

by Gerhard R. Damm

A Conservation Paradox-The pros and cons of recreational hunting

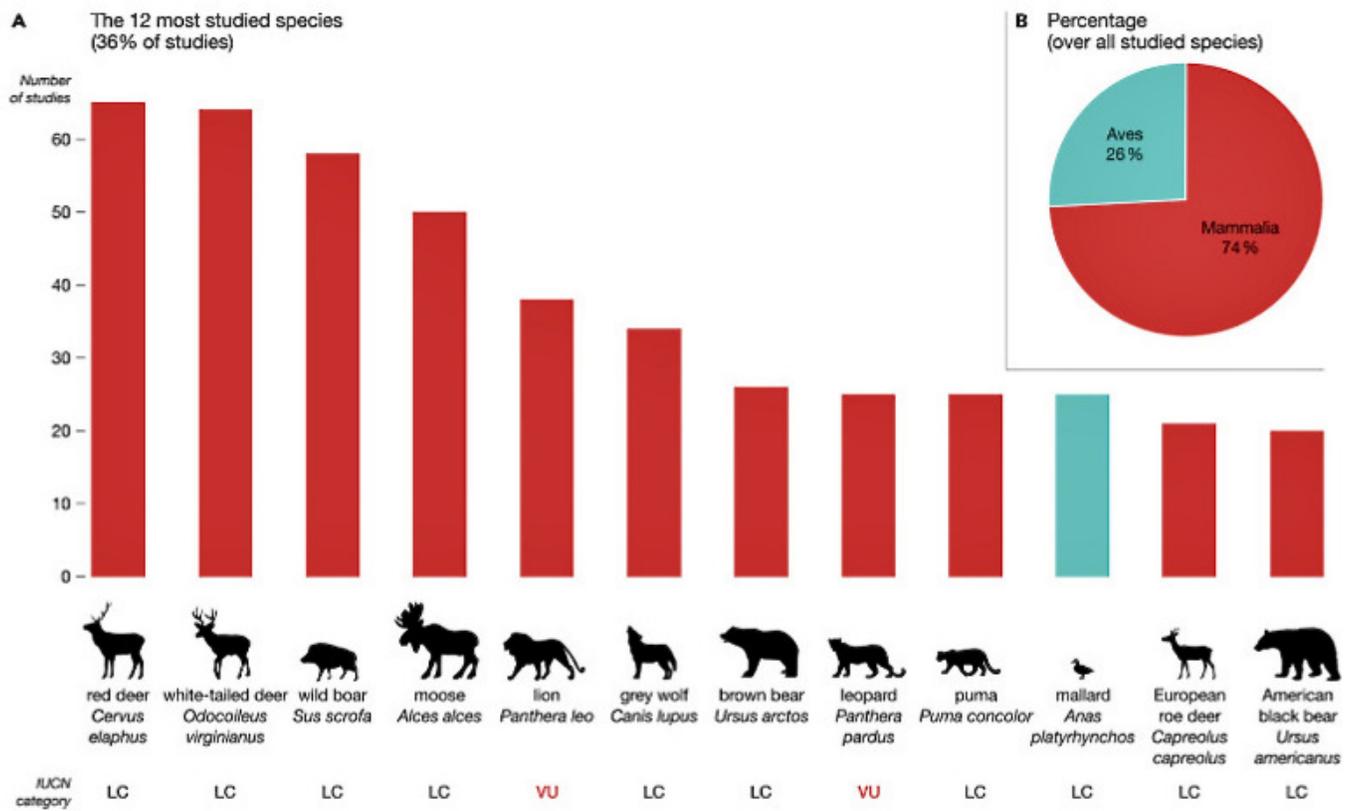


Scientists have reviewed more than 1,000 studies on recreational hunting in an attempt to summarize the scientific literature examining the biodiversity and social effects of recreational hunting globally.

More than 15 years ago, Andrew Loveridge wrote: “When a wildlife population is threatened, deliberately killing individuals from it may seem perverse. Yet some argue that, paradoxically, well-regulated hunting benefits wildlife populations, and may sometimes be the only way to ensure their persistence.” In his paper, Loveridge and colleagues listed many examples from all over the world where hunting has been regulated successfully. They took a deep look into hunting’s multifaceted aspects and concluded that a single characterization of its impact on conservation is necessarily simplistic.

Now, scientists from Finland’s University of Helsinki and Flinders University, in Australia, have reviewed more than 1,000 studies of recreational hunting and published their findings (“Consequences of recreational hunting for biodiversity conservation and livelihoods”) in the journal *One Earth*. They describe their work as a first attempt to summarize the scientific literature examining the biodiversity and social effects of recreational hunting globally. This may be so, but the authors come to the same conclusions that the Loveridge paper did in 2006.

The Helsinki and Flinders researchers note that hunting research has focused mainly on the behavior and population dynamics of large mammals in North America, Europe and Africa. Evidence is still lacking, they say, to answer the pressing questions of why hunting contributes to sustainable conservation of biodiversity in some places and not others.



“Two-thirds of the hunting research is focused on mammals. Red deer, white-tailed deer, wild boar, moose and lion are the most well-studied. Of these species, only lion is of conservation concern, with many recommendations on how hunting can be made sustainable through hunting quotas or seasonal limits”, writes one of the authors, Dr. Hayley Clements. She adds that, “far less research has tried to examine the broader impacts of hunting on ecosystem integrity and function, and how it affects the livelihoods of local people, or to document local people’s perceptions about hunting.”

Dr. Clements also posits that “approximately 1,394,000 square kilometers [538,225 square miles] of land is dedicated for [safari] hunting in sub-Saharan Africa, yet we lack research on how effective these areas are in conserving ecosystems, and how local communities benefit from hunting. Future research should focus on the contribution of recreational hunting towards meeting both biodiversity and social objectives.”

Prof. Corey Bradshaw, another author, writes, “we used automated approaches to investigate and summarize the main topics surrounding recreational hunting. This also allowed us to determine the geographic spread and diversity of species hunted around the globe . . . drawing on these topics, we considered both the positive and negative implications of recreational hunting for nature conservation and the livelihoods and well-being of people.”

Yet he exemplified the multifaceted aspects and characterizations of hunting in his blog, ConservationBytes.com, when he posits: “I couldn’t possibly conceive of hunting a wild, indigenous species for my own personal satisfaction now . . . [and I find hunting] morally and ethically

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reprehensible.” He qualified this remark with, “while it might seem counterintuitive, there is evidence to suggest that some recreational hunting can deliver environmental and social benefits” and conceding that diverting land from agricultural or other types of development to priority hunting areas can in fact benefit entire ecosystems. (Celebrities and talk-show hosts take note that personal feelings should not impede logical thinking.)

It’s also encouraging that another co-author, Enrico Di Minin, who leads Helsinki University’s Laboratory of Interdisciplinary Conservation Science, said: “We have outlined a research agenda to assess the role of recreational hunting in diverse social-ecological systems, and to consider local people’s values and needs. The need for such evidence is urgent, given declining numbers of recreational hunters in some regions and increasing opposition to trophy hunting in others.”

Di Minin’s conclusions are significant in connection with the desires and needs of Indigenous peoples—as expressed, for example, in the video “Let Africans Decide” (and regarding the 30×30 initiative). Therefore, “we should also expand research beyond charismatic and common species to better assess the impact of recreational hunting on threatened and less charismatic species.”

Here, he and his co-authors are not alone—other scientists are saying the same. See Amy Dickman and her colleagues’ article “The Truth: Conservation’s Biggest Weapon.”

Ethical concerns about recreational hunting, and trophy hunting in particular, too often attract a one-sided focus of public attention; and the often-purposeful conflation of regulated hunting with poaching exacerbates this mounting problem. The Helsinki - Flinders paper pinpoints where knowledge and interpretation are lacking; it also promotes reasoned dialogue and understanding the complexities and contexts around recreational hunting. The research agenda proposed by the authors will help close the knowledge gap and emphasize the importance of local socio-ecological dynamics and the voices of the people co-existing with wildlife.

The paper is a very useful contribution, and a must-read for all who value the conservation of wild habitats and wildlife around the world.

Article reference: Di Minin, Enrico; Clements, Hayley; Correia, Ricardo; Cortés-Capano, Gonzalo; Hausmann, Anna; Haukka, Anna; Kulkarni, Ritwik; Bradshaw, Corey J. A. Consequences of recreational hunting for biodiversity conservation and livelihoods. One Earth doi: 10.1016/j.oneear.2021.01.014

Banner image: Mountain zebra. The recovery of such species (Equus zebra) was partly supported by economic benefits generated by trophy hunting. Hayley Clements photo

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