

Conservation First



This editorial highlights the “trial by ordeal” that hunting is now being subjected to and asks some questions of those who engineer global anti-hunting campaigns. What will happen to biodiversity and rural communities if hunting is consigned to the dustbin of history? The hunting community also faces stark choices. Hunters not conforming to long-term sustainability objectives—those who do not put conservation first, and who fail to convey a convincing message—will self-destruct. Malan Lindeque and Rosalia Iileka suggest solutions.

An extraordinary public debate is currently taking place about trophy hunting¹. Everyone imaginable has an opinion or a judgement, and of judgements there are many. This public debate started some years ago as groups opposed to hunting brought their causes to various European governments, the European Parliament and the US government, with the occasional famous actor, music star and

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television pundit throwing in their emotional anti-hunting diatribes as well.

Over the past year, opposition to hunting has moved beyond a debate to a trial by ordeal². This is the medieval judicial practice of determining the guilt or innocence of an accused by torture, poisoning or similar unpleasant experience. The test was life or death and the proof of innocence was survival. It was briefly revived in Salem, Massachusetts, in the 1690s to deal with witches; Senator Joseph McCarthy used the same tactic in the 1950s to target “reds”³ in the US.

Irrationality abounds in human history—and today’s “discussion” about hunting is simply more such irrationality. Two groups of people, who both in their own ways love wildlife and nature, are shooting it out. One ardently believes that hunting is evil incarnate, and leads a coterie of short-attention-span journalists and tourism operators who style themselves as conservationists. These good people normally just attack politicians, or market idyllic but often contrived tourism experiences. Altogether, they make up the accusing side, the high priests and witch-burners of our day.

From the other side, one doesn’t hear much. The various hunting organizations have opinions, of course, but they’re not seen or heard or read in the media every day. Instead of talking to the public, they tend to talk among themselves, and these conversations come to a head at their annual conventions.

One hears even less from individual hunters. Do they not have opinions? Their cultural patrimony—or rite of passage, wilderness experience, primal connection with nature, homage to their deepest instincts—is in the sights (as it were) of the big media guns! Are they afraid to put their heads above the parapet and suffer the same vicious harassment that was meted out to Dr. Palmer of Cecil the Lion fame, and the persons who dared to bid on a black rhino auction at the Dallas Safari Club Convention some years ago? Those people got the full PETA treatment.

So much for enlightenment, reasoned dialogue and tolerance. We are back in the Dark Ages.

Hunters must do more to explain their rationales, to defend themselves and to break down the negative stereotypes. And their reply cannot be simply, *Yup, I shot the giraffe, it was delicious, and I made some cushion covers from its hide*. This is hardly positive, pro-hunting messaging.

And what about the people who have the most to lose, should hunting somehow be stopped? In southern Africa, in Central Asia and, for that matter, across Europe and North America—indeed, all around the globe—hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of ordinary, mostly rural people will be affected, and not for the better. Have we heard from them?

In some places, at the local and regional levels, we have. In large parts of southern Africa, for example, hunting takes place on community lands as part of important, and proven, conservation programs. Wildlife is again abundant on these lands because rural communities have a say in the disposition of their natural resources. This is an inalienable right. No one on the outside should form an opinion about hunting without first listening to what these people have to say about it. (And have the consequences to them been considered by those who wish to ban hunting?)

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In Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe—and, to a lesser extent, Botswana and Mozambique—wildlife habitat on community land equals or exceeds wildlife habitat in those countries' national parks. These are seriously large stretches of land that connect distant national parks with habitat and migration corridors. This is exactly what is needed to accommodate changes in wildlife distribution that the climate crisis is projected to cause.

Add to this other large swathes of freehold land—in countries such as Namibia and South Africa—that are now committed to wildlife because this is economically more viable than traditional agriculture. Forty percent or more of land in these countries is now under wildlife-friendly usage, and on large tracts of these areas, this includes hunting. Can those who vociferously oppose and condemn hunting say this of their own countries?

The Southern African Model of wildlife habitat protection underpins some of the greatest conservation successes of the past century. Countries that have adopted this model hold the largest populations of elephants, black and white rhinos, cheetah, leopard, lion and giraffe in Africa. These species are in severe decline elsewhere. The Southern African Model depends on the economic returns that are generated by tourism and hunting. Tourism works well in scenic and easily accessible places; hunting works everywhere, but especially in the MMBA, the “miles and miles of bloody Africa” that tourists will never see (and probably would prefer not to experience).

We should not forget about the role of hunting in food security, too: Rural African communities are generally protein-deficient, and hunting makes a huge difference in meeting this challenge. Meat from hunting contributes to the health of many thousands of children who attend school to build their futures. Why should anyone wish to stop this? These wise land-use choices, based on tourism and hunting, meet the needs of rural communities and support climate-crisis-resilient biodiversity.

Real conservation organizations wholeheartedly support such fundamental, large-scale community involvement in conservation. No one who puts conservation first should have any problem with this paradigm and with hunting.

Unfortunately, however, there is hunting and there is hunting. Here we mean well-regulated hunting based on sustainable quotas of animals determined by a robust system of checks and balances based on long-term ecological monitoring. No “short-termism” must be allowed! No fly-by-night hunting outfitters and professional hunters seeking economic gain over long-term conservation and sustainability should be tolerated, anywhere. Hunting that does not conform to a conservation-based vision of sustainability should not even be called hunting; it is just shooting, and there is no place for this except among game wardens or duly assigned culling teams.

Yes, this is possible. Corrupt actors must be made to leave the industry. Complicit government officials too must bite the dust.

The message of today is clear: The urban public and the governments they elect will not support hunting, especially the hunting of iconic species, unless such hunting *demonstrably* contributes to conservation.

Meanwhile, back at home . . . how strange it is that no one seems to complain about the tens of thousands of deer, elk and moose hunted in North America and Scandinavia, or the red and roe deer and wild boar killed in Europe. Why is it permissible to hunt in the West but not in Africa or Asia? This reinforces the worst images that the governments and rural people of Africa and Asia have of the West.

At a recent meeting, conservationist Shane Mahoney made it clear that hunting is so little understood and so negatively perceived in large part *because* of the messaging from hunters and their associations. This is enormously self-destructive and will surely be the end of hunting—yet this messaging is probably the only aspect of the current ordeal that is entirely within the control of the hunting community.

This is what we believe needs be done, urgently:

1. Hunting organizations must unambiguously reposition themselves as *conservation organizations that hunt*. They must demonstrate that they act to protect wildlife and, through hunting, pay for wide-ranging habitat protection. Nothing less than this will be acceptable in today's society, especially to a younger generation deeply aware of the global catastrophes of habitat and wildlife destruction and climate crisis. Today's swing in European elections towards the Green Party is attributed to the youth vote precisely because of these concerns. Hunting organizations must be able to substantiate (with hard data and regular reports) their claims of conservation benefits through hunting. They should embrace this, not fear it, as an investment in the future of hunting.
2. A very modern rebranding should accompany this repositioning. If the hunting community, which has done so much more to protect wildlife and habitat than anyone else, does not act quickly, others will claim the habitat conservation space. Those who oppose hunting and sustainable use, including animal-rights groups and certain elements in the tourism industry, are well on their way to doing just this, despite the fact that they deliver no real conservation benefits in addition to the money they spend on the actual hunt.
3. In light of the non-hunting urban public's image of hunters, more than ever before hunting must be recast as a conservation activity. For real hunters, hunting—the benign, sustainable, pro-habitat and pro-people hunting that should be the only form that survives—has never been anything else. The conservation value from *every single hunt* must be evident. Hunting can be allowed only if it demonstrates *at site level* that it embraces and supports good conservation and habitat-management practices. (And if it does not, it must be called out for what it is: unacceptable.) In Africa and Asia, we need something like the very successful US duck-stamp program, or the Pittman-Robertson Act (the tax on hunting, angling and outdoor equipment that funds conservation agencies and activities), which allows every hunter to help pay for habitat and species conservation, apart from the money they spend on the actual hunt.
4. Buying a game stamp or a hunt, or paying a levy, does not entitle anyone to disrespect, in any way, wildlife and habitat. Therefore, hunter education in ethics is crucial. African and Asian governments should not allow anyone to hunt unless they belong to a reputable hunting association, one with recognized ethical standards, in their home country. Namibia has recently introduced mandatory ethics training (and re-training) for professional hunters and hunting

guides, no matter how long they have been in the industry. Ethical conduct is the foundation; there is no room for anything less.

5. Mere recreation cannot justify hunting. The notion of killing an animal for “fun” or “sport” is hugely (and rightly) offensive to most people. The rationale for hunting is the total experience—being in the outdoors, living an adventure, embracing nature, wilderness, silence—and the fundamental conservation benefits that it should deliver.
6. Hunters and hunting operators must immerse themselves in true and demonstrable conservation roles, rationales and narratives. They *must* be totally genuine and authentic about this, and they must completely commit to living up to the highest standards of conservation. The public will not accept anything less. Hunters who don't know how to do this must seek help from conservation organizations and thought leaders.

The *Conservation First* concept must be understood and adopted by the hunting professional and the hunting client. The repositioning and reconstruction described here should go some way toward that, but the public conversation must go further and continually evolve. Hunters themselves should now take this up; otherwise hunting may not survive the current trial by ordeal.

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Banner Illustration: Trial by ordeal—medieval torture, painful questions and dubious justice. Woodcut from Neuer Leyenspiegel by Tengler, Strasbourg 1514 (Wikimedia Commons)