. Mike also hopes to join forces with like-minded NGO’s to advance the agenda. This article first appeared in International Policy Digest on June 6 and is republished by permission.

Banner Photo: A very old elephant bull from Nhoma 2, in the northwest of Nyae-Nyae Conservancy

by Mike Chambers

(Namibia). Credit: Stephan Jacobs