

BUSHMEAT TRADE

# SURGE IN BUSHMEAT TRADE

Recent events like COVID-19 and climate change-induced extreme droughts and floods have plunged more individuals into poverty, forcing them to turn to bushmeat for survival.



STORY BY  
**FELIX PATTON**

**A**ny land-based wild animal, bird, or reptile that people utilize as a food source is known as bushmeat. For centuries, impoverished communities have relied on consuming wild animals. However, due to the protection status of most wildlife species today, bushmeat acquisition is primarily illegal.

Numerous disease-causing microorganisms inhabit wild animals, coexisting with these pathogens due to their high resistance levels. Transmission to livestock and humans occurs upon contact with wildlife through blood or meat. The consumption and trade of bushmeat have been linked to a rise in zoonotic diseases, such as Anthrax, brucellosis, Rift Valley fever, and rabies, leading to fatalities in East Africa. Despite the risk of disseminating deadly bacteria and viruses, the bushmeat trade continues to gain traction in the region.

In bygone years, wildlife thrived, and human populations were smaller, resulting in sustainable off-take. However, sustainability concerns have emerged with declining wildlife numbers and rapid human population growth. Furthermore, recent events like COVID-19 and climate change-induced extreme droughts and floods have plunged more individuals into poverty, forcing them to turn to bushmeat for survival. Farmers unable to yield crops due to prolonged dry spells find limited alternatives.



PHOTO BY WIKIMEDIA.ORG

**TOP RIGHT**

Duikers are typically hunted by local communities for subsistence purposes, and their meat is an important source of protein in many rural areas. However, the hunting and consumption of duiker bushmeat, like other forms of bushmeat, can have environmental and conservation implications.

While bushmeat might be the sole protein source for impoverished individuals, the affluent often savour it for its taste and health benefits. Notably, bushmeat offers nutritious proteins with lower saturated fat and calories than domestic meat.

Predominantly residing near protected areas, poorer communities hunt wildlife to meet their daily subsistence needs, targeting smaller antelope species like dik-dik, bushbuck, and duiker. Larger species, such as wildebeest, buffalo, and zebra, yield more meat and are sought after for income generation. The income from hunting supports essentials such as maize, rice, sugar, and even clothing. Hunters typically employ wire snares to trap their prey, using spears,



PHOTO BY CIFOR



PHOTO BY WEANIMALSMEDIA.ORG

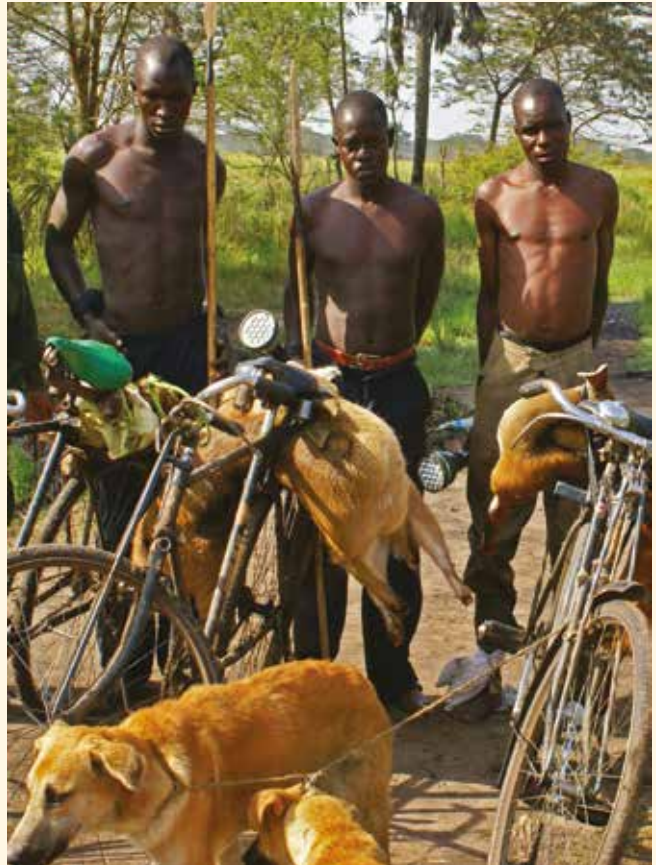


PHOTO BY RHINO FUND UGANDA

**A notable cost for those involved in the bushmeat trade arises when police or game rangers intercept illegal activities.**

bows, arrows, or rifles to kill them. A side effect of these traps is the unintended capture of non-target species. Giraffes with snares tightly bound around their legs, elephants with truncated trunks, and even lions ensnared and starving are not uncommon sights.

Transportation used to hinder bushmeat off-take. Accessing wildlife sources and conveying bushmeat to urban markets was challenging and time-consuming. However, illegal logging, improved road networks, and affordable Asian motorcycles have enhanced transportation efficiency, boosting off-take.

Previously, donkeys and bicycles were utilized. While donkeys could carry heavier loads, they needed nighttime rest, which could attract predators and security personnel due to their braying. Though limited in capacity, bicycles required money to sustain their "human engine" with food.



A notable cost for those involved in the bushmeat trade arises when police or game rangers intercept illegal activities. The meat may be abandoned if the individuals flee, or bribes might be paid to evade authorities.

**Tanzania Takes the Spotlight**

While bushmeat is hunted across East Africa, Tanzania stands out. The country seizes approximately 2,000 tonnes of bushmeat annually, valued at \$50 million. Serengeti communities alone consume 80 tonnes each week. Commonly hunted species include impala, common duiker, warthog, buffalo, bushbuck, bush pig, and zebra.

In late 2020, the Tanzanian government initiated the legal sale of bushmeat to the

**TOP LEFT**

The use of motorbikes for transporting bushmeat is a common practice in many parts of Africa and other regions where bushmeat hunting and trade are prevalent.

**BELOW LEFT**

Wildlife poachers use snares to target a wide range of animals, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Common targets include ungulates (hoofed mammals), such as deer, antelope, and bushmeat species like pangolins and primates.

**TOP RIGHT**

Poachers using bicycles. The sale of bushmeat can provide a significant income source for hunters and traders, especially in regions with limited economic opportunities.



PHOTOS BY RHINO FUND, UGANDA

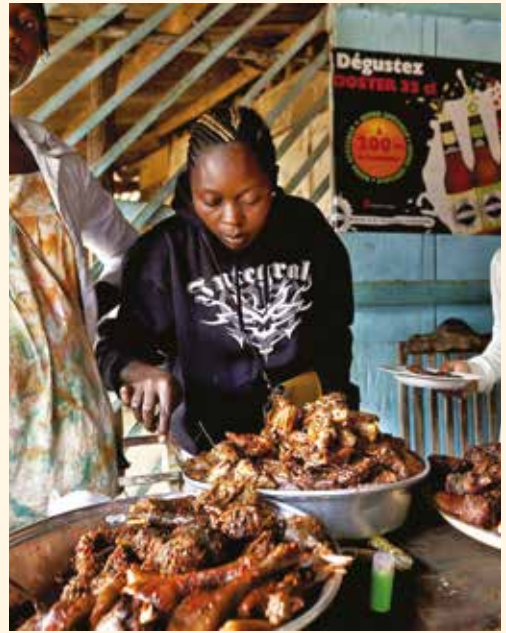


PHOTO BY BRENT STIRTON/GETTY IMAGES

public under strict regulations, aiming to curb illegal hunting. Facilities selling bushmeat must maintain cleanliness, issue buyer receipts, and document meat sources. Butchers must adhere to scrutiny by a ministerial committee encompassing wildlife veterinary and management professionals, food and drug control, health management, and meat inspection.

The Tanzania Wildlife Management Authority (TAWA) is prepared to supply young animals for wildlife farming/ranching to support the initiative. TAWA oversees the entire supply chain to ensure safety. Initial prices were around \$2 per kilogram but have risen to \$2.6 due to escalating demand, still undercutting beef prices at about \$3.4 per kilo.

However, concerns have surfaced that legal bushmeat sales might inadvertently bolster poaching. Intermediaries might support poachers to provide meat for authorized butcheries, which then passes off as legal to meet demands from hotels, restaurants, and homes.

Recent targets for bushmeat poaching in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania include giraffes.

## DID YOU KNOW

- Bushmeat accounts for up to 80 percent of the protein intake of people in Central Africa.
- Up to 6 million tons of bushmeat are extracted from the Congo Basin each year — nearly the equivalent of the annual beef production of Brazil.
- Hunting has also some strong cultural significance in Central Africa. It is variously associated with rituals and ceremonies, such as circumcision ceremonies in Gabon. Some species hunted for bushmeat are thought to have magical or medicinal properties that increase their value.

### TOP LEFT

Giraffes are killed for their meat, which is consumed in some African communities, and their hides, which are used for various purposes, including clothing, crafts, and accessories.

### TOP RIGHT

Bushbucks are often hunted for their meat by local communities as a source of food and, in some cases, as a source of income.

### BELOW RIGHT

A roadside restaurant selling monkey meat. The consumption of monkey meat carries health risks, as it can be a source of zoonotic diseases.



PHOTO BY MARIAM ABOUBAKAR ESPERANCE, GPI DRC

Often hunted at night, poachers exploit the docile nature of a giraffe which yields a much greater amount of meat compared to other wildlife. The ease of travel has facilitated an international bushmeat trade, with African supplies reaching Asian countries.

### Consumption in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a member of the East African Community, serves as a significant bushmeat market. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) reports that over a million tonnes of bushmeat are consumed annually in the DRC. This is unsurprising given that Kinshasa, with over 16 million inhabitants, is one of Africa's largest cities, projected to become the continent's largest by 2050.

Excessive hunting has led to the "empty forest syndrome" in the DRC, depleting its forests of wildlife. To meet demand, the country relies on bushmeat imports from neighbouring nations, further impacting wildlife populations in those countries.

The escalating bushmeat trade results from multiple factors: rapid human population growth, improved forest access due to road networks, COVID-19 repercussions, climate change-induced extremes driving more into

poverty, and a lack of affordable alternative meat sources.

Addressing these issues necessitates concurrent interventions, including enhanced protection of wildlife areas, increased livestock production to make domestic meat more competitive, educating users about zoonotic diseases, and offering alternative livelihood opportunities.

While Tanzania's legal sale approach includes providing wild young stock for wildlife farming, establishing such businesses requires substantial capital and legislative support. In contrast, illegal hunting has low entry barriers. Given the extensive bushmeat consumer base, farmed meat might need help to match illegally acquired bushmeat prices and meet demand.

With climate change-induced challenges exacerbating poverty, controlling the illegal bushmeat trade has become more urgent. Failing to do so risks the depletion of non-protected species, leading to the targeting of protected species and eventual extinctions. ●

---

**Felix Patton** is a wildlife ecologist with an MSc and PhD in conservation biology. He has been working in and writing about conservation in East Africa for over 20 years.

### TOP

A market in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), selling a wide variety of meats, including bush meat. The DRC is home to an incredibly rich and diverse range of wildlife, including endangered and vulnerable species like gorillas, bonobos, and elephants. Unsustainable hunting for bushmeat has led to a decline in these populations and threatens the overall biodiversity of the region.