

# The price of wildlife: Trophy hunting and conservation in Africa

Merrill Sapp

Merrill is a cognitive psychologist at Stephens College (Columbia, MO, USA).

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It has often been claimed that trophy hunting plays a crucial role in supporting conservation in Southern and Eastern Africa (e.g. Dickman *et al.*, 2019; International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 2016). Underpinning this claim is the assumption that unless wildlife provides a clear personal or community financial benefit, people in rural Africa will not protect animals or land. That is, the income generated from trophy hunting is necessary – or so it is claimed – in order to incentivize rural Africans to prevent land development that would leave no home for animals.

However, rural Africans are not a homogenous group; their values and opinions differ as much as any people across a continent. Reports about what ‘African people’ want or think often ignore this diversity, and also fail to consider the factors that shape those opinions. Many rural Africans in fact consider wildlife to be part of their cultural heritage and are motivated to protect animals for their inherent value (Lagendijk and Gusset, 2008; Griffiths, 2017). It is true that there are Africans with high wildlife exposure who have no attachment to dangerous animals. After all, when people feel that their lives, families, homes or livelihoods are at risk, it is understandable that they would resent animals and the policies that protect them. However, research shows that African people from a variety of different backgrounds are willing to support protection for wildlife if they feel safe, regardless of economic incentive or potential for agricultural loss (Lagendijk and Gusset, 2008; Packer, 2015; Kamau and Sluyter, 2018). Even those employed in the trophy hunting industry may feel conflicted – with some expressing bitterness about the colonial culture perpetuated by trophy hunters (Koot, 2019), and others resentment at foreign interference in their livelihoods or decisions about wildlife (Thondhlana *et al.*, 2020).

The exclusionary history of parks and reserves in Africa has contributed to the conflict of today. In many places, Africans were prohibited from areas

where they could be exposed to animals and learned nothing about them (Griffiths, 2017). These people may see no reason to protect wildlife or their habitats. One ranger in Uganda remarked that he used to know very little about animals and thought there was no value in conservation, but that this changed after he interacted with wildlife. Now he realizes that the animals have inherent value and need protection, even appreciating them as our “helpless brothers” (Moreto *et al.*, 2016: 659). According to Craig Packer (2015: 48), the Lion Guardians program in Kenya transformed lion killers into avid conservationists, “not least because their traditional skills and newfound knowledge were being appreciated and rewarded.”

Intolerance of wildlife is, in other words, conditional. Employment in animal protection can clearly lead to feelings of connection, but safety seems to be the primary criterion for willingness to accept wildlife (Lagendijk and Gusset, 2008; Goodale *et al.*, 2015; Kanksy *et al.*, 2016). In turn, this suggests that economic incentives without feelings of safety are unlikely to result in acceptance of dangerous wildlife.

Besides being a simplistic narrative, the claim that rural Africans will not protect space for animals unless there is monetary incentive implicitly reinforces the anthropocentric idea that animals are primarily to be considered as resources for human use. That is, if we cannot live with them, we might as well sell hunting excursions. However, approaches that commodify wildlife risk expanding exploitative use or condemning wildlife that lacks profit value. The ideology that posits a choice between human life or wildlife can also discourage investment in solutions for successful coexistence, such as improved animal husbandry leading to less human exposure to predators (Sillero-Zubiri *et al.*, 2007).

Ecocentric conservation honors the multi-species interdependencies to which humans belong. It recognizes the inherent value of wildlife, though humans also ultimately benefit from an ecocentric approach – if we take care of the ecosystem, it will take care of us. Ecology-based conservation can find balance within a dynamic ecosystem and avoid perpetual competition between humans and animals. This is a lesson we can learn from communities around the globe that live by sustainable traditions.

The claim that trophy hunting is essential to incentivize rural Africans to protect wildlife and habitats should be considered critically, including the conditions under which it is true or not true. Increasing human safety is an essential step to reframe the ideology of human life versus wildlife and support an ecological culture. Underestimating the willingness of local people to make conservation work could lead to unfortunate decisions. The importance of pride and cultural heritage should not be overlooked and are reason for hope that approaches which respect the inherent value of wildlife will be welcomed by those impacted.

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