

## CORRESPONDENCE

## Conservation or the Moral High Ground: Siding with Bentham or Kant

David W. Macdonald, Paul J. Johnson, Andrew J. Loveridge, Dawn Burnham, & Amy J. Dickman

The Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, The Recanati-Kaplan Centre, Tubney House, Abingdon Road, Tubney, Abingdon, OX13 5QL, UK

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### Correspondence

Paul J. Johnson, The Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, The Recanati-Kaplan Centre, Tubney House, Abingdon Road, Tubney, Abingdon, OX13 5QL, UK.  
Tel/fax: +44 (0)1865 611 116.  
E-mail: paul.johnson@zoo.ox.ac.uk

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Conservation requires value judgments as well as science (Dickman *et al.* 2015). The furore over the killing of “Cecil” the lion highlighted the complexities of such judgments. It demonstrated that some people view trophy hunting as morally wrong, and revealed public ignorance that it is a legal, widespread component of African wildlife management, protecting more land than National Parks (Di Minin *et al.* 2016). Open toleration of trophy hunting by conservationists on these grounds provoked further outrage.

Some opponents of trophy hunting maintain that it is unjustifiable regardless of any positive outcomes, in doing so identifying a moral imperative, a concept traceable to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. They also argue, with some justification (Lindsey *et al.* in press; Packer 2015), that it is frequently corrupt or badly managed. However, this confounds a rational with an empirical case—if asked: “Suppose trophy hunting were perfectly managed, humane, and with clear conservation benefits, would you tolerate it?” many of these critics would respond “No.”

In contrast, a utilitarian view, rooted in the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, where every action is assessed against its outcome, acknowledges properly regulated trophy hunting, like it or not, as part of current African wildlife conservation, with the biodiversity gain outweighing the loss of individuals. Defending this consequentialist perspective does not neglect the importance of motive in making ethical judgments (Nelson *et al.* 2016). John Stuart Mill, also an advocate of utilitarianism, drew a distinction between the morality of an action (as determined by its consequences) and the morality of a person (including intentions and motives; King 2004). We might personally find the appeal of trophy hunting unfathomable, but these considerations are distinct from an evaluation of the consequences of the practice. We do not reject the importance of emotion in making ethical judgments, as Nelson *et al.* (2016) imply to be true of some conservationists willing to tolerate trophy hunting. But emotion, particularly if uninformed by fact, such as that seen in the wake of Cecil’s killing, most conspicuously in

the developed world, increases the ever-present risk of unintended consequences were it to dominate conservation policy.

We support the elimination of illegal hunting and the strenuous reform of legal hunting to improve conservation and welfare standards, but acknowledge that African governments will act to benefit their own people, particularly those living alongside dangerous wildlife, and whose emotions concerning lions are often undervalued and in stark contrast to those of international “stakeholders.” Trophy hunting of big cats may eventually be judged unacceptable by Western policymakers, but we fear that precipitate legislation in reaction to western-orientated values could have far-reaching negative impacts on biodiversity without development of alternative, economically viable policies. Those in the Kantian camp on trophy hunting might reassure themselves with the knowledge that they occupy the moral high ground, but if they hold sway, there may be rather less African wildlife for them to see from that lofty position.

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