

by Paolo Strampelli

Trophy Hunting: A plea to appreciate that not all is black & white



This article, by a non-hunting research scientist who works in Tanzania, adds a voice of reason to the overheating debate on trophy hunting. Strampelli makes convincing arguments for a more nuanced approach by hunters, non-hunters and anti-hunters alike.

Recently, the UK Government stated it would consider banning the import of trophies from hunted animals in Africa. This decision, a brief Internet search reveals, has been celebrated by animal-rights groups.

I am a conservation biologist specializing in large African carnivores such as lions, leopards and cheetahs. As a result of a childhood passion for wildlife and wild places, I decided to pursue a career studying and protecting these species in their threatened and ever-shrinking habitats. Given my background, you might imagine that I am not overly fond of the idea of shooting such wildlife—and you'd be correct. The idea of hunting an animal, especially one most of us consider so beautiful and so

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worthy of celebration, is not one that I personally understand. As a result, I have never hunted anything or even fired a gun. I also have never received any funding or support from hunters or hunting organizations, and trophy hunting brings me no personal benefit whatsoever.

What you might *not* imagine is that I believe an abrupt end to all trophy hunting in Africa, as advocated by many animal-rights groups, could pose an extremely serious threat to many populations of African wildlife.

I would therefore like to try to explain why someone might be against banning trophy hunting in Africa without necessarily being a hunter or profiting in any way from the practice. My goal is to try to convince you that it is possible to hold such an opinion in good faith and that, in certain situations, it might actually be the opinion *you* should hold if you really care about preserving these animals for future generations.

Before I explain my reasoning, I first want to take a moment to stress a point that I believe has been lacking from debates surrounding trophy hunting: that is, the huge geographical variation in how trophy hunting is practiced and managed across Africa. Hunting for trophies actually takes place all over the world, including in the UK and the US, but I will focus on Africa here.

Africa is roughly three times the size of Europe and trophy hunting takes place in countries across all parts of sub-Saharan Africa. It is therefore important to acknowledge that what might be true regarding trophy hunting in, say, Ethiopia might not be applicable 3,000 kilometers away in Zimbabwe. I believe this is rarely appreciated, and it leads both sides of the hunting argument to be unable to relate to the other as a result of their varying experiences on the ground.

So, having said this, I want to present one country as a case study and state why, at least here, I believe that working to end trophy hunting right now could be the last thing we want to do. While I realize that in the UK we are talking about an import ban, not a hunting ban (which would of course be at the discretion of the country where the hunting is happening), this has the same intention of undermining the hunting industry that a ban would.

Nonetheless, the aim of this piece is not to argue whether or not trophy hunters are effective at sustainably managing protected areas, or if hunting leads to benefits for local communities (spoiler alert: sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't) or try to convince you that hunting is all good or all bad. Rather, I want to use this example to explain why the issue of trophy hunting is not as black and white as it might seem, and why some people who are dedicating their lives to conserving wildlife are so counterintuitively and staunchly taking a stand against stopping all trophy hunting in Africa. Some of the points I make are relevant to other countries too, others less so, but that is a debate for another time and not the point of this article. Furthermore, I want to emphasize that I am talking about "classic" trophy hunting, involving wild animals—not canned hunting, where animals such as lions are bred exclusively for the purpose of being hunted.

My doctoral research takes place in Tanzania, in East Africa. You might know the country from beautiful photos of vast savannahs, where hundreds of thousands of wildebeest slowly migrate across the iconic

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plains. What you might not know is that Tanzania is the country with the highest proportion of protected areas in Africa, covering almost 40% of its land. You might also not know that the majority of these protected areas are not for photographic tourism but rather rely on trophy hunting to generate revenue. In fact, more than 250,000 square kilometers (96,500 sq. mi.) of Tanzania—an area larger than the United Kingdom—are currently open to trophy hunting and not photographic tourism.

Hunting operators lease these areas from the government, are assigned an annual number of animals they can hunt from each species (a quota) and then sell these hunting rights to wealthy clients, mostly from North America, Europe and the Middle East. As a result of the vast size of its protected areas dedicated to hunting, as well as its high biological diversity, Tanzania is one of the most popular trophy hunting destinations in Africa. Tanzania is also believed to hold Africa's largest remaining number of wild lions and globally important populations of many charismatic species such as elephants, giraffes, leopards and cheetahs. Preliminary studies I am involved in suggest that, in Tanzania, most of the geographic range of these species is not in photographic reserves but in trophy hunting areas.

Knowing this, I would like now to propose to the reader a thought experiment. Let's assume that tomorrow all hunting within Tanzania is stopped. Whether this be due to pressure from Western donors or because import bans elsewhere make the industry no longer financially viable, or even through a magical snap of the fingers, doesn't matter. Tomorrow, we all wake up to the sound of celebratory trumpets: Trophy hunting in Tanzania is no more!

So, what now? My first guess is that many of you will be thinking: "Easy! Let's turn these now-ex-hunting areas into national parks, for people pointing cameras rather than guns!" And you wouldn't be wrong; for wildlife, this would without a doubt be the ideal solution. And, in fact, there is some good news: Driven in part by a drop in the demand for trophy hunting, the parliament of Tanzania recently passed a bill stating that up to seven protected areas previously dedicated to trophy hunting will be transformed into national parks, with only photographic tourism allowed. This is indeed a fantastic development, which I and all others supporting conservation have rightly celebrated.

Unlike these seven reserves, however, the unfortunate reality is that many of Tanzania's hunting areas cannot and will not become photo-tourism destinations once hunters are kicked out. This is for two main reasons. The first is that many such areas are unsuitable for photographic tourism. In 2018, I spent seven months carrying out wildlife surveys across five hunting areas in Tanzania, one of them the second-largest in the country. Unlike the Serengeti or other popular tourist destinations, the vast majority of these areas are heavily infested with tsetse flies, blood-sucking insects that deliver a surprisingly painful bite. So not exactly the ideal setting for a relaxing holiday.

In addition, hunting areas are mostly not the wide-open plains that are ideal for that once-in-a-lifetime photo, but rather woodlands, meaning that actually seeing animals can be extremely challenging. This, coupled with the fact that wildlife densities are also generally relatively low, since many of these woodland habitats are less biologically productive, means that even if some valiant masochistic tourist were to brave the flies, they'd be unlikely to see much of the wildlife they flew halfway across the world for.

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Wild Area in southern Tanzania. Paolo Strampelli photo

Which leads me to another way in which these areas are not suitable for “ordinary” tourists: distances. Most hunting areas in Tanzania are in remote parts of the country, reachable from the main tourist hubs by either 40-hour drives along terrible roads or by splashing a couple of thousand pounds on a private flight. This remoteness also leads to considerably higher costs in operating a safari lodge—which of course will be passed on to the tourist. How many tourists are going to want to pay thousands of pounds to swat blood-sucking flies and have a sub-par safari experience when they could be having their dream wildlife holiday for half the price elsewhere instead? I personally wouldn’t, and I have yet to meet someone who would.

The second reason I believe many of these areas cannot be utilized for photographic tourism is that the tourist market, although currently growing, is finite. As a result of protecting such vast areas of land, Tanzania is already struggling to make the majority of its national parks financially self-sustaining. Adding even more land to manage will only exacerbate the issue, as the tourism industry will only grow

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by so much every year.

At this point, you might ask, “But then why do hunters do it? Why do they pay tens of thousands of dollars to go to these places, if it’s as bad as you say?” Well, because they have to. Because (for reasons I honestly cannot understand) they really, really want to shoot a lion, or a buffalo or a leopard. They want to do this so badly that they are willing to travel to these remote and challenging landscapes—because most of the easily accessible and higher-density wildlife areas are currently conserved with photo-tourist dollars. As a result, hunters are not only willing to visit these more remote and unappealing areas, but also to spend tens of thousands of pounds in doing so, therefore providing these areas with tangible economic value.

Here you might say, “Why must these areas necessarily make a profit? Why always place financial values on wildlife? Can wilderness not be protected for the sake of wilderness itself?” Personally, I agree—I think there is a strong inherent value to wilderness, and to wildlife, which cannot be quantified solely in financial terms.

However, let’s take a step back. Tanzania is roughly four times the size of the UK and, in 1952, its human population was c. 8 million. Today, Tanzania is home to about 58 million people, and the UN estimates that by 2100 this will have risen to more than 300 million. Three hundred million people in a country where, in 2011, an estimated 49% of people lived on less than US\$1.90 per day (World Bank). In this context, how can we ask the Tanzanian government to put aside hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of land for wildlife if this is not creating any financial value to its people—who have the basic human right to improve their lives through economic and social development? We would not, and have not, done this in Europe and cannot ask the same of others. The opportunity cost of conserving large tracts of land solely for wildlife with no financial benefits in a developing country is simply too great. And, as predicted, over the past year numerous previously protected areas in Tanzania were de-gazetted by the Government and allocated to villages for agriculture and development.

There would be one more option: What about providing financial incentives to conserve these areas in a way that does not involve having to kill a small proportion (that’s all it is) of their species? Maybe through wealthy donors or conservation NGOs themselves leasing the hunting blocks, therefore ensuring these areas retain their value without having to kill anything? And my answer would be—yes, absolutely. That is a great idea, and there is no good reason why it should not be implemented.

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Lion poisoned following conflict with local people. Paolo Strampelli photo

But we are not doing this, are we? Nobody who is currently campaigning to stop trophy hunting has done this. Nobody has provided tangible solutions. If tomorrow a billionaire said they would provide Tanzania with the equivalent financial benefit gained from leasing these areas to hunting operators, and invest the same resources that hunting operators are legally required to in the management of the reserve, almost no one would oppose it. I certainly wouldn't, none of my colleagues would and the Government of Tanzania wouldn't, either—it would be a complete win for all of us, and for wildlife.

But, with the notable exception of American billionaire Paul Tudor Jones¹—who has done exactly this in Grumeti Game Reserve in northern Tanzania—nobody else is stepping up to make this happen. Right now, the only ones willing to provide value to much of this land are hunters. If anybody reading this has a few hundred million pounds to spare and would like to dedicate them to protecting these last pockets of remote wilderness in our overly sanitized world, please let me know. You will find no opposition, only help from those like us who are trying to find solutions. Anti-hunting proponents should put their money where their mouth is, bringing real solutions rather than sabotaging existing conservation mechanisms because they don't fit their narrative.

So is trophy hunting the answer? Not necessarily, and most certainly not always. Let me be clear: Trophy hunting should not take place where it is bringing an objective detriment to a population, and most definitely should not target species that are locally threatened and of which only a handful of

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individuals remain.

However, hunting is one possible tool to assign immediate, tangible value to wildlife, and one which we unfortunately do not currently have the luxury of demonizing in principle. Hunting should therefore be treated as such, with the caveat of being less desirable than other alternatives—when these are available.

Am I arguing that we shall give *carte blanche* to hunters? Absolutely not. Both within Tanzania and elsewhere, there has been evidence of malpractice and over-hunting in the past, and all efforts should be made to ensure hunting is carried out sustainably and in such a way that it provides considerable financial benefits to the communities living around these protected areas. Trophy hunting should be tolerated and adopted as a conservation strategy if, and only if, no better viable alternatives exist for humans and wildlife for that area at that time—as I believe is currently the case in some places. Even then, resources should be invested in ensuring that any hunting is carried out in the most sustainable and humane way possible and, in the longer term, in developing mechanisms that will, we hope, enable us to bring value to threatened species without having to resort to hunting, such as has happened in Grumeti².

What if, after all this, you still believe that, no matter the context, it is always wrong to kill something for pleasure and that trophy hunting should always be prohibited on this principle? While this is a valid ethical stance (assuming you're vegan, of course), the unfortunate reality is that what is best for an individual animal is not necessarily what is best for the species as a whole.

While I, as a conservation biologist, of course care about the welfare of individuals, my main priority will always have to be the long-term survival of the population. Both I and other conservation biologists who have spent time on the ground learning about the issues, and who share these views, care deeply about wildlife. Our main interest is to try to ensure that policy decisions help provide threatened populations with the best long-term chance of survival.

We have seen what happens when wildlife has no value: Millions of acres of wild land can be lost in the space of a few years; and within months, farms and cattle take the place of wildlife that has been there since the dawn of man. More lions can be poisoned or killed in retaliation for livestock losses in one location in a month than are killed through trophy hunting across the whole country in one year³.

So please: Inform yourselves and debate, but do keep an open mind. Most of us arguing against trophy-import or hunting bans are not arguing against banning trophy hunting in principle—we argue against banning trophy hunting *without a plan for how to better protect these areas*. As I mentioned earlier, the situation will be different in different countries, and in certain contexts hunting bans or restrictions might have positive impacts on wildlife populations, as they have in some places in the past. However, this will not always be the case, and it's important to appreciate this and make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Otherwise, as Dr. Amy Dickman, director of the Ruaha Carnivore Project, succinctly put it⁴, "Trophy hunting is decried as immoral, and I personally dislike it. However, undermining it without implementing better solutions will increase horrible, unregulated killings, undermine local decision-making about wildlife use, reduce wildlife revenue, increase habitat and biodiversity loss, and leave the

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world far poorer for all our children. I deeply believe that is far more immoral.”

Based on my years of work in both hunting and non-hunting areas, it is my firm belief that if we were to stop all hunting immediately, we would soon have considerably less wildlife in Africa than we do today.

Paolo Strampelli is a final-year PhD student with the Ruaha Carnivore Project in Tanzania and the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit at Oxford University. He specialises in large African carnivore research and conservation and has worked on this in Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania. He currently investigates the status and special ecology of, and threats to, lions, leopards, wild dogs, cheetahs and hyaenas in the Ruaha-Rungwa conservation landscape in southern Tanzania. His twitter handle is @Strampelli.

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Banner Image: Lions in Ruaha, Tanzania. Paolo Strampelli photo