

Title: Trophy hunting is not one big thing

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Abstract

Few topics in wildlife conservation are as controversial, emotive, or command as much public and political attention, as trophy hunting. International discourses regarding trophy hunting are characterised by radically contradictory assertions, ranging from claims that trophy hunting is a humane and socially acceptable wildlife management tool which benefits more animals than it kills, to claims that it is cruel, socially unacceptable, and drives species to extinction. So, which is it? We argue that using a single, blanket term “trophy hunting” obscures substantial and important variation in how and why people pay to hunt and keep trophies. Consequently, polarised disagreements over whether “trophy hunting” is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, beneficial or harmful, conflate arguments about fundamentally different activities. We urge conservation scientists and practitioners, politicians, journalists, and advocates on all sides to communicate more clearly and carefully about which specific hunting activities they believe are right or wrong, beneficial, or harmful, acceptable or unacceptable, to whom, and for what reasons.

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We argue that using a single, blanket term “trophy hunting” obscures substantial and important variation in how and why people pay to hunt and keep trophies. Consequently, polarised disagreements over whether “trophy hunting” is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, beneficial or harmful, conflate arguments about fundamentally different activities.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines trophy hunting as a form of legal hunting in which people pay to hunt animals with desirable characteristics and keep body parts (IUCN 2016). By stipulating that trophy hunters pay, this definition excludes a wide range of non-paying hunters who legally hunt and keep animal parts for display, e.g., for ceremonies or traditional purposes. Nevertheless, numerous activities still satisfy the IUCN definition. Here we describe in general terms several such activities to illustrate some important diversity concealed beneath the blanket term “trophy hunting”.

Hunting captive-bred – often referred to as “canned” – animals is one form of “trophy hunting”. This form of hunting takes place primarily within enclosures on private land, inside or outside of the hunted animals’ native ranges, and obtaining a trophy is typically one of the hunter’s primary objectives. Well-known examples occur in South Africa and the United States, where hunters pay landowners to hunt various animals. This activity often has little

obvious positive impact on biodiversity conservation, although it may protect some habitat for hunted and non-hunted species¹ and relieve hunting pressure on wild populations.

Hunting wild ungulates for recreation and/or meat can also involve keeping body parts, so can be a form of “trophy hunting”. Such hunting is usually regulated by government agencies, sometimes in partnership with community-based organisations (Di Minin et al. 2021). Well-known examples include ungulate hunting in North America, Europe, and Asia where hunters buy licenses to hunt on public, private, or communal land and might pay additional fees to landowners. Obtaining a trophy may not be the hunters’ primary objective, and some hunters might not keep trophies at all². Such hunting can help fund public wildlife agencies and positively impact biodiversity, for example by helping small populations to recover (Parker et al. 2023) or reducing deleterious impacts of hyperabundant populations (Hothorn and Müller 2010; Duda et al. 2021). However, in many places problematically high wild ungulate populations are products of wildlife and land management decisions to maximise hunting opportunities, prioritising a small number of huntable species to the detriment of overall biodiversity (Blossey et al. 2019; Carpio et al. 2021; Hare et al. 2021).

The form of “trophy hunting” in which hunters from the Global North pay large sums to hunt iconic animals in the Global South dominates media narratives (Hart et al. 2020; Yeomans et al. 2022) and draws the most ire from individuals and organisations who publicly oppose trophy hunting on moral grounds (HSI 2016, 2022; IFAW 2016). Obtaining a trophy is typically the hunter’s main, but not necessarily only, objective. However, this form of hunting itself encompasses a wide range of activities, across multiple governance contexts,

¹ It is not clear whether the habitat protected by canned hunting operations is large enough or connected enough to contribute to conservation of wide-ranging species such as African lions.

² If so, being a “trophy hunter” comes down to whether a hunter keeps any body parts as souvenirs. Under the IUCN definition, a hunter motivated by a desire to reduce wild ungulate densities and who keeps no body parts except meat would not be a trophy hunter. However, a hunter with identical motivations, but who keeps a body part as a souvenir as well as meat, would be a trophy hunter. Moreover, it is not clear whether souvenirs must be put on display in their original form to be considered trophies. For example, if a hunter makes a knife handle from antler, would that make them a trophy hunter?

with vastly divergent ecological and socio-economic impacts. At one extreme are well-regulated activities that demonstrably generate net positive outcomes for biodiversity and local people, such as some community-led hunting systems in countries including Canada, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Namibia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (IUCN 2016; Parker et al. 2023). At the other extreme are poorly regulated hunting systems that can threaten (or even extirpate) wildlife populations and largely divert revenues away from local economies (Lindsey et al. 2007).

It would be absurd to claim that such a varied range of activities is universally acceptable or unacceptable, or ecologically or socio-economically beneficial or harmful³. The absurdity is illustrated by Thouless and Thouless's (2011, p.29) observation that if someone insisted it would be extremely dangerous to keep a cat in one's house on the grounds that some cats are man-eaters, the speaker would rightly be thought not to understand the diversity contained within the word "cat". Thouless and Thouless point out that misunderstandings of this type are often overlooked. This appears often to be the case in the international scientific, political, and policy discourses regarding trophy hunting.

Rather than adopt a stance that is categorically for or against "trophy hunting", it seems essential to consider this diversity when evaluating specific activities and their ecological, cultural, and socio-economic impacts (Dickman et al. 2019; Mitchell et al. 2021). For example, we (the authors) are in favour of evidence-based approaches to wildlife and land management that are sensitive to local contexts, promote biodiversity, support rural livelihoods, respect local self-determination, and attenuate human-wildlife conflicts. Some

³ Some people appear to oppose all forms of trophy hunting. This position is common in media and social media. The argument that it is never acceptable for a person to kill an individual animal for the purpose of conservation may be consistent with some vegan philosophies or anti-speciesist ethical standpoints. A related argument also occurs in the academic literature, often in connection with an ideology its proponents call "compassionate conservation". However, these arguments are so far removed from our practical experiences of wildlife conservation and community development, as well as our pragmatic commitments to solutions that benefit people and biodiversity, that we do not address them here. But see Oommen et al. (2019) and Callen et al. (2020).

forms of trophy hunting will meet these criteria better or worse, and therefore be evaluated as more or less acceptable, than others.

Continuing to discuss trophy hunting as if it is a single activity will perpetuate long-standing, polarising debates without helping resolve them. We urge conservation scientists and practitioners, politicians, journalists, and advocates on all sides to communicate more clearly and carefully about which specific hunting activities they believe are right or wrong, beneficial or harmful, acceptable or unacceptable, to whom, and for what reasons (e.g., hunting which animals, where, how, under which offtake rates, with what implications for human-wildlife conflicts). By communicating more precisely, we will advance our collective knowledge of context-specific relationships between trophy hunting, conservation, and socio-economic development, including which activities generate costs and benefits for people and wildlife, how those costs and benefits are distributed, which activities are perceived as acceptable or unacceptable, and by whom.

It is time to stop talking about trophy hunting as if it is one big thing.

121 **Declarations**

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123 **Ethical Approval**

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