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CAN TROPHY HUNTING ACTUALLY HELP CONSERVATION?

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Can trophy hunting ever be a useful tool in the conservationist's toolbox? On the surface, the answer would appear obvious. It seems as if the killing of an animal – especially an endangered one – for sport is directly contradictory to the goal of ensuring the survival of a species. The question has been

asked again following the auction last Saturday night of the right to hunt an endangered black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) in Namibia. And the answer, as usual, is more complicated.

The permit was sold for $350,000, well above the previous high bid for a permit in that country, $223,000. While the Dallas Safari Club had the dubious distinction of being the first organization to hold such an auction outside of Namibia itself, it's fairly unremarkable and actually quite common for an African nation to sell permits for trophy hunting, even for endangered species. Indeed, both Namibia and South Africa are legallypermitted (http://www.cites.org/eng/res/13/13-05R14C15.php) by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to sell five permits for the hunting of adult male black rhinos each year.

And it's not just rhinos. For example, a 2000 report from TRAFFIC (http://www.traffic.org/general-reports/traffic_pub_gen8.pdf), an organization that works with the WWF, IUCN, and CITES to track the international trade of wildlife, describes how Namibia alone was the site of almost 16,000 trophy hunts that year. Those 16,000 animals represent a wide variety of species – birds, reptiles, mammals, and even primates – both endangered and not. They include four of the so-called "big five" popular African game: lion, Cape buffalo, leopard, and rhinoceros. (Only the elephant was missing.) The hunters brought eleven million US dollars with them to spend in the Namibian economy. And that doesn't include revenue from non-trophy recreational hunting activities, which are limited to four species classified as of "least concern" by the IUCN: Greater Kudu, Gemsbok, Springbok and Warthog.

The issues here are complex and highly politicized. There are several questions that science can't help address, primary of which is whether or not the money raised from the sale of hunting permits is used for conservation, something often promised (https://www.facebook.com/DallasSafariClub/posts/620656804679231) by hunting tour operators. But empirical research can help to elucidate several other questions, such as whether hunting can ever help drive conservation efforts.

In 2006, researcher Peter A. Lindsey of Kenya's Mpala Research Centre (http://www.mpala.org/)and colleagues interviewed 150 people who either had already hunted in Africa, or who planned to do so within the following three years. Their findings were published in the journal *Animal Conservation*. A majority of hunters – eighty-six percent! – told the researchers they preferred hunting in an area where they knew that a portion of the proceeds went back into local communities. Nearly half of the hunters they interviewed also indicated that they'd be willing to pay an equivalent price for a poorer trophy if it was a problem animal that would have had to be killed anyway.

Lindsey's team also discovered that hunters were more sensitive to conservation concerns than was perhaps expected. For example, they were less willing to hunt in areas where wild dogs or cheetahs are illegally shot, in countries that intentionally surpass their quotas, or with operators who practice "put-and-take hunting," which is where trophy animals are released onto a fenced-in property just before a hunt. Together this suggests that hunters were willing to place economic pressure on countries and tour companies to operate in as ethical a manner as possible. Approximately nine out

of every ten hunters said they'd be willing to hunt in places that were poor for wildlife viewing or which lacked attractive scenery. That is, they said that they were willing to hunt in areas that would not have otherwise been able to reap an economic benefit from ecotourism.

It's encouraging that trophy hunters seem willing to take conservation-related issues into consideration when choosing a tour operator, but it is possible that they were simply providing the researchers with the answers that would cast them in the best light. That's a typical concern for assessments that rely on self-report. Better evidence would come from proof that hunting can be consistent with actual, measurable conservation-related benefits for a species.

Is there such evidence? According to a 2005 paper by Nigel Leader-Williams and colleagues in the *Journal of International Wildlife Law and Policy* the answer is yes. Leader-Williams describes how the legalization of white rhinoceros hunting in South Africa motivated private landowners to reintroduce the species onto their lands. As a result, the country saw an increase in white rhinos from fewer than one hundred individuals to more than 11,000, even while a limited number were killed as trophies.

In a 2011 letter to *Science* magazine, Leader-Williams also pointed out that the implementation of controlled, legalized hunting was also beneficial for Zimbabwe's elephants. "Implementing trophy hunting has doubled the area of the country under wildlife management relative to the 13% in state protected areas," thanks to the inclusion of private lands, he says. "As a result, the area of suitable land available to elephants and other wildlife has increased, reversing the problem of habitat loss and helping to maintain a sustained population increase in Zimbabwe's already large elephant population." It is important to note, however, that the removal of mature elephant males can have other,detrimental consequences (http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20121211-animals-that-seek-teenage-kicks) on the psychological development of younger males. And rhinos and elephants are very different animals, with different needs and behaviors.

Still, the elephants of Zimbabwe and the white rhinos of South Africa seem to suggest that it is possible for conservation and trophy hunting to coexist, at least in principle. It is indeed a tricky, but not impossible, balance to strike.

It is noteworthy that the Leader-Williams' 2005 paper recommended that legal trophy hunting for black rhinos be focused mainly on older, non-breeding males, or on younger males who have already contributed sufficient genetic material to their breeding groups. They further suggested that revenues from the sale of permits be reinvested into conservation efforts, and that revenues could be maximized by selling permits through international auctions. Namibia's own hunting policy, it turns out, is remarkably consistent with scientific recommendations.

Even so, some have expressed concern regarding what the larger message of sanctioned trophy hunts might be. Could the possible negative consequences from a PR perspective outweigh the possible benefits from hunting? Can the message that an auction for the hunting of an endangered species like the black rhino brings possibly be reconciled with the competing message that the species requires saving? This question is probably not one that science can adequately address.

However, it might just be worth having a quick look at some numbers. 745 rhinos were killed due to illegal poaching in 2012 in Africa, which amounts to approximately two rhinos each day, mostly for their horns. In South Africa alone, 461 rhinos were killed in just the first half of 2013. Rhino horns are valued for their medicinal uses and for their supposed cancer-curing powers. Of course, rhino horns have no pharmacological value at all, making their harvest even more tragic. The five non-breeding rhinos that Namibia allows to be hunted each year seem paltry in comparison, especially since they are older males who can no longer contribute to population growth.

I don't understand the desire to kill a magnificent animal for sport, even if the individual is an older non-breeding male. The sale of the right to kill an animal for a trophy surely reflects the value that animal lives hold in at least some corners of our society: that killing an animal for fun isn't wrong, as long as you can afford it. It is right to worry about the sort of message that sends.

But if an endangered species as charismatic as the black rhinoceros is under such extreme threat from poaching (http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/extinction-countdown/2013/07/12/rhino-horn-south-africa-legalized/), then perhaps the message that the species needs saving has a larger problem to address than the relatively limited loss of animals to wealthy hunters. The real tragedy here is that the one rhino that will be killed as a result of Saturday's auction has received a disproportionate amount of media attention compared to the hundreds of rhinos lost to poaching each year, which remain largely invisible. And while there remains at least a possibility that sanctioned trophy hunts can benefit the black rhino as they have for the white rhino, there is only one possible consequence of continued poaching. It's one that conservationists and hunters alike will lament. **– Jason G. Goldman | 15 January 2014**

Sources: Leader-Williams N., Milledge S., Adcock K., Brooks M., Conway A., Knight M., Mainka S., Martin E.B. & Teferi T. (2005). Trophy Hunting of Black Rhino: Proposals to Ensure Its Future Sustainability,Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy, 8 (1) 1-11. DOI:10.1080/13880290590913705 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080%2F13880290590913705)

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Photo: Male black rhino and calf, Karl Stromayer/USFWS (http://digitalmedia.fws.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/natdiglib/id/14246/rec/3). Public domain.

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