

# The Truth: Conservation's Biggest Weapon-Misinformation leads to devastating real-world impacts



*Shutting down trophy hunting in Africa without viable alternatives—for income, land use, coexistence—would imperil wilderness and biodiversity and undermine local communities.*

Facts matter and misinformation can have devastating real-world impacts. This is as true in the African bush as it is in the US Capitol. That is why we are deeply concerned when we read overt misinformation about trophy hunting, such as in the opinion pieces by photographer Cyril Christo.

Trophy hunting is an emotive and polarizing issue ripe for misinformation. Much of the discussion on both sides occurs in echo chambers, where falsehoods and half-truths are shared and perpetuated. Misinformation can eventually make its way into policy debates, as it has in the US Congress, the California state legislature and the UK Parliament. Just as with anti-vaccine falsehoods and climate-change denial, these misinformation campaigns must be called out for the significant harm they do. As the scientist Kelvin Peh said so well: “Truth not only continues to matter; it remains the biggest weapon and shield for all wildlife conservationists and environmental scientists in a world of increasingly wanton, politically motivated myth-making.”

Many of Mr. Christo’s statements could be debated, but three central misconceptions stand out. These

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are not unique to him—they are commonly spread by anti-hunting groups. Such misinformation must be tackled so that policymakers can be better informed.

### ***On extinction***

The first is the idea that trophy hunting is driving species to extinction. Decades of published scientific research and field experience show this is false. There is not, as far as we can tell, a single species where trophy hunting is listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as a key threat driving it to extinction. Humane Society International, an organization that campaigns against trophy hunting, listed the top 20 species imported by American hunters (the bulk of international hunters). If hunting were intensifying decline, it would be a major concern in a world that has lost over two-thirds of its vertebrate wildlife since 1970.

However, far from hunting driving those species to extinction, nine of the 20 are increasing in numbers and six are stable. Eighteen are ranked as of “least concern” by the IUCN, with the other two “near threatened”; none is “threatened.” For four of the 20, including one of the “near threatened,” trophy hunting is identified by the IUCN as a positive instrument in their conservation; and this is implied for a further three species. None of the 20 has trophy hunting documented as a threat to its population. These facts matter.

Trophy hunting can conserve wildlife because it provides the economic incentive to protect large tracts of wildlife habitat where there are few or no alternative funding sources. This helps maintain species including lions, which can threaten the lives and livelihoods of rural people. One seminal study documented at least 340 million acres (148 million hectares) conserved by trophy hunting across sub-Saharan Africa. This is more land than has been set aside for national parks, where photo-tourism is concentrated. Furthermore, there are clear examples where trophy hunting has benefited the conservation of wildlife including elephants, lions, rhinos, buffalo, argali and many others. These examples are well documented, including in an IUCN Briefing Paper, academic literature and a US Congressional Research Service report. Again, these facts matter.

By incentivizing the conservation of wildlife habitat and the maintenance of dangerous species, trophy hunting can play an important role in reducing far greater threats to wildlife such as habitat loss and poaching. This conservation benefit is particularly significant given that the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services highlighted land-use change as the primary driver of massive global biodiversity loss. This is why more than 130 scientists and local stakeholders, including the chairs of multiple IUCN Specialist Groups, signed a 2019 open letter in *Science* warning that banning trophy hunting without viable alternatives at the ready would imperil biodiversity.



Poachers under arrest. From the video letter “Let Africans Decide”

### ***Hunting is not poaching***

The second theme of the misinformation campaign is the false equivalence between trophy hunting and poaching. Trophy hunting differs from poaching as shopping differs from shoplifting. In both cases, the former is legal, regulated and generates wide benefits. Conversely, because poaching is illegal and unregulated, it is often indiscriminate, kills many non-target species and plays a key role in wildlife decline.

Oddly, the “evidence” that has been cited for poaching being linked to trophy hunting is that both can occur in the same area, such as in Tanzania’s Selous Game Reserve, which has undoubtedly suffered severe poaching. But recent data from South Africa’s Kruger National Park, one of the most popular photo-tourism destinations in Africa, shows that rhino numbers have fallen by 67% since 2011. Does this mean that where photo-tourism is allowed, poaching follows? Should photo-tourism be banned, in Kruger or more widely, especially as most African protected areas maintain wildlife far below carrying capacity due to threats such as poaching?

The sensible answer is no. Whether managed for photo-tourism and/or trophy hunting, most African protected areas are woefully underfunded, so removing either one of those key revenue streams without adequate replacement would only exacerbate those threats. For example, in Tanzania’s Ruaha landscape—internationally important for lions and many other species—it is indeed likely that lions are in decline. However, as with many other landscapes, far more lions around Ruaha are speared, snared and poisoned by community members than are killed by trophy hunters. An exaggerated focus on trophy

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hunting simply draws attention away from the real threats such as intense human wildlife conflict or the disempowerment of local people in conservation. This is of real concern.



Who is threatened here? From the video letter “Let Africans Decide”

Clearly, trophy hunting has huge impacts for individual animals and in some cases can negatively impact populations, such as with lions in Hwange or the Selous. But in Africa, just as in the US, there is science that can and does underpin sustainable trophy hunting. This includes age-based adaptive quotas and targeted actions such as quota reductions or time-limited moratoria for some species. Poor governance, including corruption, and poor design of and adherence to regulations can doubtless have real impacts on wildlife in trophy hunting areas, and the same is true for photo-tourism areas.

The key question, however, is whether removing trophy hunting from an area would ultimately decrease overall threats to wildlife. Currently, this is unlikely. Indiscriminate bans, without better alternatives to replace incentives from high-fee trophy hunting to maintain wildlife and habitat, risk significantly amplifying major threats such as poaching and land conversion.

### ***Modern colonialism***

The third, and crucial, topic of misinformation has to do with trophy hunting and colonialism. Much of the current conservation model—including land set aside for both photo-tourism and trophy hunting—has deep colonial underpinnings, and this must be understood and acknowledged. But that makes it ever more important that, today, post-colonial decision-making and rights of African countries

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and communities be respected. Westerners must not continue to externally impose their own ideals upon Africans, such as pushing trophy hunting bans and restrictions. Local communities now resist this, warning anti-hunting groups that they are directly undermining both successful conservation and human rights.

What is all too rarely recognized is that Africans themselves have long realized the failure of conservation models and have in many places reversed them. At the core of these new African-invented wildlife conservation models is the principle that the legal right to sustainably use their wildlife should be given back to local people. These rights—and the global markets that add so much value to a uniquely African product—and the democratic awakening associated with them should not be undermined because utilization offends people elsewhere. Let the communities that live with wildlife be the ones to decide whether the benefits they receive from trophy hunting are meaningful—as many have. Recently, the Community Leaders Network of Southern Africa made a powerful statement on this very topic.

Tired of getting a raw deal, rural African communities are demanding a new deal in which they are shareholders, not disempowered stakeholders, in their own wildlife resources. Thus, externally imposed bans, including bans on the importation of hunting trophies, undermine not only the foundations of sustainable wildlife management but also of human rights.



Human rights—and human livelihoods and safety—are at stake too. From the video letter “Let Africans Decide”

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It is strange that, although much of the legislation that would affect trophy hunting emerges from the US and UK, neither of those governments is proposing to ban hunting domestically. In fact, hunting has long been a bedrock of North American conservation; and declining domestic hunting revenue has been a source of concern as this funds wildlife conservation. [*Ed. note: Due to a pandemic-induced surge in hunting and fishing, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has seen a \$121 million (€103 million) increase, to \$1 billion, in these funds.*]

Imposing different ideals on other nations seems hypocritical, especially nations such as Botswana, Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, which rank among the top five countries for megafauna conservation. In comparison, the US comes in 19th and the UK does not make the top 20.

There is also a crucial omission in this debate, if it is truly about conservation: Despite the huge negative media coverage that trophy hunting receives, we have yet to see campaigners present viable alternatives for securing the vast habitats, dangerous species and invaluable biodiversity currently conserved by trophy hunting areas. The truth is that, despite some nascent initiatives such as debt for nature swaps, rhino bonds and Lion Carbon, no viable alternatives currently exist at the scale and timeline needed if trophy hunting were removed today.

### ***The future***

We are not unwilling to consider alternatives to trophy hunting—several of us are actively working on potential alternatives—but we demand an informed view based on expertise and history.

For a historical comparison, it is informative to look at Kenya and what happened after that country banned trophy hunting in 1977. Since then, there has been a precipitous decline in wildlife (averaging 68% for 18 species over 40 years) while livestock numbers increased sharply. People debate the extent to which those declines were linked to the trophy hunting ban, but it is a clear warning of what happens in a system where local communities are more incentivized to raise domestic stock than to conserve wildlife.

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A scene essentially gone from Kenya except in a few national parks. From the video letter “Let Africans Decide”

Peer-reviewed research shows a stark contrast between Kenya on the one hand and Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia on the other, where utilization (including trophy hunting) enabled landholders to make a living from wildlife—and to reduce their livestock numbers—over the same period. The Kenyan example clearly highlights that removing trophy hunting does not automatically guarantee a better future for wildlife.

Before trophy hunting is removed or restricted, even just through import bans, IUCN recommends developing alternatives that offer equivalent benefits for people and wildlife, in genuine partnership with local stakeholders. In Africa’s tough landscapes and climates, this is not a trivial challenge.

Amid this debate, there are some welcome central points of agreement: We all want nature to thrive. We all must tackle the terrifying threat of climate change. We all want a world where our children can see lions and other wildlife. But to make these things happen, we need vast, intact landscapes. While trophy hunting understandably troubles many people, the fact is that presently there are no viable alternatives for securing the immense habitats in Africa that trophy hunting now does.

As a low estimate, foreign hunters spend more than \$470 million (€401 million) in Southern and East Africa each year. This is less than a quarter of what a better managed sector could earn—but it will be a long time before philanthropy or new financial models can deliver at the scale and on the timeline required. Until they do, trophy hunting is stemming the existential threats of biodiversity loss and

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degradation and loss of wild ecosystems.



Misinformation spoken loudly and often is still misinformation. From the video letter “Let Africans Decide”

Loudly spoken misinformation is a blight in conservation, and we need to counter it with pragmatic solutions, examples and scientific evidence. Free speech, diverse viewpoints (including from other scientists) and open debates are the foundation of democracy and innovation. Denying facts and amplifying misinformation around trophy hunting (or anything else) causes major damage. It harms evidence-based conservation across vast areas and risks disempowering and disenfranchising many of the world’s most vulnerable people—people in whose hands the future of biodiversity increasingly lies. It must stop.

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*Banner image: From the video letter “Let Africans Decide”—more than 50 community leaders, representing millions of people across Southern Africa, urge celebrities to stop using their influence to undermine the human rights of impoverished people and to jeopardize wildlife conservation.*

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