Trophy hunting: Bans create opening for change

In their Letter "Trophy hunting bans imperil biodiversity" (30 August, p. 874), A. Dickman *et al.* warn that banning trophy hunting, a practice many of them deem "repugnant," could threaten African biodiversity and livelihoods. What they actually describe is how loss of funding may impart these effects, without specifying any unique benefits of trophy hunting. It is defeatist to defend business-as-usual instead of promoting alternative conservation activities that could sustain formerly trophy-hunted species and areas.

Trophy hunting relies on deep geopolitical inequalities, particularly in Africa, where it often fails to deliver demonstrable conservation outcomes (*1*) and can intersect with crime (*2*). It yields low returns at household levels (*3*), with only a fraction of generated income reaching local communities (*4*). It also siphons off wildlife from adjacent protected areas (*5*), reduces population connectivity and resilience, and can have genetic consequences such as reductions in body, horn, and/or tusk size (*6*). Its effects on wildlife demography and behavior can be profound (*7*).

Trophy import bans present an opportunity to rethink how we can conserve wildlife in nonextractive ways that are consistent with shifting public opinion. The system is primed for change. The recently polled U.S. public shares attitudes with other countries enacting trophy import bans and especially strongly disapproves of trophy hunting of African elephants and lions (*8*). Sustainable alternatives exist and could reduce reliance on a small and narrowing cohort of wealthy Western "donors" (*9*).

For example, land use reforms, co-management, and greater participatory stewardship can provide a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable system (*10*). Locally adjusted and bottom-up management practices (*11*), granting communities land titles, conservation-compatible agriculture, and coexistence approaches can also benefit communities and conservation more than trophy hunting. In addition, tourism reforms could invigorate domestic tourism (*12*), minimize leakage of tourism income to foreign investors, and reduce the footprint of wildlife-viewing tourism through green development investment. Diversified nature-based tourism beyond photographing and viewing wildlife could incorporate survival skills/bushcraft training and agritourism, emphasizing local knowledge, cultural exchange, and inclusion of women. Finally, environmental investments could connect would-be micro-investors more directly to wildlife-wealthy communities. Financial strategies such as decentralized markets made possible by blockchain technology could use carbon and biodiversity credits for conserving habitats. Sustainable enterprise development could generate direct financial benefits to local communities.

During transitions, nongovernmental organizations could raise funds to pay concessions or countries could agree that a private entity would temporarily assume game reserve management. As the bans are not blanket but import bans, they provide the impetus and also the time to incrementally switch to practices that maximize contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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