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Debating Public Policy: Ethics, Politics and Economics of Wildlife Management in Southern Africa

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Abstract

Based on field research in Africa, this essay explores three claims: first, that sport hunting places economic value on wildlife and habitats; second, that this motivates conservation practices in the interest of sustaining revenue sources; and, third, that this benefits human populations. If true, then sport hunting may sometimes be justifiable on utilitarian grounds. While not dismissing objections from the likes of Singer and Regan, we suggest their views – if converted into policy in desperately impoverished places – would destroy animals and the habitats on which they depend. There are empirical verifications of this, which we discuss.

Keywords

Ecology; economics; environmental ethics; hunting; policy; wildlife management; utilitarianism.

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I. Introduction

This essay is a précis for a larger project underway on the ethics and economics of sport hunting. More specifically, it is based on field research, and aims at testing the claims:

1. That sport hunting places economic value on wildlife and habitats.
2. That this motivates conservation practices in order to maintain business enterprises, however distasteful sport hunting may be.

3. That this, in turn, benefits local human populations.

The field research – presented in a number of case studies – specifically focuses on regions of Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. While some of the findings suggest that sport hunting can have the benefits just outlined, political opposition in the name of conservation thwarts such practices. So without necessarily challenging philosophical outlooks that would forbid sport hunting such as those advanced by Jeremy Bentham [1], Peter Singer [12], and Tom Regan [9], the case studies presented suggest that these positions, if enacted in policy, can have the counterintuitive effect of destroying that which they seek to protect, in this case, animals and the habitats on which they depend.

II. Case Study 1: Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley

The first case study focuses on northern Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley, specifically the Mbire District in the Dande region, an area bordering Zambia and Mozambique. This region has long suffered from poaching, which employs indiscriminate methods such as snares and poison, stripping the land of game. Porous and unpatrolled boarders make matters worse. At the same time, rampant killing of animals is bad for the hunting business, and those running legal operations have a vested interest in preventing it.

In line with this, the sport hunting operation we observed – Charlton McCallum Safaris – has gone to lengths to thwart poaching. Measures include funding anti-poaching patrols, and establishing reward systems for captured snares, poachers, hunting equipment and so forth. These measures appear effective, so that during our brief research visit, we witnessed a leopard poacher arrested and another convicted for killing a juvenile elephant. The anti-poaching patrol we travelled with also removed numerous snares during our stay, with approximately 6.500 seized between 2014 and 2016.

It is important to note that overhunting is bad for business. Consequently, the sport hunting carried out here is not the mass slaughters that we picture when thinking of colonial adventurers – the sort detailed in books such as Theodore Roosevelt's *African Game Trails* [11]. Quotas restrict the numbers killed. So do prices that clients pay for hunts, sometimes exceeding $110.000. In the 457.000 acre area in

which Charlton McCallum Safaris operate, the number legally hunted accordingly pales in comparison to poaching levels prior to the introduction of regulated trophy hunting. This is enough so, for example, that with anti-poaching measures the total amount of elephants killed has dropped. Thus in 2010 – the year Charlton McCallum Safaris established the Dande Anti-Poaching Unit or DAPU – 40 poached elephant carcasses were found from the previous season. By 2013, the number was down to four, with amounts fluctuating in subsequent years, but remaining below 10. The number hunted on legal safaris, by contrast, averaged 11.25 per year from 2013 onward. This means that in even the most egregious years, the number of animals killed was roughly half of that occurring in the year prior to the introduction of DAPA.

Species accordingly appear to benefit, and advantages also accrue to human populations, enough so that the local government pays half the salaries of DAPU scouts, with Charlton McCallum Safaris covering the remainder, plus food and equipment. This makes economic sense since hunting realizes 90% of revenues in the Mbire District, with locals prospering from jobs that would otherwise be absent, along with lease payments. Just as importantly, future generations should yield benefits from the continued existence of wildlife and habitats that would otherwise be destroyed.

III. Case Study 2: Namibia Ranch Country

The second case study differs from the first insofar as land is not leased from local indigenous populations, but owned by ranchers in northwestern Namibia. In at least the short term, ranchers' interests tend to conflict with wildlife conservation. However, the introduction of sport hunting generates enough revenue to compensate for losses caused by wildlife, and in this way motivates a conservation spirit.

One problem ranchers face is elephants breaking through fences, allowing breeding stock to mix. Elephants also destroy watering holes. Another common challenge is predators eating stock. Hence both have historically been shot. The introduction of sport hunting, however, markedly alters the situation, assuring profits exceeding damages, even for ranchers not directly involved in safari operations. This, in turn, dissuades them from shooting so called "problem animals" in the 650.000 acre Loxodonta Africana Conservancy jointly established by

them for regulated sport hunting on their lands. As in the Zambezi case, moreover, only small numbers – for example, one or two elephants every five years – are hunted.

The situation is of course optimal when ranching is mostly abandoned in favour of using lands for sport hunting, with ecosystems benefiting from the removal of cattle, which strip vegetation, thus harming wildlife. Such is the case in the 37.000 acre parcel run by Westfalen Hunting Safaris that we observed. Moreover, it is not just the removal of cattle that yields benefits. Operators also cultivate wildlife – including giraffe, oryx, springbok, warthog, zebra and other species hunted – by putting out saltlicks and alfalfa pellets for animals and by maintaining waterholes, which are essential, more so during increasingly common droughts. The co-owner of Westfalen Hunting Safaris, John Westhuizen, further notes that sport hunting – which he incidentally does not enjoy – is more profitable than raising cattle, particularly in times of drought. Notice, moreover, that animals will be killed even if owners opt exclusively for ranching, only in this case it will be cattle raised for slaughter, plus wildlife extinguished because of stripped vegetation, making the total number higher.

Although most of the financial benefits accrue to affluent landowners, who happen to be overwhelmingly white, this does not diminish the fact that wildlife and habitats are preserved. Financial rewards, moreover, would still go disproportionately to land owners if they engaged in ranching instead of sport hunting, just as it goes disproportionately to those who already have much in every society. That this is so, in any case, does not obviate the fact that poorer black populations nonetheless benefit. This is not so much because more jobs are created, although this happens in times of expansion. Rather, it is because jobs are higher skilled and hence better paying. In addition to this, uniforms, shelter and meat are supplied to workers and local schools, with about four tons donated annually by Westfalen Safaris alone. Because of the environmentally destructive nature of ranching, and for other reasons stated, changing to sport hunting – in addition to benefiting locals – conserves habitats and wildlife for future generations.

IV. Case Study 3: Makuya Lands

The third case of sport hunting – this time in Makuya lands in South Africa along the Mozambique and Zimbabwe boarders – appears less successful in terms of achieving conservation goals. Here tribespeople control both the hunting rights and the land abutting Kruger National Park, a protected area from which game wanders onto their territory.

A problem here is that one group in common controls the land, and the same group has access to it, with little incentive against illegal hunting since individuals are rarely held responsible, and since, from their perspective, there is almost unlimited game passing onto their territory from Kruger. As if to exemplify this, our hosts boasted in front of tribal leaders that they served us poached buffalo after drinks had loosened tongues. When touring the land, we observed lower densities and less variety of animals than when in Namibia, which is shocking given the proximity to Kruger Park, although more thorough surveys over longer periods would be needed to determine the extent to which this is actually so. Another problem with the Makuya operation is that revenues earned from hunting appear to be funneled disproportionately to local elites, though this is hard to ascertain for certain. To some extent, this is the case everywhere, but the difficulty appears worse here.

V. Political Obstacles

Though sport hunting is not always beneficial, there are cases in which it is, as in the Zambezi and Namibia examples. Be this as it may, political agendas tend to thwart even these beneficial arrangements.

As an illustrating example, one might consider the 2014 Dallas Safari Club auction of the right to hunt a black rhinoceros bull from a national park in Namibia. A wealthy Texan named Corey Knowlton won the bid, paying $350.000 to hunt this critically-endangered species. Interestingly, after the auction, Knowlton declared that he was unhappy with the result. He anticipated (and wished for) a much higher price. However, weeks of negative publicity had scared off potential bidders. Perhaps more interestingly, Knowlton wondered why individuals or organizations so repulsed by the potential killing had not bothered to bid and then simply opted not to shoot the animal. He suggested that this – with the broader anti-hunting venom – detracted from

conservation aims by lowering the value of the animals and hence local motivation and capacity to protect them.

A parallel example involves land within Kruger National Park which after much political wrangling, was restored to the Makuleke, with rights granted to any commercial ventures in the area as long as they coincided with the conservation efforts of the park itself. The most obvious prohibited activities included homebuilding, mining or farming within the "contractual park" [13]. Notably, commercial trophy hunting was permitted and took place in an effort to raise revenues, in turn used for community development projects and to pursue an eco-tourism arrangement, eventually carried out without hunting. The projections were an estimated 150 jobs, paying $400 per month [7], a very good wage by South African standards. While unpalatable to many, it should be made clear that hunting revenue allowed the construction of several lodges within the area which serve today as a source of funds for the community [10]. The trophy hunting, of course, received abundant criticism, likely more so because the activity was taking place within the crown jewel of African national parks – an area, however, subject to occasional culls due to overpopulation that is not only unsustainable but also stressing local vegetation [4]. In circumstances similar to the Knowlton incident, an uproar ensued, and consequently only a handful of hunts occurred, nonetheless yielding roughly $500.000 revenue [2, 6, 9].

It is important to note community involvement nonetheless protected the area to an extent that Kruger National Park elected to relocate rhinos into it. More recently, however, the Makuleke have come to see politically fuelled conservation pressures as a hindrance. This is directly related to the reality that revenue has dropped as hunting has become too politically unpopular as a management option. Further, the imposition of less profitable luxury lodges is not without ecological impact. Without sufficient revenue, one wonders about the long-term prospects for local wildlife [3], though in this case matters should at least be mitigated by the fact that these lands lie within Kruger.

VI. Ethics and Policy

One premise advanced throughout is that human populations stress non-human habitats. Land is generally used one way or another. Cattle

farming, for example, is extremely harmful to habitats and the entire planet insofar as it contributes to climate change, water pollution and depletion, vegetation destruction and more. Growing crops also damages wildlife habitats and contaminates water with pesticides and fertilizers, among much else. Sport hunting obviously kills wildlife too. In all cases, accordingly, animals die.

Anti-hunters, moreover, cannot protect animals without a sufficient revenue source, and will inevitably "sell" some animals and let them die, even if merely opting to protect some over others. Sport hunting, as carried out in the first two case studies, is less destructive to habitats and wildlife in comparison to farming and perhaps in comparison to not doing anything since unoccupied land is more vulnerable to poaching. Conversely, wildlife plummets have been documented following hunting bans, as in Kenya from the late 1970s onwards [8]. Reasons are complicated, some independent of hunting or its absence, as with increases in human population and consequent strains on habitats. However, bans can relate directly to wildlife destruction, as when environmental stresses follow because people, whose livelihood depends on doing something on available land, opt to raise livestock or grow crops, thereby destroying habitats. In comparison to livestock, moreover, sport hunting yields a kind of double-value per animal. This is because safari operators receive trophy fees and other remunerations while also keeping the meat, either consuming or donating it, whereas the economic value of slaughtered cattle is solely in money exchanged for meat and skins. Predators and other animals such as baboons, which trophy hunters sometimes shoot, are exceptions and not consumed. In some cases, jobs are also supplied that would otherwise be absent, as with the Makuleke and Zambezi examples.

As intimated at the outset, it is not our aim to repudiate Regan's inherent value argument [9] or Singer's anti-speciesist position [12], both suggesting that sport hunting is morally indefensible. However, these ideas – like the fortress conservation practices they would imply – are ineffectual in regions where people are struggling just to get by. In fact, insofar as these positions contribute to the political unpalatability of sport hunting, they may reduce conservation outcomes by depleting the economic value of wildlife, while simultaneously harming desperately poor people. For example, ivory import bans that the United States government issued against Zimbabwe due to rampant

mismanagement and lack of enforcement lowers the price of elephant hunts, with revenues precipitously dropping by half in the case of Charlton McCallum Safaris. The price of black-market ivory, however, remains unaffected, and the decreased funding from legal hunts impedes anti-poaching initiatives and the economic motivations to mount them. The ban on rhinoceros horn trade is similarly irrational. In this case, it is irrational because horns regrow and can be harvested without harm from farmed animals. Increasing the legal supply, in turn, would lower black-market prices and hence incentives to poach.

The idea in our research is to critically weigh the costs and benefits of hunting within a utilitarian framework, and within that framework it appears that sport hunting is defensible in certain circumstances, namely, those in which it benefits habitats, wildlife and human beings. We do not maintain utilitarianism is the only framework and are not even necessarily committed to it philosophically, but we do think it is a good one if the aim is saving animals and habitats, while improving living standards of impoverished people. Leaving philosophical standpoints aside, we emphatically believe it is time to ask whether hunters and environmentalists dislike wildlife and habitat destruction more than they dislike one another, and whether they can accordingly find common ground that promotes all their interests, along with those of non-human and human populations in effected regions.

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