

Trophy Hunting Bans Imperil Biodiversity



International scientists—many of them non-hunters—argue there is compelling evidence that ending trophy hunting risks land conversion and biodiversity loss. Trophy hunting can provide income for marginalized and impoverished rural communities. Effective hunting reforms should be prioritized over bans.

Trophy hunting is under pressure: There are high-profile campaigns to ban it ¹, and several governments have legislated against . In the United States, the CECIL Act ² would prohibit lion and elephant trophy imports¹ from Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe and restrict imports of species listed as threatened or endangered on the Endangered Species Act. In addition to the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, and France have restricted trophy imports¹, and the United Kingdom is under pressure to follow. Calls for hunting bans usually cite conservation concerns. However, there is compelling evidence that banning trophy hunting would negatively affect conservation.

In African trophy hunting countries, more land has been conserved under trophy hunting than under National Parks ³ and ending trophy hunting risks land conversion and biodiversity loss ⁴. Poorly managed trophy hunting can cause local population declines ⁵, but unless better land-use alternatives exist, hunting reforms—which have proved effective ⁶—should be prioritized over bans ⁷. Positive

population impacts of well-regulated hunting have been demonstrated for many species, including rhinos, markhor, argali, bighorn sheep, and many African ungulates¹⁰.

Trophy hunting can also provide income for marginalized and impoverished rural communities¹⁰. Viable alternatives are often lacking; opponents of hunting promote the substitution of photo-tourism, but many hunting areas are too remote or unappealing to attract sufficient visitors⁸. Species such as lions fare worst in areas without photo-tourism or trophy hunting⁹, where unregulated killing can be far more prevalent than in hunting zones, with serious repercussions for conservation and animal welfare¹⁰. Focusing on trophy hunting also distracts attention from the major threats to wildlife.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a global conservation authority, clearly concludes that “well managed trophy hunting can—and does—positively contribute to conservation and local livelihoods”⁷. Although there is considerable room for improvement, including in governance, management, and transparency of funding flows and community benefits¹¹, the IUCN calls for multiple steps to be taken before decisions are made that restrict or end trophy hunting programs⁷. Crucially, as African countries call for a New Deal for Rural Communities¹² that allows them to achieve the self-determination to sustainably manage wildlife and reduce poverty, it is incumbent on the international community not to undermine that. Some people find trophy hunting repugnant (including many of us), but conservation policy that is not based on science threatens habitat and biodiversity and risks disempowering and impoverishing rural communities.

Amy Dickman and Paul J Johnson (corresponding author, email: paul.johnson@zoo.ox.ac.uk) are faculty member of the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford. Rosie Cooney is a faculty member of the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University. Maxi Pia Louis works for the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organizations. Dilys Roe belongs to the Natural Resources Group, International Institute for Environment and Development, London. Except Paul J Johnson, all are members of the IUCN SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group. Of the 128 co-signatories, 41 are based in Africa, 6 in Asia, and the balance come from Europe, North America and Australia, many of them belong to a wide range of SSC Specialist Groups, including a number of Specialist Group Chairs, as well as many leaders from highly active IUCN member organizations with large field conservation programs of species subject to hunting (download the complete list of signatories). This letter was first published by Science Magazine on August 30, 2019.

Banner Image: Old Cape Buffalo Bull; Conny Damm photo.