

by Natasha Illum Berg

# Will We Conquer the Virus of Fear and Inertia, One Fine Day?



*A professional hunter notes that the current pandemic harbors immense threats for wildlife and wild lands in Africa, and for those businesses with nature at their core. Are we able to seize the opportunities arising in the wake of COVID-19, to safeguard the remaining pockets of wild Africa and create a new understanding for conservationist hunting?*

The hunting outfits of Africa have been given their second chance in a decade to become more heard and understood, and to grow new support from the wider world.

Will we take it? Or repeat failings past?

The healthy balance of nature in hunting areas is in a delicate position in Africa this year. More than usual. This year, bookings from hunting guests have dropped sharply, or been moved forward, because of travel restrictions, travel fears and world economics due to COVID-19.

Beside all the financial problems this brings to humans in the hunting industry, we are also painfully

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aware of the negative effects this will have on the protection of flora and fauna in the areas where we operate. We all know how quickly poachers can create huge damage, in hunting areas and national parks alike.

Who will pay for anti-poaching teams now? When their salaries cannot be fully covered by what remains in the sorry pockets of struggling hunting companies? African governments probably will not be able to take much out of their coffers either, for us or our areas.

There are some private efforts to fund anti-poaching, but these generally take place off the public stage. Such funding will help protect our areas in the short term, but not for long, since the public image of hunting is still so very far from the truth.

I am talking about conservationist hunting, not near-sighted reapers of game. In the long term, it won't be lack of money that kills our wild lands, it will be public opinion against hunting, even conservationist hunting.

### ***We are not alone on the capricious rapids of COVID***

But we hunters are not alone. We have an equal on board, and this could make all the difference in the world. COVID-19 is not only killing the hunting industry, it is hitting photographic tourism in Africa too. Hard. Our national parks need income from tourism too, to pay their rangers to protect them.

Conservationist hunting or photographic safaris, the difference is way less relevant than the public believes when it comes to the protection of animals and wild land. Whether or not you agree with conservationist hunting, until someone comes up with an effective new way to let these hunting areas remain free and wild, if conservationist hunting is taken away, all arguments against it become mere rambles.

I have been completely open to and interested in being part of new ways for my entire life, and I still am. But so far no one has come up with a realistic alternative to conservationist hunting. Whether a wilderness area in Africa is a national park or something else, its protection simply comes down to making enough revenue from that tract of land, through sustainable use, to keep the nature in it natural.

So with the loss of tourism, whether photographic or hunting, national parks and hunting areas in big parts of Africa are all in the same dire straits, fighting against the current without the proverbial paddle.

### ***The ray of light***

However, in any sudden shifting light that moves across the world lies the opportunity to show a different depth of field to those who have only ever before been exposed to things in the flat light of the one-dimensional.

Such new light can show the public a novel, multi-faceted reality.

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The hunting industry has wealthy clients and organisations behind it who just might say yes to being part of a collective African plan to protect wild areas. Especially if their efforts become public knowledge.

Let us not forget that hunting areas often lie as buffer zones around national parks. Anti-poaching teams here are very valuable in helping to protect the nearby national parks, too. (There are of course other angles to take, but this is very relevant.)

This in itself could be the proof of a decent pudding. But I am more ambitious yet.

Big international conservation organizations that are involved in Africa will have to be asked—publicly, facts and figures in hand—if they now want to help protect some of the most important natural areas in the world during this crisis. Or would they rather not, because they happen to not like hunting? (This would be a bit like saying that you don't care about the ocean because you don't like to eat fish.)

All they have to do, when asked the question, is respond publicly. Out of “yes” and “no,” I know which would feel quite uncomfortable to say out loud.

Organisations like the World Wildlife Fund and the Frankfurt Zoological Society are just two of the many who should come out of the bush to help us raise money to combat poaching.

Such organisations have enough practical experience to be perfectly aware that well-looked after hunting areas are hugely important to the bigger picture of conservation in many parts of Africa.

Such organisations have no problem admitting this privately, but will they say it openly? I have already started this debate in public with WWF on television in Sweden, but pressure to bring this question out into the open must come from more hunters internationally.

The point is to bring this up in the public conservation space—but not just to collect money from hunters and hunting organisations. That would possibly give us some much-needed funds, but we would miss the boat in building a truthful image of conservationist hunting.

To ask this question requires the macho, individualistic community of African hunting-company owners to communicate with each other, and—with the help of independent, non-hunting conservation scientists—to get the facts and figures together for our entire continent.

Then they (we) must boil down these facts to 10 hard-hitting numbers backed up by tourism companies across Africa. These data we will then collectively send out into the world through any channel we can.

### **Where?**

Preferably in printed and televised media together with social media. Yes, social media can be a contagious breeding ground for vile lies, but it can just as easily be the biggest field in the world for cultivating truth. With one caveat: We must stand up and speak clearly and intelligently and together, and at the right time.

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Honestly, are you going to tell me that one little Swedish girl (no, not me) can speak in a louder voice than a few thousand gun-swinging hunters in Africa?

### ***Will we, this time?***

While learning backgammon as a child, I realised that there are two ways to play. There is playing not to lose and there is playing to win. Those who play not to lose might see a few victories, by hanging on for dear life, but in the long run, little by little, they are eaten up by the scores.

Now, will we African hunters play to win, finally? Will we take the road of the brave and make something of these hugely challenging but interesting times? Or will it be yet more disappointing whining about "to each their own," "nobody will hear us anyway" and "we're just trying to survive"? In my 28 years in the hunting industry, I have heard these excuses so many times.

### ***Last time, we missed it***

The last time African hunters collectively had a chance to put themselves in a positive light on the world stage—to milden the death stare of the anti-hunting eye—was during the elephant-poaching crisis that swept across Africa a few years back.

It was obvious to me then that if we, the hunting community, had gone out early and hard to say that elephant hunting would be put on hold while we collectively and humbly asked for anti-poaching support, a greater understanding would have spread about us. This would have been an opportunity to show, openly and in public, the good work that we do.

Embarrassingly, it largely turned into a lobbying campaign to keep elephant hunting open for selfish reasons, which made me doubt we even deserved anyone's support at all.

### ***The time, the place***

There is a time and a place to argue for something with a chance of its leading to some sort of success. (Hint: While Africa's elephants were being killed by poachers was not the time to argue to keep on hunting elephants.)

Conservation hangs on understanding what humans are, not what we want them to be, and how much they know. Educating humans in conservation can mean hunters teaching urbanised women and men about sustainable use and the economics that have to be in place to keep many wild areas in Africa wild.

It also means understanding when and where and how certain points can be pushed: timing and *Fingerspitzengefühl*, as the Germans call it.

A chance to show the world how much good we can do together was lost during at least two recent elephant crises; instead, like little children, we put ourselves in a position to be told off. Instead of taking charge from day one, the lack of action just damaged our image further.

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When a ring of fire is closing in on all sides, there comes a time when a choice has to be made: You can either stand there in the middle and repeat to yourself, "it burns, it burns" while hunching down (as if the fire will take mercy on you if you make yourself small) or you can jump and deal with it from the outside.

If you decide on the latter, it becomes a matter of choosing the right place and time to jump over the (politically sensitive) flames, and then from which vantage point to attack the flames.

### ***Now is that time for us!***

Questions: Is our industry simply afraid, are our visions (I'm being nice when I say visions) too small and our egos too big, to do anything? Will we let the opportunity pass on by, once more?

*Natasha Illum Berg is a Danish-Swedish professional hunter and author who has been based in the north of Tanzania for 27 years; her specialty is buffalo and she works with Robin Hurt Safaris. Illum Berg grew up on a hunting and conservation estate in Sweden, where her family saved several species from extinction. She has published five books in nine languages and has created and been featured in conservation documentaries. Illum Berg writes and give talks widely on conservation and motivational issues. "To a hunting conservationist the aim is balance and sustainability. The driving force is adventure as much as it is respect, protection and love for nature. It is to be the eyes and ears of the forest or the bush. It is about being part of nature, part of the food chain. It is about being someone who takes personal responsibility for the nature you live in and off." Here she reads the first installment of her short story "Looking at Harry."*

*Banner image: The author at home, northern Tanzania. Jimmy Greenwood photo*