



Safari Hunting, Conservation and Sustainability

By Robin Hurt

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Africa's wildlife and wild lands are disappearing and relentless attacks on hunting accelerate this process. A renowned safari veteran discusses hunting, conservation and sustainable use in Africa.

Dr. Amy Dickman and 132 other conservationists and scientists [wrote](#)—in *Science Magazine* on August 31, 2019—that “imposed bans or blanket restrictions on trophy hunting without viable alternatives will imperil biodiversity.” Dr. Dickman is not a hunter and has no desire to be one, but her statement is to the point.

For myself, I hate the term *trophy hunting*, as it does not adequately describe what my peers and I do for a living. Instead, it gives an impression that the trophy is the only reason we hunt. Nothing could be further from the truth. I rather use *safari hunting*, although *conservation hunting* appropriately describes modern hunting in Africa too.

I am a licensed PH, professional hunter, and have been one my whole adult life—more than five and a half decades—throughout the game fields of Africa, wherever legal, licensed hunting is or was allowed. It's what I do, and I am proud of my profession.

I am also, by choice, a conservationist. I harbor a deep love and respect for wildlands and wildlife. My life would be meaningless and empty without them. On land under my care, I prefer to see wild animals roaming freely rather than domestic livestock.

“Conservation” is often erroneously understood as strict protection. In reality, it stands for a host of activities relating to habitats and wildlife. Ultimately, conservation, in a holistic sense, is the sustainable and wise use of nature for the benefit of present and future generations.

In today's world, the Internet has become a tool for spreading information about the interlinking facets of biodiversity, conservation and hunting. Unfortunately, the Internet also became a broad battlefield for negative, bellicose and deliberately false anti-hunting propaganda.

Most people who oppose hunting know animal meat as neatly wrapped packets from supermarket shelves. Users of cheaply produced meat, and also vegans, often conveniently forget that cattle and soybeans are produced on an industrial scale at the cost of great environmental damage, from over-fertilization of fields to the disappearance of rain forests.

Wild animals, on the other hand, are the product of a far more natural, sustainable and evolutionary form of land use; they are a valuable asset for private landowners and rural communities. Wild animal meat is free of additives and antibiotics and is wholesome, tasty and nutritious. Wild animals do not require large swathes of land to be cleared and they thrive in natural environments, even dry zones. With climate change hugely affecting parts of Africa with drought, it is wildlife that better tolerates these changes.

However, people sharing the land with wildlife must be able to make a living. Wildlife is a renewable crop, and its sustainable use must not be negated. Sustainable use is the salvation of wild lands and wildlife. The outcomes of the recent CITES conference in Geneva underline the problems that Africa's wildlife and people face today. Denial-of-use sounds the death knell for wild animals.

Africa cannot be transformed into a huge national park. Yes, photographic tourism is tremendously valuable to African countries harboring big game animals. But something like 70% of our wildlife occurs outside fully protected areas, and not many of these outlying regions are suitable for tourism. Reasons include a lack of infrastructure and adequate accommodation, remoteness and difficult access, disease vectors, civil unrest and limited game-viewing opportunities. It is here especially that wildlife needs to pay its own way if it is to survive.

These outlying regions themselves need defending. They are important buffer zones for the protected areas and also corridors for wild animals to move and migrate freely. If the buffers are eroded, the core protected areas become vulnerable. Legal, licensed hunting is the most successful form of use there; the harvested animals provide meat and safari hunting provides jobs and income for the rural communities.

Hunting bans, or the absence of regulated hunting brought about by civil unrest, have had and are having a devastating effect across Africa: Wildlife numbers diminish, habitat is destroyed and local communities suffer.

CITES '19 was a defeat for African Wildlife

At CITES 2019, in August in Geneva, the parties gave little credence to African conservation philosophies, models and successes. Member countries of SADC (the Southern African Development Community, which harbor most of our continent's wildlife and have set aside vast tracts of land for conservation) were denied compensation for their wildlife stewardship and their sovereign rights were curtailed. It seemed they were punished for their good conservation programs.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, CITES, was originally formed to control the use and trade of wildlife and wildlife products. But it has now been infiltrated by protectionist lobbies whose remit is based on the prohibition of any use. In Geneva, decisions were not rooted in science. Africans and their rural communities were denied a proportionate voice. Conservation and social sciences apparently do not matter. The CITES parties did not take into account that humans need to benefit from conservation of wildlife and habitat.

Conservation is hugely expensive. Yet SADC requests to sell stockpiles of ivory to pay for conservation were rejected by the vast majority of delegates. It's not surprising that talk of quitting CITES prevailed after the conference.

SADC countries were upset that their growing wildlife numbers and substantial conservation investments were not recognized. The glaringly obvious precedence of wildlife over people, and more so the relentless propaganda of protectionist NGOs, made our SADC governments question the relevance of CITES.

This year's CITES outcomes were a huge victory for those opposing any sustainable use. SADC countries suffered a humiliating defeat, but these countries are continuing to foot the high conservation bill, with little or nothing as reward.

The sad case of our elephants

Today, nine SADC countries hold the vast majority of Africa's elephants—in the case of Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa, far more than their habitats can support. The other elephant countries are fast approaching their maximum carrying capacities.

If the numbers of these large herbivores keep growing, habitat destruction escalates and then, especially in drought conditions, be prepared for huge die-offs from starvation. It happened in Kenya's Tsavo region in 1971, when thousands of elephants died (along with many other animals, including numerous black rhino).

This leads to a problem. Should excess numbers be culled? Possibly. But in this day and age of misunderstanding of conservation and wildlife management, culling would cause international outrage. It is a most unlikely outcome.

So, what to do with the excess populations?

Sterilization is very complicated, problematic and costly. Translocation, to repopulate areas of suitable habitat where elephant numbers have been significantly reduced through poaching, may work. But it too is an immensely difficult and expensive proposition.

In 2018, Namibia exported 205 elephants, and recently six more, to a protected area near Kinshasa, in the Congo. They are reportedly doing well and breeding. In Zimbabwe, Sango Conservancy owner Willy Pabst translocated 100 elephants, mostly at his own expense, to a

depleted area in the Zambezi Valley. They also are reportedly doing well. Laudable efforts both, but these numbers, though important, are minuscule when considering the extreme elephant over-population in some countries.

It has been suggested to allow more elephant hunting at special rates and under special license to reduce numbers. But this form of culling does not appear to be a viable solution either. Most safari hunters do not have the skills to cleanly select and shoot a large number of animals. This is best left to the professionals. Safari hunting, where an old, individual male is selected, is a completely different activity and is valuable as a means of paying for conservation.

In fact, the only solutions are professionally executed major culls and internationally funded large-scale translocations.

There is one more option: Let nature takes its course, resulting in the tragic and wasteful death of tens of thousands of elephants along with much other wildlife.

Giving back through custodianship

My wife Pauline and I consider ourselves custodians of the wildlife on the land under our care. Having earned our entire livelihood from wild animals, we want to give back. Here are several examples:

We see the rhino poaching crisis as a challenge and, on land under our care, initiated a program we called Habitat for Rhino. We started by moving rhinos from vulnerable areas with high numbers to secure habitats with fewer or no rhino, to spread the risk. With our own funds and help from hunter-conservationist friends from America, we bought five Namibian white rhinos in 2014. Five years later, we have nine rhinos and some pregnant females. Because of the poaching threat, we employ a specialized, armed anti-poaching team full-time.

Pauline and I understand that a minuscule number of old non-breeding black or white rhino bulls are under CITES approval to be hunted each year to help fund rhino conservation. I feel this is the only justification for hunting rhino today. Along with bringing in significant funds for conservation, this also protects younger, non-dominant bulls and helps boost reproduction. Yet we wouldn't hunt any of our own rhino, on our lands, since we know each individual intimately and observe most of our rhinos daily.

At our place, game viewing, photo safaris and, most important, licensed, regulated hunting of common plains game are vital pillars in the funding of the heavy cost of rhino protection. Without hunting, and our generous friends' support, Pauline and I are not able to afford to keep rhinos—it's as simple as that.

Currently, rhinos are a financial burden, with diminishing value, and a security risk. Ultimately, only a legal horn harvest and international sales will cover the full cost of rhino conservation. (Rhino horn can be safely harvested at least five times during a rhino's 40-year life span.) Legal trading in horn will make rhinos more valuable and worth keeping, with more communities and landowners wanting to protect rhinos.

A legal rhino-horn trade would reduce poaching, as the price of horn would drop to a level that makes poaching not worthwhile and allows traders to deal legally with a controlled product. Currently, with rhino horn in Asia fetching four times the price of gold, poaching continues unabated.

In Tanzania years ago, my late friend Joseph Cullman, of New York, and the late Costa Mlay, former head of Tanzania's Department of Wildlife, helped me establish a pioneering community wildlife project. We wanted to give village communities real benefit from the legal use of wildlife. A percentage of all safari game fees were paid to the communities for their priority requirements—medical, water, education, food and religious worship. This resulted in dispensaries, schools, teachers' housing, water points, maize-grinding machines, tractors, plows, anti-poaching vehicles, ambulances, building a church and a mosque, and a mobile education unit that showed wildlife films to school children.

This project has turned former poaching communities into anti-poachers. It is now mandatory for all safari companies in Tanzania to support community wildlife projects. If safari hunting were ever stopped, for whatever reason, in a very short time these communities would revert to poaching, as they would no longer benefit from the legal use of wildlife.

On a similar note, philanthropist Paul Tudor Jones sponsored the reintroduction of black rhino to three areas in the North Serengeti, and Tony Fitzjohn arranged the translocation of black rhino to Mkomazi National Park, both in Tanzania. The result is a black rhino population of 167 and growing.

The real effect of hunting bans

Tanzania banned hunting in 1973. In result, elephant, rhino and other animals were decimated. Commercial poachers—for ivory, rhino horn or bushmeat—don't care if they kill small, large, female or male animals. Their motivation is quick riches. They are as indiscriminate as their preferred tools, steel-cable snares and foothold traps. The result is animal suffering and extermination. We witnessed this in Tanzania's Maswa Game Reserve in the early 1980s. After eight years of the hunting ban and no legal presence in the bush of licensed safari operators, thousands upon thousands of herbivores and large numbers of predators had died.

Luckily, the Tanzanians saw the mistake of the ban. Hunter-conservationists came to the call, invested in wildlife and safari operations, and salvaged the remnant herds in time.

Botswana hosts the largest population of elephant in Africa—in excess of 130,000. Hunting was shut down in 2014. Poaching escalated. Wild animals killed or injured villagers and raided their fields. It was the village communities living with wild game who asked for a reversal of the hunting ban. This was duly considered by the Botswana government and now safari hunting will reopen under strict regulations and quotas, as before. It is only right that those rural communities be allowed to derive income from elephant hunting. Zambia and Uganda also both reversed their hunting bans because poaching got out of hand. When legitimate hunters are taken out of the picture, poachers replace them.

It's easy for a person unaware of African needs and the reality of living day to day with dangerous wild animals to dictate preservationist policies from a distance, or wave anti-hunting placards on the streets of another country and continent. But imagine your gran was killed by an elephant while out collecting firewood. How would you react?

Will safari hunting survive?

I have often heard that the professional hunter is Africa's most endangered species. If the current trend of misunderstanding professional safari hunting continues, this could well be the case.

But we shouldn't give in so easily. Safari hunting is an important economic driver, and many social and conservation projects depend on safari hunting.

Yet we do need to eliminate an element of unsavory behavior by a few so-called hunters. Their unacceptable behavior taints the entire hunting industry. Shooting of recently released animals in small fenced enclosures can't be called hunting, and banning it requires appropriate action and tough legislation. Empowering self-regulation for professional hunting associations will do wonders to restrict lawlessness and unethical practices. The old and well-tried system of three-year apprenticeships for would-be professional hunters should be reintroduced as mandatory. It's not enough to just pass an exam on game laws—practical experience earned in the bush under the leadership of a master guide is essential to learn good and ethical behavior and respect for wild animals.

The whole point of proper hunting is the chance the animal has of escaping the hunter. When that chance is taken away, it is no longer hunting. The trophy is not the principal reason to hunt. As a matter of fact, the trophy—although of value to the hunter—should be the least important factor in a hunt. Being in the bush close to nature, the spirit of adventure, stalking and tracking game up close and on foot, the camaraderie around the campfire—that's what it's all about. The horns or tusks from an old male, worn down with age, are an earned memento of all that.

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset eloquently said, "One does not hunt in order to kill. On the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted." There is the difference. It's a maxim that most professional hunters live by and that our clients have adopted.

The message in all this? Please consider the positive side of safari hunting before damning it. Yes, wildlife is an evocative and emotional subject, but blanket condemnation, even if the intent is well-meant, can be disastrous for wild animals, let alone for the people who live with them and depend on them. Let's have science dictate the way ahead, not emotion.

There is space enough in Africa for both photographic and hunting safaris—as long as both benefit humans and wildlife. At our place, we do both in equal measure; they pay for the high cost of conservation.

Whether we are pro- or anti-hunting, we all have the same ideal: the well-being of wild places and their wildlife. It's time to put aside our prejudices and cooperate for a worthy common cause.



Born in London in 1945 as the eldest son of a Kenya game warden, the late Lt. Col. Roger Hurt, DSO, Robin Hurt grew up on the family ranch on the shores of Lake Naivasha in Kenya's Great Rift Valley. By the age of 18, Robin was a fully licensed Professional Hunter and a member of EAPHA, the famed East African Professional Hunters Association. Robin has hunted professionally in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, Central African Republic, Congo, Botswana, Zambia, Ethiopia and Namibia. He and his wife Pauline live full-time at their ranch in the foothills

of the Gamsberg Mountain in Namibia. Robin's new book, A Hunter's Hunter—A Lifetime of African Safari, will be published next year by Safari Press.

Banner Photo: White rhino cow and calf at Gamsberg/Namibia. Daniel Mousley photos

Robin Hurt photo by the late Simon Clode.