# Trophy Hunting As Conservation Strategy?

## Abstract

Should we kill animals to save animals? This question lies at the heart of this case study. Sovereign nations have an interest in protecting and conserving their natural resources, and in particular their distinctive flora and fauna. As they seek to promote these interests, they inevitably face the economic question of how they are going to finance their conservation efforts. One way of answering this question is to engage in the practice of selling big game hunting licenses and using the revenues to fund conservation programs. This strategy is counterintuitive (and to some, morally repellent); but it has a partial track record of success in places such as Namibia, South Africa, and the United States. Despite its successes, there are some who believe that the moral objections to such a strategy outweigh any potential benefits. This case study provides the student with an opportunity to explore the tension between the desire to save endangered animals and the possibility that the best way to do that involves killing some of them.

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

- Summarize both the relevant endangered species statistics and the relevant trophy hunting statistics that seem to make trophy hunting a viable conservation strategy.
- Articulate the reasons in favor of trophy hunting as a way to assist with conservation efforts, the objections against the practice, and the alternatives to the practice.
- Weigh the competing moral and sociopolitical considerations and come to a conclusion, even if tentative, about whether and when trophy hunting should be used as a conservation strategy.
- Reflect on broader moral issues regarding the relative worth of animals and humans.

## Introduction

In July of 2015, Dr. Walter J. Palmer was temporarily forced to close his Minnesota dental practice (Capecchi & Rogers, 2019). Protesters were picketing outside his office, and he was facing a wave of online protests: Negative Yelp reviews came piling in and a Facebook page targeted him and his practice. All this publicity produced so many visits to his office website that it was forced to go offline. The impetus behind the outrage was a picture of Palmer, a longtime big game hunter, standing proudly behind his latest kill: Cecil the lion. What Palmer didn't realize was that researchers from Oxford University had been tracking Cecil for years, and the lion was well known among those familiar with the national park in Zimbabwe where he lived. Palmer, with the help of two local men (a farm owner and a professional hunter), had lured Cecil out of the sanctuary and injured him with a crossbow before killing him with a gun.

At first blush, the outrage seems understandable (although the personal attacks on Palmer and his business were clearly excessive). A closer look, however, complicates the issue. Although the Zimbabwean men were later tried on poaching charges, Palmer was not charged. Palmer had paid about $54,000 for a hunting license, and he was relying on the expertise of his local guides as he carried out the hunt (Capecchi & Rogers, 2015).[1] He was not aware that the lion he killed was well known and well loved. It appears, then, that any problems with what Palmer did are problems that relate to the broader practice of trophy hunting, and do not trace back to any specific ill will on Palmer's part.

The surprising fact about trophy hunting, however, is that there are many who have argued that controlled trophy hunting can actually be an effective strategy in the service of a comprehensive conservation program.

## Trophy Hunting as a Conservation Strategy?

The idea behind including trophy hunting as a tool in the conservationist toolbox is that revenues raised through the sale of hunting licenses can be used to support initiatives that will, over time and on balance, help rescue an endangered species (or prevent a threatened species from becoming endangered). For example, suppose that there is a member of an endangered species that is past breeding age, and that a hunter will pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase a license to hunt that animal. If the money raised through selling the license is spent on anti-poaching efforts, or restoring habitats, or some other worthwhile conservation initiative, then it would seem that a significant amount of benefit for a species can be purchased at the cost of one animal. (In order for this type of strategy to be effective, it will probably also need to include some sort of public education effort, so that the general public can recognize the difference between sanctioned hunting and poaching.) At the time of Cecil the lion's death, lions in Zimbabwe were not classified as endangered. They were, however, classified as threatened, so the sale of the hunting license to Palmer could be treated as an example of using hunting license revenue to help prevent a threatened species from becoming endangered.

This strategy is controversial (and we will consider some objections below), but it also carries some intuitive plausibility. If we are operating within a broadly consequentialist framework, in which we can evaluate actions and practices according to how much overall benefit they produce, then it is easy to see how the calculations could favor trophy hunting for conservation. If selling a hunting license produces a large amount of money, which is used effectively, then we can see how the overall outcome might be positive.

The case in favor of this strategy becomes even stronger when we look at its track record in the small number of places in which it has been attempted. For example, according to conservationists, the practice of regulated trophy hunting on private game ranches in South Africa in the 1960s played an instrumental role in restoring habitats and reviving species such as the southern white rhinoceros (Onishi, 2015). And in Namibia, black rhinoceros numbers are up by 30% and overall wildlife numbers are up by 80% since the country implemented a regulated trophy hunting strategy (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015).

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[1] The guide claims innocence; see Victor (2015).

In fact, the practice of selling trophy hunting licenses for the sake of endangered or threatened species is just a special case of the more general practice of using revenues from hunting and fishing to support conservation. In the U.S., for example, hunting and fishing provide the primary source of funding for state wildlife agencies:

> State wildlife agencies and the country's wildlife conservation system are heavily dependent on sportsmen for funding. Money generated from license fees and excise taxes on guns, ammunition and angling equipment provide about 60 percent of the funding for state wildlife agencies, which manage most of the wildlife in the U.S. (Rott, 2018).

Southern Africa and North America are the two places that have seen the most wildlife growth in the 20th century, and in both places that growth was supported in part by a conservation model built around hunting (Onishi, 2015).

Due to its successful track record, this strategy has been endorsed by a large number of scientists and conservationists (Onishi, 2015). They point to several factors that help explain its success.

First, this strategy can help combat poaching, which has devastated rhino and elephant populations in recent years due to increased black-market demand for horns and tusks (Clark & Fears, 2014). For example, black-market prices for rhino horn in China and Vietnam have spiked as high as $45,000 per pound (Fears, 2015). A regulated and limited practice of selling trophy hunting licenses generates revenue that can then be used to hire rangers, enforce regulations, and engage in other anti-poaching efforts. The surprising result is that allowing trophy hunting can actually result in fewer animals being killed.

There are also some populations, such as the black rhino population, for which selective culling can have positive effects. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service,

> The removal of limited numbers of [black rhino] males has been shown to stimulate population growth in some areas. Removing specific individuals from a population can result in reduced male fighting, shorter calving intervals, and reduced juvenile mortality ("Black Rhino Import Permits," n.d.).

Removing a limited number of males (e.g., five per year per country) produces these benefits because black rhinos are particularly territorial, which produces competition among male rhinos. Removing older males that are unable to reproduce, or whose genes are already sufficiently represented in the population, can reduce competition and give younger males greater opportunity to reproduce. This in turn contributes to the survival of the population as a whole ("Black Rhino Import Permits," n.d.). In fact, older male rhinos can become so aggressive that they represent a threat to their own population. An example of this occurred in Namibia in 2014 when a black rhino that was too old to breed was killing calves, cows, and other male rhinos. (A hunter from Texas paid $350,000 for a license to kill this particular rhino and undertook the hunt the following year (Phillip, 2015).)

In some cases trophy hunting protects animals from threats in the local community by turning them into a resource instead of a nuisance. For example, in communities that receive income from lion hunting, local farmers are less likely to poison lions as a way of protecting

family members or livestock. In general, studies suggest that the optimal trophy hunting regulations limit hunting without banning it completely (Lindsey et al., 2012).[2]

These considerations point to the following economic argument for trophy hunting: Given the reality of the situations facing certain species, the best way to preserve those species is to increase their value; and the best way to increase their value is to sell the right to hunt them.

## Objections to the Strategy

Not everyone agrees that issuing selective hunting licenses is the best way to try to preserve wildlife. Let's examine some of the objections to using trophy hunting as a conservation strategy.

### *Moral Objections*

The first objection is a moral one. According to this viewpoint, some strategies should be off-limits even if they do improve the overall situation, and hunting animals is one of those strategies. One version of this objection comes from Jeff Flocken, North American Regional Director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, who argues that this strategy for animal conservation is just as problematic as a hypothetical parallel strategy for humanitarian causes. "If you pay to take a human life and give to humanitarian causes, it does not make you a humanitarian. And paying money to kill one of the last iconic animals on earth does not make you a conservationist." (International Fund for Animal Welfare, 2015)

Clearly it's not permissible to address poverty by selling licenses to hunt people in poverty; so why is it permissible to address problems like poaching and habitat loss by selling licenses to hunt the affected animals? The analogy between the wildlife conservation strategy and this morally repugnant "humanitarian" strategy is illuminating because it points to a deeper question about the intrinsic value of animals and their relative worth when compared to humans. If humans and other types of animals have equal moral worth, then it seems to follow that the hunting of animals is no more permissible than the hunting of humans. So perhaps the debate over this wildlife conservation strategy is really a debate over whether big game hunting (or even sport hunting in general) is morally permissible in the first place, which in turn depends on the debate over whether humans have greater moral worth than other types of animals.

A related concern is that this strategy sends the wrong message. Viewing these animals primarily in terms of their economic value is what poachers are doing, says the objector, so this type of response is problematic because it accepts that starting point. A better response would be one that clearly communicates the intrinsic value of the animal. This is similar to the line of reasoning that prompted Kenya to burn 105 tons of ivory in 2016, rather

[2] Although this consideration doesn't directly support the economic argument in favor of trophy hunting, there is evidence that hunting can also contribute to conservation of biodiversity ("Sport-hunted Trophies," n.d.).

than sell the ivory and use the money in support of anti-poaching causes or other worthwhile efforts (Kahumbu & Halliday, 2016).[3]

Finally, some have objected that this strategy places an outsized focus on certain high-profile species, attempting to preserve them at the expense of the ecosystem as a whole (Lindsey et al., 2006). Thus, even if trophy hunting is supported in the name of conservation, the benefits to a given endangered species might be outweighed by the overall environmental harms.

### *Practical Objections*

Even if the moral concerns can be addressed, there are still practical concerns associated with trophy hunting as a conservation strategy. Some have objected that the strategy often doesn't work due to government corruption and poor management of wildlife programs (Smith, 2016). Instead of the trophy hunting revenues supporting the fight against poaching, or supporting habitat restoration, in some countries (such as Zimbabwe) there are reports of those revenues being diverted toward other purposes (Onishi, 2015). This raises the possibility that even if the strategy is viable in principle, it may be too difficult to implement successfully.

Another practical objection is that the argument for trophy hunting as a conservation strategy presents something of a false dilemma. For example, instead of having to choose between a black rhino killing members of its own species or hunting that black rhino, there could be other options—such as relocating the aggressive animal. Relocation can be expensive, however (costing as much as $10,000), and it's not clear who would pay that money (Fears, 2015). But if that money could be raised, then relocation could be a viable alternative.

The trophy hunting strategy also seems to presuppose having to choose between no additional money for conservation or money raised through the sale of hunting licenses; but surely there are other ways to raise money for conservation apart from selling hunting licenses? Perhaps what's needed is simply a more creative fundraising strategy.

## Decision Point

Suppose that you are in charge of conservation for a country with a large but declining big game population that faces threats from poaching and habitat loss. Would you decide to raise money for conservation efforts through the sale of hunting licenses? Why or why not? Are there special circumstances that would change your answer?[4]

## Discussion Questions

1. After considering the reasons in favor of trophy hunting as a conservation strategy and the objections against it, what is your overall assessment of the strategy?

[3] For a critique of trophy hunting that brings together several of the points mentioned in this section, see Flynn (2019).

[4] I am grateful to the following individuals, all of whom made this case study better than it would have been otherwise. Cori Persinger provided valuable research assistance, an anonymous reviewer provided helpful comments on an earlier draft, and the editors of SAGE Business Cases provided valuable feedback and suggestions for improvement.

2. Can you think of other creative ways of raising money for conservation efforts that don't involve trophy hunting?
3. According to the economic argument for trophy hunting, the best way to preserve endangered species is to increase their value; and one of the best ways to increase their value is to allow the selling of trophy hunting licenses. Is this a good argument? Why or why not?
4. What are the similarities and differences between selling trophy hunting licenses to fund big game conservation efforts and selling regular hunting licenses to fund fish and wildlife agencies (as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Serves has for decades)? Is there a moral difference between the two practices? For example, does an elephant or a black rhino have more intrinsic worth than a deer, duck, or trout?
5. Most of the material in this case study has focused on Western perspectives on trophy hunting, which are codified in U.S. restrictions on importing hunted trophies. (For example, even if trophy hunting is legal in Namibia, the U.S. could effectively ban U.S. hunters from trophy hunting in Namibia by banning the import of black rhino horns.) How should we balance our Western perspective on trophy hunting with the perspective of the sovereign nations that are responsible for managing their natural resources? If a country has decided that they will allow trophy hunting as one way of supporting conservation efforts, is it somehow inappropriate for outside governments to undermine those efforts by banning the import of hunted trophies?
6. One common theme in some of the high-profile hunting cases (e.g., Cecil the lion and the black rhino in Namibia) is that the hunters involved have become the subject of aggressive online attacks, including death threats directed toward them and their family members. Are such online attacks morally permissible? Why or why not?

## Further Reading

- For an in-depth treatment of the story of the hunter, Corey Knowlton, who purchased the black rhino hunting license for $350,000 in 2014, see "The Rhino Hunter" from the Radiolab podcast (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015).
- For a brief but illuminating history of wildlife conservation in the U.S., see Rott (2018); for an update on the position of the U.S. government with respect to trophy hunting, see Dwyer (2018) and Romo (2020).
- For a thoughtful examination of considerations both for and against trophy hunting as a conservation strategy, see Goldman (2014).
- For recent scholarly treatments of these issues, see Child et al. (2012), Di Minin et al. (2016), and Lindsey et al. (2007a, 2007b, 2012, 2016).

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