

CONSERVATION IS IT WARPED BY A LOVE FOR ANIMALS?

When an American dentist shot Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe, he had no idea that he and his “sport” would also become targets of animal rights campaigners and conservationists alike. The international media storm has brought the debate about “consumptive” use of wildlife back into the public arena for discussion. SWARA commissioned this article long before the story about Cecil became news to demonstrate that it is a forum for all informed opinion in the world of conservation. This story does not represent EAWLS views.



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Saharan Africa since 2005. He is a member of the International League of Conservation Writers.

In the era of contemporary environmentalism, the animal welfare movement has targeted sport hunting and consumptive wildlife use as cause for much of Africa's wildlife woes. Trophy hunting is particularly vilified, its clientele consisting of easily unlikable characters—wealthy individuals paying to shoot majestic creatures.

For animal lovers, the idea that hunting's proceeds often go to local communities in return for conservation support is about as illogical as pressing the down button to go up in an elevator. Their scepticism is understandable. Even the most dispassionate scientist would concede that it doesn't help when American huntress Rebecca Francis takes a selfie lying next to a dead giraffe with a self-satisfied grin on her face.

But in their push for comprehensive hunting bans, animal welfare advocates—many of whom live in Europe or the United States—impose a cultural imperialism upon many more who don't have the luxury of sharing a similar worldview. Sadly, such altruism may be paradoxically doing more harm

than good for species conservation.

Traditional conservationists generally work to save wildlife species by incorporating scientific methods with tangible benefits for people without compromising the long term viability of natural resources. They believe that sustainable utilisation programmes—similar in nature to livestock, whose financial value ensures cattle never go extinct—establishes balance between safeguarding the wildlife and protecting the livelihood of the people who live near them.

By contrast, institutions like the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) work to protect individual animals, an effort





PHOTO COURTESY OF JONATHAN AND ANGELA SCOTT

based almost entirely on the emotional conviction that wildlife's intrinsic value exceeds all else. Moreover, their deep pockets have galvanised governments in Kenya and Botswana to sustain and institute blanket hunting bans.

"In the past, missionaries would give people money to baptise them so that they could convert them," said Thomas McShane, former senior conservation adviser for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and current senior scientist at Arizona State University's Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability. "It's the same process here. Money becomes the carrot. But what comes with that carrot is the idea

that they want governments to enact policies that support their interests."

McShane and former WWF colleague Jonathan S. Adams coauthored *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation Without Illusion* in 1992. Adams, a conservation biologist and former programme director at The Nature Conservancy, described how animal welfare campaigners have effectively upheld Kenya's hunting ban from attempts to reintroduce sustainable utilisation. "When I was working on the book and talking to [former director and current Chairman of the Kenya Wildlife Service] Richard Leakey about this, I have no doubt that he understood how

hunting could play a supportive role for conservation. Leakey's no dummy. I think he knew what the science was, but politics made it impossible for him to do anything about it."

Since the 1980s, animal rights institutions have gained massive support from Europe and the United States, all too easy given their fondness for pets. The sad face of an elephant, a catchy slogan, or press junkets featuring big-named celebrities easily tugged on the public's heartstrings while they opened their handbags and wallets to donate. Nowadays, many conservationists in Africa now side with activists—possibly because their data-



poaching, they'd be in big trouble. As long as there's a crisis, they're in business."

While poaching remains the most widely publicised conservation challenge, the complexities surrounding what causes it are often left out of the conversation. Ivory and rhino horn demand aside, millions of African people still live in extreme poverty and suffer protein deficiency. Not everyone has the means to purchase livestock or crops and those who do must protect their herds, harvests, and families from elephants, lions, and other dangerous wildlife that roam outside protected areas.

"Human-wildlife conflict is a huge issue that's not being recognised because NGOs want something that's simple and sexy," said Stiles. "They take positions and make statements aimed at fundraising. It doesn't help raise funds when you side with Africans because they're normally portrayed as the bad guys, the ones killing the animals. As soon as you start defending Africans then you're a bad guy."

Stiles has lived in Kenya since 1977, the year its government issued the ban on wildlife hunting. He explained that in 1978 they additionally prohibited the sale of wildlife products. "Right after that, poaching skyrocketed," he added.

It was members of the former Kenya Rangeland Ecological Monitoring Unit (KREMU) who discovered that the country was losing more wildlife since the inception of both bans. According to former KREMU member, and current Kenya wildlife economist Dr. Michael Norton-Griffiths, the last 35 or so years have seen a roughly 4.0% per annum loss in the country's wildlife.

NGOs point to Asia's ivory demand as the primary reason elephants are killed. Few make mention of the fact that since 1978, Kenya has lost around 80% of

its wild animal population, including elephants, primarily to livestock and agriculture. Many argue that since economic returns from wildlife are restricted to tourism, alternative landowners no longer have any incentive to keep them around.

Today, poachers harvest bushmeat wholesale with wire snares because that's the only benefit from wildlife they can realise. Lion prides are poisoned and elephants are shot. "It's gotten so much worse," said Stiles. "Sustainable wildlife utilisation are dirty words now. Thirty years ago that was what people were aiming at. Today [conservationists] give lip service to it once in a while, but they're not beating the drum like they used to. Basically they've been compromised by the animal rights folks."

Ecotourism is typically championed by animal welfare groups as the ethical antidote. But while certainly integral to conservation measures, few domestic systems are in place that provides adequate advantages for communities. And it's economically impossible for all rural citizens in Africa to be stakeholders in, or direct beneficiaries of, safari enterprises.

Tourists also impact the fragility of traditional cultures and ecosystems, as evidenced by the displacement of the Maasai from protected areas. Concerning ecological ramifications, McShane added, "I would never call the tourism that takes place in the Maasai Mara ecotourism. I would call that mass tourism. And who wants to watch a lion with 15 other minibuses around it?"

Botswana, whose government outlawed hunting in 2014 in response to pressure from animal rights groups, touts its low-impact, high-cost tourism model. What they don't advertise is the hundreds of hunting jobs lost and scores of children who dropped out of school to provide for their redundant families. Owners of hunting concessions are now told that they must turn their land into reserves for tourists. Unfortunately, many of these areas aren't visually pleasing for visitors who will aptly choose the famed Okavango Delta or Chobe National Park over dense scrub

driven approach can't beat the power of emotion in the court of First World public opinion.

Dr. Dan Stiles, a conservationist who's worked in Kenya for almost 40 years, has a particularly cynical view of animal welfare groups. "They thrive on crisis," he said. "If something came along that could actually significantly reduce

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THE ROMANTIC VIEW OF WILDLIFE ROAMING FREE IN NATURE, INDEPENDENT OF HUMANS IS A FANTASY. IN ORDER TO SAVE AFRICA'S ANIMALS, PEOPLE MUST DO MORE THAN LOVE THEM.

where wildlife isn't as easily spotted. Tourists can be unreliable as well. Any political or civil unrest in a host country or global market turbulence could result in critical conservation revenue loss.

Unlike Kenya, South Africa adds value to its wildlife that transcends the financial limitations of ecotourism. They can be farmed sustainably for meat, kept on private reserves, and even hunted. Many South African landowners favour wildlife that will sustain ecosystems in lieu of cattle that would degrade them. Interestingly, both countries contained roughly the same number of wildlife in the mid-1970s. According to Norton-Griffiths, South Africa's wildlife surged from about 1.5 million then to over 20 million now.

In Namibia, tribal communities are the primary stakeholders of various conservancies. Their government encourages subsistence and sport hunting as accompaniments to ecotourism, provided each are managed properly. Those who hunt plains game for food even report incidents of illegal poaching to wildlife management.

Countries that permit hunting or sustainable use are not without complications, however. While canned hunting (hunting of an animal in a confined area) is generally disdained by conservationists and animal welfare groups alike, some trophy hunters who engage in fair chase still target animals whose genes should be preserved to ensure healthy offspring. "Good governance is also crucial," Adams said regarding sport hunting. "That's why it hasn't worked in a lot of places because it becomes corrupt. Once the money coming from overseas hunters starts getting siphoned off at upper levels of government, you've lost the battle."

But where governed well, there exists strong conservation backing from rural communities. "The important thing to remember is the system is never going to be perfect, but what you want to find is how best to balance the unsavory aspects of hunting and utilisation with the most effective ways to conserve and promote wildlife," said McShane.

Emotional attachment to animals is understandable, even admirable. The

activists' desire to protect one rhino is borne of the same determination a conservationist has in saving the species. Nevertheless, comprehensive bans backfire because activists use their hearts while forgetting their heads. Species conservation involves the species, its habit, government policies, and community involvement. This requires hard, but necessary strategies that require proper management.

Unfortunately, animal welfare groups seem content being idealistic to the point of unrealistic—often promoting what feels good rather than what works. Ironically, as reason becomes victim to emotion, and as draconian policies fail and more wildlife disappears, these same institutions will applaud themselves for fighting the good fight against overwhelming odds. Meanwhile, Africa's people and animals will be left to pay the heaviest costs.

The romantic view of wildlife roaming free in nature, independent of humans is a fantasy. In order to save Africa's animals, people must do more than love them. They need to look for the wisdom in how it should all fit together. Conservationists and animal welfare groups should both start by listening to the African people—wildlife's only hope for survival. ●

