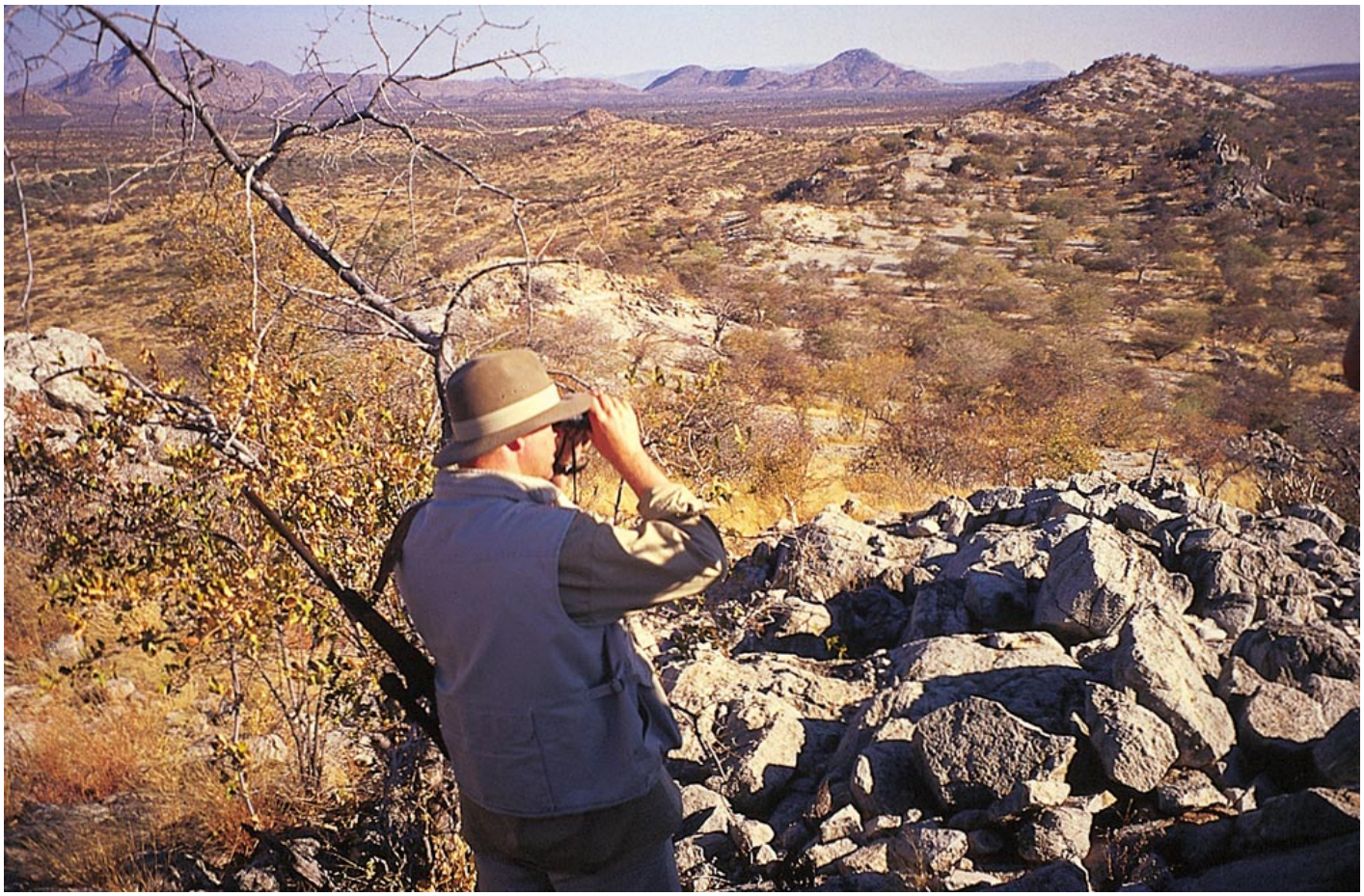
by David Peddie

An African Conservation Tool



A personal perspective on the ethics and emotive narrative of trophy hunting.

The topic of safari hunting—unfortunately, more widely known as trophy hunting—often stirs passionate debate around the questions *Is recreational hunting ethical?* and *Can hunting contribute to the conservation of wild species?* Unfortunately, many of the comments made and positions taken, by both opponents and proponents of hunting, only exacerbate the polarization around this issue instead of offering pragmatic answers about the role and validity of hunting as a tool in the African conservation landscape.

The more vociferous members of the anti-hunting lobby tend to feed disingenuous information to a sincere but sometimes ignorant and gullible public—all too often for the purpose of stoking emotions to raise funds for agendas that do not acknowledge the reality of circumstances in the field or of the rural communities living with wildlife.

The logical and sensible answers to much anti-hunting propaganda are countered—at least for the many reasonable, non-hunting people looking to contribute to wildlife conservation—by the behavior of rogue

operators, the corruption of government ministries and wildlife departments, the shooting of caged lions, “kill videos” and the posting of grotesque pictures of hunters with leopards draped over their shoulders. With a little manipulation, it is not difficult for anti-hunters to project the image of psychopaths who kill for pleasure—and tar all hunters with the same brush.

In addition, it sometimes seems that the very concept of safari hunting has been degraded into a travesty of collecting horns and tusks, the trophies, that lacks morality and personal integrity, respect for the quarry and any real concern for the future of the species hunted. That is a broad and serious generalization, especially to those who are ethical hunters and/or committed conservationists.

Nevertheless, a close inspection of the African hunting industry makes it appear that ethical Professional Hunters and ecologically sound hunting operations are something of an exception in most African countries rather than the rule.

The willingness of some safari companies to operate outside the rules, the misguided demands of some clients for more and bigger trophies and the endemic corruption of some game department officials may create a climate of greed. The list of transgressions is long: shooting from vehicles, leaving wounded animals, shooting as many animals as it takes to find one big enough to make the record books, shooting animals over or outside the quota, baiting or calling animals along the boundaries of national parks, shooting “canned” lions—the list goes on.

The notion of a collection safari—making a distinction between a “conservation” hunt and simply amassing as many as possible of the largest-possible horns and tusks—goes back many decades. A portion of the blame for this lies with some of the big American safari clubs. Such organizations often raise large sums of money for wildlife conservation, which can have significant positive impact when invested wisely. However, the practice of rewarding and glorifying those members who shoot the most and the biggest panders to those who seem to have lost perspective and who primarily pursue the satisfaction of their egos.

It is a fallacy that the most impressive animals with the biggest horns or tusks are always the oldest, past their prime and no longer contributing to the reproductive health and social structure of a population. Elephant, lion, sable antelope and buffalo are some of the species where this is often not the case, and removing these specimens may have reproductive and population-structural consequences.

Although subsistence hunting was an essential element in our evolution and is embedded in our genes, there are some principles of hunting that should be kept in mind in today’s world. If hunting is not part of the sustainable, subsistence livelihood of a society; if it is not done for the protection of life or livelihood or for the scientific management of ecosystems disturbed by human interference, then at the very least it should be conducted as “fair chase.” Among other things, fair chase allows the hunter to use the experience to fully integrate with nature. Hunting should never, in any way, negatively affect the viability of the quarry population or its role in the ecosystem. Hunting should also be carried out with respect for the quarry and without malice or misguided ego.

A commercial safari should also adhere to these principles. The client should immerse him or herself in

all facets of the hunt to experience its essence and to connect psychologically and physically with wilderness. This process starts with the hunt preparation, extends to tracking, stalking and killing the quarry, and concludes with processing the carcass and consuming the meat.

Can safari or recreational hunting play an ethical and economic part in wildlife conservation? The answer is a resounding yes, but with a number of clear provisos.

The first is that the trophy-hunting clubs must change their criteria of what constitutes a successful safari. Clear ethical norms need to be reinstated and the wilderness experience, the chase, the effort and the story be the objective and the prize, not the number or size of the heads on a wall. Club members should be encouraged to get into the wild and fully embrace the experience, successful kill or not. And they should be reminded that the quarry needs respect, not undignified Facebook photographs.

Second, the commercial hunting industry must be cleaned up. Rogue operators who abuse the resource and jeopardize hunting's viability need to be named, shamed and put out of business by their peers and conservation authorities.

Third, some wildlife conservation authorities must redevelop the expertise they once had in managing hunting areas and operators, including their research and monitoring capacities and strict control over science-based quotas.

Fourth, those authorities also need to think carefully about where they use safari hunting in their wildlife conservation strategies. Easily accessible state-protected areas of high wildlife diversity and density are generally more suited to (and financially lucrative as) wildlife viewing rather than game ranching or safari hunting.

Finally, and critically for the future of Africa's wild areas, the whole approach to the distribution of benefits to, and the economic development of, rural communities in or alongside wildlife areas, including hunting concessions, should be reviewed. If wildlife is a principal use in these areas, it is essential that the flow of benefits from hunting or ecotourism to these communities is equitable and transparent. Otherwise the hunting industry cannot truly live up to its claim of contributing to both wildlife conservation and rural development.

In Zimbabwe, for example, the northwest Matabeleland complex of juxtaposed national parks, safari areas, forest reserves and communal lands lends itself to a whole new land-use planning model. In the Matetsi and Deka safari areas, and in the Kazuma, Fuller and Panda-Masuie forest reserves, the land-use emphasis should be shifted to a mix of safari hunting, game viewing, wildlife management and small-scale "conservation" agriculture in cooperation with Victoria Falls and the adjacent communal areas.

Throughout Africa there are still large areas and circumstances where well controlled and ethically conducted safari hunting has an important role in wildlife conservation. In the Zambezi Delta in Mozambique, for example, controlled hunting concessions have provided the revenue, manpower and

security to allow depleted wildlife populations to recover.

To reiterate my opinions: Trophy hunting, as it is currently managed and practiced in many areas, and by some operators, is not an ethical and effective conservation tool.

Safari hunting—when it is conducted ethically, transparently and verifiably, with strictly managed quotas set on sound scientific knowledge and not just the desire to collect big heads—will contribute significantly to wildlife and ecosystem conservation, to rural community socio-economic development and to the elimination of corruption within the safari industry.

As a final consideration, the proponents of hunting in Africa should actively demonstrate and promote their commitment to wildlife and wild area conservation, and to implementing pragmatic solutions to the difficult issue of co-existence of people and wildlife. To accomplish this, public perception and political influence are critical. Words are both positively and negatively emotive: “Trophy hunting,” “recreational hunting” and “trophy” have been given strongly negative connotations by the public, and their politicians listen to them. This sort of terminology must be consigned to history.

Go on safari, embrace the whole experience of the hunt, take home memories and mementos, and leave the trophies in the cabinets of footballers, golfers, tennis players and other athletes. You are a conservationist, embracing the wilderness, accepting its bounty and ensuring its perpetuation.

David Peddie is a conservation ecologist experienced in wildlife management, rural community development and safari tourism in Southern Africa. David grew up in Hwange, northwest Zimbabwe. After earning degrees in agricultural cconomics and wildlife ecology, he worked with both the Rhodesia and Zimbabwe Department of National Parks. Since leaving Zimbabwe National Parks, in 1988, he has been a consultant in wildlife management, protected-area planning and rural development throughout Southern Africa. For a number of years he managed the Sindisa Foundation, a UK-registered charity supporting wildlife conservation and rural development in southern Africa.

Banner image: A hunter in the Omaruru area of Namibia, glassing the terrain from a kopje in search of kudu. Author’s photo