

by Keith Somerville

Propaganda in the Trophy Hunting Debate - Card-Stacking, Cherry-Picking, Name-Calling & KISS



Keith Somerville examines a lengthy and ostensibly scientific, but unattributed pamphlet called 'Trophy Hunting & Conservation'. It was distributed at a discussion with UK Environment Minister Michael Gove and attacks the proposition that regulated, fee-paid hunting can benefit conservation and rural communities. The pamphlet's authors twist statements; take data out of context, and cite broad, factual-sounding 'evidence' that is unsupportable or false. Somerville concludes that this is a prime example of anti-hunting propaganda meant to stir emotions and influence opinions on the complex issues of conservation.

In almost every field, we try to influence each other's opinions and persuade people to align their beliefs with ours. We use social media, radio, TV, periodicals, public meetings and advocacy campaigns. And we hear endlessly (in the era of Trump, Fox News, Brexit and Breitbart) of "fake news," as though

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this were something new. Really, it is just a form of propaganda, which is any form of communication—from Neolithic cave paintings to Twitterbots—meant to sway public opinion.

From *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Sage, 2006): “Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.” It uses truth, half-truths and outright falsehoods to sell everything from dish soap to Brexit and the current US President. And now propaganda is being used, effectively and globally, against hunting.

In the late 1930s, in the run-up to the Second World War, the American IPA, Institute for Propaganda Analysis, studied the growth of propaganda, from Nazi and Spanish Civil War political speeches to the radio and print broadsides of the “hate priest,” Father Charles Coughlin. Key methods identified by the IPA include—

Card-Stacking: The selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea, program, person, or product.

Facts or Falsehoods: In propaganda, the use of truth or lie is governed only by its credibility. If you are not familiar with the subject, you might not be able to detect a lie.

Cherry-Picking: The propagandist uses only those facts and details that support their argument. The selected reasons are used to support the conclusion. You will get misled if you do not notice that important details are missing. The worst part of card-stacking is that it can be very difficult to detect if you are not really knowledgeable about the subject.

Propaganda and conservation

Conservation strategies have for decades been passionately and often bitterly debated—especially when it comes to balancing habitat, wildlife, sustainable use and the rights and livelihoods of local people. In Africa, during the 1970s and ‘80s, open policy warfare erupted between conservationists such as Iain Douglas-Hamilton in Kenya and Zimbabwe’s Rowan Martin over elephant numbers and whether a legal ivory trade helped or hindered conservation.

Finally, the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) conference of 1989 voted to ban all international trade in ivory. This ran against the wishes of southern African elephant-range states and of many conservationists who believed that regulated, sustainable ivory sales could fund elephant conservation and motivate local people to tolerate dangerous wildlife. In the months before, a bitter propaganda battle had been fought to influence CITES member states. AWF, the US-based African Wildlife Foundation, had been in favor of sustainable use and did not oppose a legal ivory trade—but by 1989, AWF (followed soon by WWF, the World Wildlife Fund) had moved to a position of total opposition to the ivory trade and was trying to sway American, British, other European and key African states to vote for a ban.

A simple ivory-ban campaign proved more effective than a nuanced one. Lurid posters of elephants with

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their faces hacked off appeared, headlined *African Chainsaw Massacre*. This set the tone for future debates and advocacy campaigns. Propaganda in all its forms, from card-stacking to cherry-picking and name-calling, was used to stir emotions and influence the opinions of a public ignorant of the complex issues of conservation.

Now, as another CITES conference looms, and in the wake of the media frenzy over the killing of a lion called Cecil in Zimbabwe in 2015, a debate over hunting itself is in full spate. The British and American governments are under pressure to ban the import of certain hunting trophies and adopt anti-hunting positions. At the same time, however, such bans are increasingly seen as ineffective and even counterproductive by a diverse and growing group of conservation scientists—though they are often not themselves keen advocates of hunting. Amy Dickman of WildCRU, founder of the Ruaha Carnivore Project in Tanzania, believes that ending trophy hunting would lift crucial protections from vast areas of habitat, which then would be turned over to marginal and unproductive farming and lose all their wildlife, as the animals would no longer have any value to local people. Some international conservation bodies and species-protection NGOs, such as the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and Save the Rhino, also believe that banning hunting would be a step backward and that hunting can—when properly regulated and when the income goes to conservation and local economic development—be one of a cocktail of conservation strategies.

The ‘Cecil Incident’

The old male lion named Cecil by researchers from the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit of Oxford University (WildCRU) was killed illegally—the hunting concession had no lion permits that year—on the boundary of Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. The hunter posted a photo of himself and his trophy on Facebook, and the resulting global uproar generated an extreme campaign of vilification of the hunter himself and hunting in general. Animal-rights groups, aided and abetted by some celebrities and politicians, stepped up their push for the US, Britain and other European countries to ban the import of African hunting trophies.

The “Cecil incident” is now one of the cards that is perpetually stacked in opposition to trophy hunting. At a meeting between the UK’s Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Gove, and sustainable-use supporters from the scientific, conservation and hunting communities, on 15 May 2019, anti-hunters distributed a pamphlet entitled *Trophy Hunting and Conservation: An assessment of evidence regarding impacts and benefits of sport hunting on wildlife and habitat conservation*, with a front-page box touting “conservation before trophy hunting.” It bears no authors’ names.

In fact, the pamphlet contains no scientifically supported assessment of “impacts and benefits,” but rather a long series of bullet points that criticize hunting and try to break down the arguments that support hunting as part of a sustainable-use wildlife policy.

Facts and quotes from reputable conservation organizations and scientists are taken out of context and presented in ways that negate their original meaning, and there is a wealth of inaccuracy and partial truths. Many of the pamphlet’s points supposedly drawn from “studies” are actually from other anti-hunting groups—the Humane Society of the USA and Conservation Action, for example—or individuals

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such as the Namibian journalist John Grobler. Like all propaganda, the pamphlet is emotive, repetitive, relentlessly consistent and simple. It was created for those with a love of wildlife but little knowledge of the subject, and it adheres to the KISS principle: Keep it Simple, Stupid.

Let me dissect the pamphlet further, with my own bullet points, as it is such a prime example of propaganda:

- The most extreme example of cherry-picking is a statement in large type that “Big game hunting, in terms of conservation, does not work—IUCN.” This attaches the IUCN’s valuable name and reputation to a long denunciation of hunting, but in fact the statement was taken from a discussion paper by French wildlife consultant Bertrand Chardonnet. As Dilys Roe and 14 other IUCN conservation specialists explained in the South African *Daily Maverick*, on 13 May 2019, “The report which [claims that hunting fails as a conservation tool] was commissioned by a program of the IUCN in order to stimulate discussion, but includes a clear disclaimer that it represents the views of the author only—Bertrand Chardonnet—and not the IUCN.”

(The pamphlet’s version of the Chardonnet paper also appears on the Web site of the anti-hunting group Conservation Action Trust, which also does not mention that the paper is Chardonnet’s view, not the IUCN’s.)

In fact, the IUCN has a clear policy *supporting* sustainable use of wildlife, including well-regulated trophy hunting, and in 2016 produced a briefing paper that clearly sets out the conservation and cultural benefits of trophy hunting. Nevertheless, the pamphlet frequently but selectively cites the IUCN as though it were aligned with the anti-hunting campaign. The pamphlet also:

- Cherry-picks quotes from scientists such as Andrew Loveridge and Craig Packer while ignoring context, and the fact that Packer—who has long fought against corruption and incompetence in the management of hunting in Tanzania—and other researchers are very concerned that closing hunting concessions there and converting them to farming areas will be disastrous for wildlife.
- Lists numbers of trophies exported from Africa and numbers of species such as elephant, lion, leopard and bear that are hunted legally worldwide, but with no background context, let alone mention of the rights of range states to manage their own wildlife resources. These “data” are meant to raise emotions and impart horror. (Although the pamphlet seeks to influence British politicians, there is no reference to shooting pheasant, grouse, partridge or wildfowl in the UK; the focus is “charismatic” fauna, not birds. This too is a form of cherry-picking.)
- Makes broad, factual-sounding yet unsupported statements such as, “Studies of lions have found trophy hunting to have been the primary driver of the species’ decline in trophy hunting areas.” One must ask: which studies, which areas and when? At times, poor regulation, inadequate age-limits and scant monitoring have led to overhunting of lions in some areas, but the primary threats to African lions today are habitat loss, human encroachment and human-lion conflict.

Dr. David Macdonald of WildCRU wrote in a scientific study commissioned by the British government and published in December 2016: “There is little evidence that trophy hunting has substantial negative effects at a national or regional level. Where trophy hunting is well-regulated, transparent and devolves

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sufficient authority to the land managers, it has the potential to contribute to lion conservation.” Macdonald goes on to call for trophy hunting to be carried out under clear principles of good governance and notes that, where corruption is rooted out and hunting is properly regulated, “The most fundamental benefit of trophy hunting to lion conservation is that it provides a financial incentive to maintain lion habitat that might otherwise be converted to non-wildlife land uses.”

- Abounds with similar out-of-context assertions that do not stand up to scrutiny. Two particularly glaring examples are in the section on the use of hunting fees. One says that there is no evidence that the substantial income from (very limited) hunting black rhino in Namibia benefits conservation. This is demonstrably false. Even the WWF, no great advocate of trophy hunting, states that hunting income benefits both communities and conservation programs in Namibia. The second example lambastes the Tsholotsho Rural District Council in Zimbabwe for spending elephant-hunting income on a new football stadium, roads and other infrastructure. Yet such “amenities” are precisely what rural communities need in order to improve their citizens’ lives. Spent this way, revenue from hunting makes wildlife not just tolerable but valuable to local people. Without such community benefit, wildlife, especially species that destroy crops or kill livestock or people, will be eradicated.

The pamphlet is such a perfect example of card-stacking, cherry-picking and other manipulations that I will use it in the course on propaganda methods that I teach at the University of Kent. This one document exemplifies, both in content and style, exactly what the IPA identified (80 years ago!): “the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements.”

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