

A Conservationists Reality Check and Viewpoint on the role of legal hunting in Africa.

Written by Robin Hurt

Yes, there will always be two sides to any argument. But, from my side there is no real argument because we all have the same interest - that is the long term wellbeing of wildlife - whether we are pro legal hunting or anti legal hunting. It's time to work together for a common cause and put aside our various prejudices. It's time to look at things in a realistic light. To realize that for wildlife to survive in an Africa with a huge human growth problem, that it must be a competitive form of land use, to say agriculture.

But, having said that, I would like to clarify things from my perspective if I may be permitted to do so. I hate the term " trophy hunting " as this gives the wrong impression. I prefer the term safari hunting or conservation hunting which more adequately describes what I do. The " trophy " is not the sole reason for a safari. At least not to my clients. Yes, the " trophy " may well be part and parcel of a safari's outcome, but it is not everything to a safari hunter - there is so much more to the experience. The feeling of being in wild places with wild animals, up close, on foot. The excitement of the stalk. The danger factor. The chance of the chase. The companionship around the campfire in the evening. The conservation of wildlife and wild places paid for through legal hunting. The anti poaching efforts undertaken and funded through legal hunting. The love we have for wild animals and wild places.

Yes it is love. I can go on.

How do we fund our Rhino conservation in Namibia? It is paid for through the legal and selective careful hunting of our plentiful plains game. I haven't had any offers to pay for the conservation of our Rhinos from other quarters! I can tell you it is an expensive undertaking - what with armed anti poaching personnel and support feeding in drought times. But we do this because we want to do our bit to help conserve an iconic animal being poached daily (in South Africa at the rate of between 3 and 4 a Day!). Because we love our wildlife - especially our Rhino.

I am not much different from a cattle or sheep herder who manages domestic animals - I choose instead to manage wild animals. I would prefer to see wild animals on the land I manage rather than cattle and sheep. But, as is the case of the farmer of domestic animals, the animals must pay for themselves to survive in an ever changing Africa. If a shepherd or cattle herder could not use his sheep or cattle, he or she would see little reason to keep them. The same applies to wildlife whether it's from photo Safaris or legal hunting Safaris. If it pays it stays. We eat what we hunt - and distribute the rest - nothing goes to waste. But, can those who oppose hunting justify going to a super market to buy plastic wrapped meat, fish and poultry without a thought of where it came from. What about our shoes, hand bags, belts made from animal leather? The fact that an animal or bird or fish died to be displayed on a super market shelf? Have they ever thought of how many have died by what I term "passive killing"?

Our legal hunting gives employment to previously disadvantaged people who now enjoy a much better life style. We have changed poachers into anti-poachers.

Reference poaching - there is a lot of misunderstanding about what is a poacher and what is a legal hunter. It's a mistake to place both under the same umbrella. A poacher is the illegal unselective user of wildlife. Simply a thief bent on the extermination of wildlife for quick reward. The legal hunter on the other hand is the legal steward of wildlife. His or her very existence and way of life depends wholly on healthy wildlife herds and its sustainable use. A use set by careful management quotas.

In fact I practice wildlife conservation with my family by funding raised through both legal hunting and photo Safaris. There is room for both to coexist in our lives and on the land we call home.

It is not legal hunting that has led to the decline in Elephant and Rhino numbers. It is due to unchecked poaching fueling the demand for these illegally obtained products in Asia. Where legal hunters have been forced to leave the bush, for example in Kenya, wildlife numbers plummet. In Kenya when legal hunting was banned in 1977 there were about 176,000 elephant and about 8000 black rhino.

Today after a period of NO legal hunting (the ban remains in place today) elephant numbers have declined to just over 22,000 and black rhino reduced to about 350 animals. Where legal hunters leave the bush they are replaced by poachers.

What hasn't been addressed enough is the end user; when we consider elephant and rhino poaching. So long as there is demand the poaching will continue. That in a nut shell is the problem. No demand equals no poaching.

The one thing we all need to be aware of is the continual threat to wildlife and habitat by human encroachment into the wilderness. This is going to be wildlife's biggest threat in the near future. How do we counteract this threat? By giving wildlife real value from legal sustainable use, to people who live on a day to day basis with and near wildlife, to encourage them to conserve it.

What we can't do is make the whole of Africa into one huge national Park. The unprotected areas currently carry most of Africa's wildlife populations - it's in these outlying and often marginal and unsuitable to non consumptive use areas, that it is vital that legal hunting continues as an effective tool for conservation. Conservation does not just mean protection - it means wise use.

Further more the banning of Elephant and Lion trophies into the USA will only fuel the decline in these animals. Hunters will not hunt in places just to kill an animal and not be able to take the trophy home. Even if the trophy is not the prime reason for a safari. This makes hunting blocks effected by import regulations a financial burden to operators. When hunting blocks are no longer viable financially the legal operator will leave the bush only to be replaced by poachers bent on extermination for a quick financial reward. So, I ask - What is better - a few animals taken legally on sustainable quotas - OR - unchecked and un-selective slaughter?

Thanks for your interest in this topic. Wildlife in Africa today stands on a cliff edge, by stopping its legal use, we are writing its death warrant.

Kind regards,
Robin Hurt