Winners and losers from trophy hunting bans

Daniel W.S. CHALLENDER[1,2,3], Amy DICKMAN[4,5†]

[1]Interdisciplinary Centre for Conservation Science (ICCS), Department of Biology, 11a Mansfield Road, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 3SZ, United Kingdom.

[2]Oxford Martin Programme on Wildlife Trade, Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford; Oxford, United Kingdom.

[3]Species Survival Commission/Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, % IUCN; Gland, Switzerland.

[4]Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Department of Biology, University of Oxford; Tubney, United Kingdom.

[5]Lion Landscapes, Highcliffe, New Road, Teignmouth, Devon UK TQ13

[†]*email*: amy.dickman@biology.ox.ac.uk

Standfirst

Bans on trophy hunting or the movement of trophies are increasingly proposed as 'wins' for conservation. However, trophy hunting is a complex and contentious topic, and proposed bans involved considerable trade-offs – including conservation and welfare risks. Here, we briefly outline some of the trade-offs that deserve deeper consideration.

Main text

Trophy hunting, that is, '*legal hunting, primarily for recreation (including but not solely for meat), where hunters pay to hunt individual animals with particular characteristics, such as horn length or body size, and retain all or part of the hunted animal as a memento*' (adapted from IUCN) is an increasingly contentious topic. Particularly since the killing of 'Cecil' the lion in 2015, campaigners have been pushing for bans on trophy hunting and the importation of hunting trophies, especially in Europe and North America (e.g., Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting) The scale of these bans is substantial: according to a preprint, import bans on hunting trophies have been enacted or proposed in 11 countries in the past decade[1], which account for around 60% of international trade in hunting trophies from species listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Campaigners suggest these bans will deliver multiple wins, claiming they would benefit conservation, animal welfare, and/or local livelihoods. Campaigners also claim that the bans are a win for democracy, as they deliver

‘what the public wants’. However, trophy hunting is a far more complex topic than these campaigns suggest, and these ‘wins’ are likely to involve considerable trade-offs, which require a better understanding by both politicians and the public.

Campaigns tend to centre on threatened African species, but trophy hunting is far more geographically and taxonomically diverse than this focus: trophy hunting involves at least 300 species globally[1]; it takes place in diverse social-ecological and governance contexts in more than 100 countries; hunter motivations are heterogeneous[2]; and variation exists in where, and how much, revenue flows between government agencies, the private sector, and Indigenous peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs), and the extent and form of non-monetary benefits to different stakeholder groups[3]. Trophy hunting can provide an economic incentive to conserve many species and ecosystems and much-needed income to public agencies, particularly in low and middle-income countries; however, revenues can be inequitably distributed and often fail to sufficiently benefit local people[4]. Negative impacts on species can occur if trophy hunting is not well-managed[5], but positive impacts on species (including threatened species) can be achieved through proper management[6]. The winners and losers created by policies that restrict trophy hunting and/or trade in trophies will be determined by trade-offs in decision-making.

Trophy hunting bans are often framed around conservation concerns, as campaigners claim that bans will reduce threats to imperiled wildlife. Trophy hunting can indeed put additional pressure on some wildlife populations: eight species for which trophy hunting is or was a possible or likely threat to some populations have been identified[7], and trophy hunting restrictions and time-limited moratoria have improved population outcomes for certain species[8]. However, trophy hunting is not a major threat to any species listed under CITES and traded internationally as a hunting trophy in the last ~20 years[1,7]. By contrast, trophy hunting actually or potentially provides benefits for species and/or people for at least 20 taxa[7], and the vast extent of habitat maintained under trophy hunting (which exceeds that maintained under National Parks[4]) benefits many thousands of species, including threatened and endemic taxa. Habitat maintenance is a critically important conservation benefit, particularly as habitat loss is the primary threat to biodiversity overall[9].

Counterintuitively, removing the (relatively small) threat trophy hunting might pose to some populations risks exacerbating other far larger threats, such as habitat loss and poaching, if hunting revenue is not replaced with other wildlife-based sources of income[10]. As viable alternatives are unlikely for many hunting areas, declining revenue often leads to poorer

management and intensifying anthropogenic threats. This trend has been highlighted as an emerging conservation threat[11] and should be very carefully considered before policies to remove or restrict trophy hunting are implemented.

Animal welfare trade-offs

Policy-makers and the public are often told that animals will be 'safer' without trophy hunting, and that horrible deaths will decline. However, for the many areas in which no clear wildlife-based alternative land use exists, this claim is likely to be untrue. Hunting area management often involves substantial investments in anti-poaching[6,10], which reduces threats such as snaring and the associated suffering of animals. The 2014–2019 trophy hunting ban in Botswana led to increased poaching[12] and presumably increased suffering, and the killing of iconic species such as lions tends to be far higher in areas where they don't have economic value: on village land in Southern Tanzania, lion spearings, snarings and poisonings far exceeded the level of lion killing that would have been allowed in a trophy hunting area (A.D., personal observation)

If hunting areas are converted to other uses, livestock-keeping is one of the most likely alternative land uses. Livestock keeping involves the death of animals and often has important welfare concerns, but the relative welfare cost of having wildlife versus farmed stock is rarely explicitly considered. Overall, whether the public would still support hunting bans if they led to more animals dying or increased suffering is a question of interest: many might still be supportive, but that trade-off should be explicitly discussed and considered.

Local livelihood trade-offs

Campaigners (e.g., Born Free Foundation) repeatedly assert that 'fewer than 3%' of trophy hunting revenue reaches local communities, framing such revenue as unimportant. The 3% figure has been repeatedly debunked: the amount of local revenue reaching communities varies hugely around the globe, but can be a very high percentage, including up to 100%, and is clearly substantial in many areas[3,13]. Removing local benefits from trophy hunting, such as income, meat and jobs, can lead to meaningful harms for local people[12] and, critically, those decisions should be made by local stakeholders and not imposed externally without proper consideration and consultation.

Democracy, misinformation and complexity

If the public and politicians were aware of the likely trade-offs mentioned above, the discourse around this topic would presumably be more informed and nuanced. Unfortunately, trophy hunting has been presented as a simple issue, and bans are claimed to deliver clear wins for wildlife. Such misinformation has been pushed particularly by animal protection organisations in high-income countries who work closely with policy-makers, leading to sharing of misinformation at the highest level. For example, in 2021 the UK Government claimed that a hunting trophy import ban would ”protect nearly 7000 species”[14]. However, analysis suggested this figure was a vast over-exaggeration: only 0.1% of the species concerned had been imported to the UK in the previous 20 years[7], most of the species had never been trophy hunted, and no evidence existed for how thousands of species would benefit.

The misleadingly simplistic framing from lobby groups has unsurprisingly led to high levels of popular support for trophy hunting bans: campaigners repeatedly state that over 85% of the British public want an import ban. However, when the public receives more complete and nuanced information, support for bans drops. In a UK survey, fewer than half of people questioned would support a ban if that harmed wildlife conservation or local livelihoods[15]. Listening to public views is important, but those views should be informed by accurate, nuanced information.

Ultimately, trophy hunting and associated policies are complex topics with no clear ‘win-wins’, and many policy scenarios risk substantial losses for conservation and local livelihoods. Honesty about these very real trade-offs — in which a perceived ‘moral’ choice by external decision-makers could have major unintended consequences for wildlife and vulnerable people — is critically important for balanced, informed and effective policy-making around this highly contentious topic.

References

1. Challender, D.W.S., Mallon, D., ‘t Sas-Rolfes, M., Dickman, A., Hare, D., Hart, A.G., Mandisodza-Chikerema, R.L., Roe, D., Mbaiwa, J.E. and Hoffmann, M., 2024. Disproportionate regulation of wildlife trade. Preprint at: https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2024.11.11.622931v1 .

2. Hare, D., Ambarlı, H., Dickman, A.J., Dröge, E., Farhidinia, M.S., Johnson, P.J., Khanyari, M., Mandisodza-Chikerema, R., Montgomery, R.A., Sutherland, C. and Webster, H., 2023. Trophy hunting is not one big thing. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, *32*(6), pp.2149-2153.

3. IUCN, 2016. Informing decisions on trophy hunting. IUCN Briefing Paper. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.

4. Lindsey, P.A., Roulet, P.A. and Romanach, S.S., 2007. Economic and conservation significance of the trophy hunting industry in sub-Saharan Africa. *Biological conservation*, *134*(4), pp.455-469.

5. Packer, C., Kosmala, M., Cooley, H.S., Brink, H., Pintea, L., Garshelis, D., Purchase, G., Strauss, M., Swanson, A., Balme, G. and Hunter, L., 2009. Sport hunting, predator control and conservation of large carnivores. *PloS one*, *4*(6), p.e5941.

6. ’t Sas-Rolfes, M., Emslie, R., Adcock, K. and Knight, M., 2022. Legal hunting for conservation of highly threatened species: The case of African rhinos. *Conservation Letters*, *15*(3), p.e12877.

7. Challender, D.W., 't Sas-Rolfes, M., Dickman, A., Hare, D., Hart, A.G., Hoffmann, M., Mallon, D., Mandisodza-Chikerema, R.L. and Roe, D., 2024. Evaluating key evidence and formulating regulatory alternatives regarding the UK's Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill. *Conservation Science and Practice*, *6*(10), p.e13220.

8. Loveridge, A.J., Valeix, M., Chapron, G., Davidson, Z., Mtare, G. and Macdonald, D.W., 2016. Conservation of large predator populations: Demographic and spatial responses of African lions to the intensity of trophy hunting. *Biological Conservation*, *204*, pp.247-254.

9. Watson, R., Baste, I., Larigauderie, A., Leadley, P., Pascual, U., Baptiste, B., Demissew, S., Dziba, L., Erpul, G., Fazel, A. and Fischer, M., 2019. Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. *IPBES Secretariat: Bonn, Germany*, pp.22-47.

10. Di Minin, E., Leader-Williams, N. and Bradshaw, C.J., 2016. Banning trophy hunting will exacerbate biodiversity loss. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, *31*(2), pp.99-102.

11. Strampelli, P., Henschel, P., Searle, C.E., Macdonald, D.W. and Dickman, A.J., 2022. Habitat use of and threats to African large carnivores in a mixed-use landscape. *Conservation biology*, *36*(6), p.e13943.

12. Mbaiwa, J.E., 2018. Effects of the safari hunting tourism ban on rural livelihoods and wildlife conservation in Northern Botswana. *South African Geographical Journal= Suid-Afrikaanse Geografiese Tydskrif*, *100*(1), pp.41-61.

13. Parker, B.G., Khanyari, M., Ambarlı, H., Buuveibaatar, B., Kabir, M., Khanal, G., Mirzadeh, H.R., Onon, Y. and Farhadinia, M.S., 2023. A review of the ecological and socioeconomic characteristics of trophy hunting across Asia. *Animal Conservation*, *26*(5), pp.609-624.

14. UK Government. Importing of hunting trophies banned to protect world's threatened species. 2021. *UK Government.* https://www.gov.uk/government/news/importingof-hunting-trophies-banned-to-protect-worlds-threatened-species
15. Survation 2021. Conflicting attitudes around the trophy hunting ban. Survation | Conflicting attitudes around the trophy hunting ban | Survation

Competing interests

D.W.S.C. is a member of the IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group (SULi) and the IUCN SSC Pangolin Specialist Group, and has done consultancy work for Jamma International but they did not fund this work. A.D. conducted this work under a Fellowship funded by the Recanati-Kaplan Foundation and Panthera. She has consultancies with the Darwin Expert Committee and Jamma International, but neither funded this work. A.D. leads WildCRU which has funding from donors with a wide variety of views of trophy hunting.