

The African Trophy Ban Controversy: Leading Conservation through Science, not Emotion



Sometimes elected officials respond to pressure from animal-rights groups by introducing unnecessary or poorly conceived legislation directed against hunting or even the possession of hunting trophies.

In an increasingly urbanized and technology-focused world, the public has become more and more detached from nature, and the natural resources that people have traditionally relied upon. Because of this isolation, the concept of conservation is lost and replaced with a misconception that the outdoor world is best left untouched by humans. Of course, this is unrealistic. As a result, some elected officials have found political opportunity in responding to this emotional disconnect with nature by introducing unnecessary and poorly conceived legislation to advocate for their own personal biases that preservation should replace conservation as a management paradigm and with that hunting should be abolished.

The case of the African “Big 5” (elephant, Cape buffalo, lion, white and black rhinoceros, and leopard) trophy ban is a classic example of this misguided approach. In September 2018, then California Governor Jerry Brown vetoed Senate Bill 1487 (the Iconic African Species Protection Act), which would have banned the importation of 11 African species, many of which are legal to hunt, into the state. Legal, regulated hunting of African species has proven to be a successful tool for management and recovery; and this bill would have done nothing to stop poaching or illegal hunting – it would have merely catered to anti-hunting interests to advance the preservationist philosophy.

by Sara Leonard, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Prior to the veto, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) joined a coalition of sportsmen's conservation groups in opposing SB 1487 in the California Legislature. This outreach highlighted that revenue generated by licensed, regulated safari hunting is the single most important source of funding for conservation and anti-poaching efforts in Africa. In many Southern and Eastern African countries, this revenue is the primary source of management, conservation, and anti-poaching funds for national wildlife authorities. These hunting programs have been designed by experts to allow a limited, sustainable take, and to generate funds for conservation, anti-poaching, and community incentives.

A similar case was presented back in May 2016, when then New Jersey Governor Chris Christie issued a constitutional veto on Senate Bills 977 and 978, which would have prohibited the import, export, sale, possession, and transport of "Big 5" African species (including parts and taxidermy). While the veto allowed for transport, import, and export of animal parts, it still prohibited keeping those trophies in the state. Actions were taken by the hunting conservation community. CSF sent letters to Gov. Christie urging him to veto the bills; and Conservation Force, a pro-hunting conservation legal services organization, sued the state of New Jersey, successfully arguing that the ban was preempted by the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which voids any state law or regulation that applies to importation and exportation, domestic or foreign, outside of ESA ruling. The legal arguments put forward in the New Jersey case also proved to be important in requesting a veto of SB 1487 in California as it was clear that signing the bill into law would likely put the state in the position of having to spend financial and personnel resources defending itself against solid, opposing legal precedent.

This year, Connecticut was faced with Senate Bill 20 - which would have prohibited the import, sale, and possession of African elephants, lions, leopards, black and white rhinoceros, and giraffes. CSF worked closely with leaders of the Connecticut Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus to express strong opposition to this bill, which would have detrimental effects on wildlife conservation, hindering anti-poaching efforts, and depriving rural communities of much-needed tourism dollars from hunters. A victory for conservation, this bill failed to pass during the General Assembly's regular sessions and never advanced to the Governor's desk.

Wildlife management should be guided by science - not emotion. This principle has been too central to the successful recovery and conservation of numerous species, and should not be abandoned in favor of knee-jerk emotional responses. In the United States, fish and wildlife agencies are the entities best-equipped to manage wildlife through the use of science (and yes, hunting), and African countries should be afforded the same opportunity to manage their wildlife in keeping with the needs of their communities and unique conservation challenges. CSF will continue to work with true conservation-minded legislators and other partners across the country on preventing emotionally-driven anti-conservation hunting bills from advancing.

For more information on trophy importation bans, visit:

www.congressionalsportsmen.org/policies/state/big-5-trophy-importation-bans

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Banner Image: An old solitary buffalo bull, or dagga boy, enjoying a break in the dagga (mud). Photo by the late Don Cowie, courtesy of Peter H. Flack