

The Trophy Hunting Debate

A Case for Ethics

AEJAZ AHMAD

This article attempts to unravel the underlying reasoning behind the contemporary practice of “trophy hunting.” It uses deontology to critique the debate on trophy hunting, which, it reckons, is based on utilitarianism. This debate is wrongly pitched between those who consider trophy hunting as economically viable and those who decry this viability. This understanding treats environment as “unrelated” or “irrelevant” domain for the economic benefits, denies its intrinsic value and makes its instrumental use as a collective norm.

This article is dedicated to Ashok Acharya of University of Delhi whose inquisitiveness has always inspired me. I am highly indebted to my brother Zaboora Ahmad, my friends including Rupak, Tanya and Aadil who all helped in identifying key issues in the debate.

Aejaz Ahmad (danishwani.du@gmail.com) is at the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi.

Jahangir, the 17th century Mughal emperor of India, is known for his passion for hunting. He is said to have hunted hundreds of lions and tigers (Divyabhanusinh 2009). The Mughal emperor’s pursuits are not only deemed “unethical”—or even “illegal” from today’s vantage point but also barbarous in general terms. Back in the 17th century, however, such a legalistic and ethical understanding was yet to emerge in India or elsewhere.

Today, the same practice has emerged in a new avatar; it is popularly called “trophy hunting.” The practice is essentially the same as those in medieval times except the mode of justifying it. What has changed in essence is the “cruelty” associated with hunting animals. Today Jahangir could have been legally and rightfully hunting animals had he been paying for his hunts, the amount which could have been redirected for the very preservation of the species in question. Such is the understanding behind the contemporary idea of trophy hunting.

Trophy hunting holds that governments allow hunting of some elder, healthy specimens of species such as lion, tiger, giraffe, elephants and deer in order to raise funds for the conservation of wildlife, when there is “no incentive” for conservation (Young 2015). The hunter can keep any organ or part of the hunted animal and boast about it or decorate houses or offices as was done during medieval times (Dobson 2012). In 2015, in the us, a dentist killed and

posed with Cecil, the lion, a beloved fixture in Zimbabwe’s Hwange National Park causing much outrage around the world (Kassam and Glenza 2015). The Idaho huntress Sabrina Corgatelli brags about “trophy hunting,” saying she has hunted a giraffe, crocodile, lion, etc. She defends her acts:

“Just because we hunt them does not mean we do not have respect for them. Giraffes are very dangerous animals. They could hurt you seriously very quickly” (*Guardian* 2015).

The practice is particularly widespread in the African continent, us, Norway, Western China and other parts of the world. In recent times, it has led to a debate which is still in an embryonic stage.

Conventional Debate

There are those who support trophy hunting on account of its economic value; such arguments are based on empirical evidence and estimates (Dobson 2012). Such estimates often aim to integrate trophy hunting into the local economy; the practice is seen as generating sustainable incomes for local communities (Mbaiwa 2008). A related argument asserts that trophy hunting develops the potential of tourism (Novelli and Humavindu 2005). The thrust of these arguments is that this practice allows controlling the population of the wild animals, which would otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of an area. More specifically, it allows wiping out extra males—or the ones in post-breeding phase—of the species so as to effectively manage breeding and thereby population (Williams et al 2005).

Hunting tourism in seven Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries in 2008 was approximately \$190 million (International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation nd). In

2010, the South African environmental affairs minister said that this type of hunting has bolstered the South African economy. He claimed that in 2010, as much as R 1.1 billion was raised in local hunting industries collectively (*Mail and Guardian* 2012).

A related claim was made by Tanzania which accounts for nearly 40% of lions in the African continent. The wildlife authorities here contended that trophy hunting has not led to a fall in the number of lions in the country. The director of Tanzanian Wildlife Alexander Songarwa wrote in the *New York Times* about “Saving Lions by Killing Them.” According to his statistics, trophy hunting had added \$75 million to the Tanzanian economy (Songarwa 2013).

On the other side of this debate, empirical evidences in various studies contradict the economic viability claims of trophy hunting. Jeff Flocken, Director of International Fund for Animal Welfare, in a perceptible article in *National Geography News*, challenged trophy hunting’s viability claims both empirically and ethically. First, he argues, that more often than not, healthy male lions are hunted by wealthy foreign hunters thereby destabilising populations because the lions that are left behind suddenly become dominant and kill their cubs. Second, Flocken dubs this practice as counter-evolutionary for being selective about large and robust males. Third, he punctures the arguments often made that such hunting contributes to otherwise poor communities. He argues that going by reports of even pro-hunting organisations, not more than 3% of the revenue collected from trophy hunting reaches the communities that are affected by it. Other studies have similarly demonstrated that the revenue generated through this practice does not reach people who live in these areas (Hassiss and Pletscher 2002).

Zambia and Botswana banned trophy hunting in 2013 and 2014 and switched to photography tourism. The affected villages and communities claimed that trophy hunting did not earn them much bucks; instead wild animals would kill livestock and destroy crops (Norimitsu 2015).

Empiricism sans Ethics

In this debate, the empirical claims stand out. However, this empirical game may be a deceptive one because various empirical reports and data contradict each other. While some reports show potential benefits of trophy hunting, others puncture the claims. The numbers may be unreasonable because they do not speak for themselves; rather they have to be well-grounded in one set of reasons. For instance, if one claims that terrorism generates employment or revenue for terrorists and supports the argument with data, one cannot prove that wrong empirically. It is only when we look at the argument normatively or ethically, do we realise its dubiousness. Therefore, this article argues that the debate on trophy hunting is wrongly pitched between those who consider hunting economically viable and those who decry this viability. In essence both generate an illusion of empirics with ethical reasoning getting a backseat.

This reasoning, therefore, is based on the utilitarian understanding of the world (cost and benefit analysis) which states that if the benefits exceed the costs of a project, it is empirically and morally right to go ahead with it (Sandel 2009). Of course, benefits are being understood in the orthodox economic sense. It follows from this “logic” that governments have other priority areas and that there are no incentives for them to invest or spend on wildlife conservation where the rate of return is perceptibly very meagre. Trophy hunting, thus, invites the rich or celebrities to pay for the kingly pursuits of hunting. The funds thus raised add to the economies or to the “GDP” of the concerned countries thereby providing governments with enough money to spend on the conservation of wild animals, their food and breeding and to generate scientific understanding about them.

We find a typical utilitarian argument mapping a one-sided linkage between conservation, tourism and economic development. Conservation is undertaken not for its own sake, but for the sake of economic surplus that it can generate. However, generating such surplus is not undesirable if conservation is undertaken effectively, but, as is evident from the

cases pointed out above, it is the economics of conservation that remains the priority. From this standpoint, even conservation becomes an instrumental tool to bolster economy, foreign exchange, job creation and social improvement (*Indian Express* 2015). Rather than treating biodiversity as an end in itself, or at least an equally important component of the human life, it makes conservation an avenue of investment. This form of understanding, therefore, squarely fits in within the neo-liberal ideology just like the “sustainable development was/is hijacked by the neo-liberal practices” (Mansfield 2008).

It is not difficult to fathom that such understanding treats environment as essentially separate from other arenas of life such as politics, economics and society. The “shocking” practices of trophy hunting are a natural outcome of this understanding. Environment is treated as an “isolated realm” which needs “incentives” for its conservation. It is pertinent to put it that in any empirical sense, environment forms the very base of our economy, polity or society.

It is also argued that if certain animals are allowed to be hunted, the rest could be cared for better. This implies that certain animals are made “scapegoats” so that others of the species can live. Does this not resemble the arguments of those who advance the political majoritarian sentiments? Here lies the essential case of speciesism—a one-way value-creation regarding animals. The Western core of individualism stands helpless here. Individualism is taken as a human attribute, not that of animals.

Animals are so non-sacrosanct, non-individualistic that anyone can eliminate some from a species without raising much dust. This understanding allows few animals to be hunted for the sake of “majorities.” Classical individualism is normally held as an antidote to sexism, racism as well as speciesism (Cavaliere 2001). But in actuality, individualism has been conceived only with regard to homo sapiens and conspicuously denied to animals.

The population management of animals’ argument outlined above is similarly

based on human utilitarian understanding. Strictly speaking, it is the human population that has played havoc with the animal population, not the other way round. While constantly increasing population is exerting pressure on the hitherto unoccupied wild lands, the natural habitat of certain animals, the burden of conservation is being surprisingly shifted on to the animals themselves. The inability to control human population cannot be corrected by managing the animal population.

This Is Speciesism

It is also evident that there are “dangers” of extending such a human framework to the study of wildlife, but such an exercise reveals hitherto unacknowledged aspects of speciesism. For the sake of argument, a precise thought experiment can be generated if we apply the logic of trophy hunting to human beings. In libertarian parlance, there is no incentive, other than voluntary, for poverty eradication. The debates on poverty constitute one of the most important areas of contemporary political economy and moral philosophy. These debates have been trying to figure out whether we have any obligations towards the poor, with poverty sometimes seen as natural (Pogge 2008). Following this, why not invite rich people to kill “some poor people” for “fun” or to satisfy their “kingly passions” by paying for it just like hunting wild animals? Why not allow such killings for generating huge funds which can thereafter be used for otherwise incentive-less poverty eradication programmes? Outrageous, isn't it? How then is trophy hunting, which invokes similar kind of reasoning, ethical? Why doesn't trophy hunting evoke similar outrage? It doesn't because we have created values about animals that are one-sided or unilateral. Animals don't participate in such value creation about them. This is what speciesism is all about.

At the locus of all criticism that is levelled at trophy hunting is the very act of killing and the manner in which it is done. The magnitude of suffering, both physical and emotional, that it causes is seldom taken into account. In the entire debate of trophy hunting that is largely

about its economic benefits this element of the practice is ignored (Gunn 2001). Last but not least, such reasoning can also be challenged from the standpoint of animal rights. Trophy hunting, it is argued, takes the rights discourse about animals as hostage. It not only denies even the minutest “agency as living beings” to the animals, but also transforms their very existence into an instrument for GDP, let alone for conservation of wildlife per se.

Conclusions

Trophy hunting is extrapolated from utilitarian reasoning. It not only plays havoc with the environment, but also justifies and reinforces the underlying belief that environment is an “unrelated” or “irrelevant” domain for the economic benefits and that environment conservation needs “incentives” for its conservation. Trophy hunting takes away the agency of essentially voiceless creatures, it denies the individuality of animals and militates against their right to exist. There are alternative ways of generating funds for the wildlife conservation.

From any ethical point of view, justifying animal killings for the sake of “entertainment” is untenable. This article has used the deontological approach of Immanuel Kant to critique the practice of trophy hunting. But at the same time, it does not hold on to deontology's absolutist propositions. It recognises the importance of economics as crucial for conservation in neo-liberal times. However, taking conservation as a means or as an arena of investment rather than an end in itself is indefensible. It is argued that this debate belongs essentially to the ethical domain. There is, therefore, a need to understand the underlying reasoning behind trophy hunting, rather than being bewildered or misled by numbers and empirics.

REFERENCES

- Cavaliere, Paola (2001): (Trans Catherine Woolard), *The Animal Question: Why Nonhuman Animals Deserve Animal Rights*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Divyabhanusinh, C (2009): *The Great Mughals Go Hunting Lions, Environmental Issues in India: A Reader*, Mahesh Rangarajan (ed), New Delhi: Pearson Longman Publications, pp 49–90.

- Dobson, John (2012): “Ethical Issues in Trophy Hunting, Controversies in Tourism”, Omar Moufakkir, Peter M Burns (eds), Oxfordshire: CAB International, pp 90–91.
- Guardian* (2015): “Giraffes Are Dangerous: Another Trophy Hunter under Fire after Defending Hobby,” <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/04/giraffes-are-dangerous-another-trophy-hunter-under-fire-after-defending-hobby> (2015), 4 August, viewed on 1 September 2015.
- Gunn, Alastair S (2001): “Environmental Ethics & Trophy Hunting,” *Ethics & the Environment*, 6, 68–95.
- Hassiss, R B and D H Pletscher (2002): “Incentives toward Conservation of Argali Ovis Ammon: A Case Study of Trophy Hunting in Western China,” *Oryx, Cambridge Journals*, Vol 2, 36, 1–9.
- International Council for Game and Wildlife Tourism (nd): Newsletter, http://www.ic-wildlife.org/fileadmin/Press/Technical_Series/EN/8_.pdf, viewed on 24 October 2015.
- Indian Express* (2015): “For Some, Hunting Lions in Africa is the Ultimate Experience,” *Indian Express*, 30 July, viewed on 24 October 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/middle-east-africa/for-some-hunting-lions-in-africa-is-the-ultimate-experience/>.
- Kassam, Ashifa and Jessica Glenza (2015): “Killer of Cecil the Lion Was Dentist from Minnesota, Claim Zimbabwe Officials,” *Guardian*, 28 July, viewed on 30 September 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/28/killer-of-cecil-the-lion-was-american-zimbabwe-officials-claim>.
- Mail & Guardian* (2012): “Molewa: Hunting Brings Much to South Africa's Economy,” *Mail & Guardian*, 30 October, viewed on 25 October 2015, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-30-molewa-hunting-brings-much-to-south-africas-economy>.
- Mansfield, Becky (2008): “Global Environmental Politics,” *The Sage Handbook of Political Geography*, Kevin Cox, Murray Low and J Robinson (eds), London: Sage Publication.
- Mbaiwa, J E (2008): “*The Success of Sustainability of Consumptive Wildlife Tourism in Africa* Tourism and the Consumptive Wildlife,” ed. Brent Lovelock, London: Routledge.
- Norimitsu, Onishi (2015) “A Hunting Ban Saps a Village's Livelihood,” *New York Times*, 12 October, viewed on 20 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/world/a-hunting-ban-saps-a-village-livelihood.html>.
- Novelli, M and M N Humavindu (2005): *Wildlife Tourism-Wildlife Uses v Local Gain, Trophy Hunting in Namibia*, Niche Tourism Contemporary Issues, Trends and Cases,” M Novelli (ed), London: Elsevier, pp 171–82
- Pogge, Thomas (2008): *World Poverty & Human Rights*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sandel, Michael (2009): *Justice: What Is the Right Thing to Do?* England: Penguin Books.
- Songarwa, Alexander (2013): “Saving Lions by Killing Them,” *New York Times*, 17 March, retrieved 13 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/opinion/saving-lions-by-killing-them>.
- Williams, Leader, N Milledge, S Adcock, K Brooks et al (2005): “Trophy Hunting of Black Rhino *Diceros Bicornis*: Proposals to Ensure Its Future Sustainability,” *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy*, pp 1–11.
- Young, Jonathan (2015) “Trophy Hunting Can be a Lifeline for Africa's Wildlife,” *Telegraph*, 29 July, accessed on 24 September 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/zimbabwe/1177112/Trophy-hunting-can-be-a-lifeline-for-Africas-wildlife>.