

The UK's trophy hunting import ban needs to be a smart ban – an open letter

The UK Government's proposed ban on the import (and export?) of hunting trophies is poorly conceived and unlikely to deliver any of its claimed conservation benefits. Instead, it threatens to reverse many conservation gains while undermining the livelihoods, rights and autonomy of rural communities across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. However, before attempting to pass this legislation into law, the government has undertaken to pursue further engagement with relevant stakeholders, leaving a narrow window of opportunity to restructure this legislation so that it may yet deliver on its stated aims.

Contrary to the claims of some Western celebrities and animal rights campaigners, trophy hunting can and does deliver a variety of significant conservation and development benefits¹. Indeed, the UK government explained its understanding of this fact as recently as 2018, when Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, stated, "conservation non-governmental organisations have set out how, in certain limited and rigorously controlled cases, scientific evidence shows that trophy hunting can be an effective conservation tool."²

Certainly, poorly managed trophy hunting can have harmful impacts, but it remains true that well-managed hunting has demonstrably improved the conservation status of multiple threatened species, including lion, white rhino, black rhino, argali, markhor, and others.³ Crucially, land managed for trophy hunting currently plays a vital role in protecting ecosystems against threats such as habitat loss and poaching, which pose far greater threats to the world's endangered species.

In South Africa, wildlife-based land use has enabled the largest rewilding movement on the planet, as privately-owned conservation areas, often used for game ranching and hunting, now cover more than twice the area of land contained within the country's state-owned protected areas.⁴ Across sub-Saharan Africa, a 2007 study estimated that 1,394,000 km² of private and state-owned land was used for trophy hunting, exceeding the area protected by all the region's national parks.⁵ Across these vast areas, which attract few other international visitors, trophy hunting generates revenues in areas where ecotourism cannot.⁵

We understand (and many of us share) the public's instinctive dislike of trophy hunting. However, the reality is that no alternative land use has yet been developed which equally protects the wildlife and habitats found in these vital landscapes while also generating valuable revenues for local communities. Indeed, where trophy hunting has been subjected to bans, wildlife has often suffered, and conflict with communities has increased.⁶

This is not to claim that trophy hunting is perfect. It is beset with a variety of problems, including but not limited to the inequitable sharing of hunting revenues, inappropriate or poorly observed quotas, corruption and inadequate regulation.⁵ But tourism is not a perfect industry either.⁷ And sadly, the UK's trophy import ban, as currently proposed, will do little or nothing to address these problems where they occur, targeting good and bad hunting operators alike, alienating those communities who generate revenues from well-managed sustainable hunting, and exposing the UK to accusations of hypocrisy.

There are those who feel all hunting is indefensible, but this is surely not the UK Government's position since it permits and supports hunting – including trophy hunting – within its own borders, even as it now, confusingly, seeks to ban trophy imports. Botswana, Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe are 4 of the 5 top-performing countries in the world for megafauna conservation and all use trophy hunting to support their success.⁸

The UK's exclusive focus on banning imports of hunting trophies – while ignoring their own domestic trophy hunting industry – has been called out by African community leaders for undermining their human rights, threatening livelihoods, and disrespecting the region's unparalleled conservation record.^{9,10} Across 8 leading hunting destination countries, hunting supports at least 53,400 jobs, often in areas where there is no alternative employment.¹¹ A recent poll amongst the British public showed a majority would not be in favour of trophy hunting bans if such a ban increased threats to wildlife conservation or negatively impacted marginalised communities.¹² This legislation, as proposed, would do both.

If the UK wants to make a real contribution to the conservation of threatened species around the world, there is a better way. A 'smart ban' would incentivise good practice and encourage reform of much which remains bad. Such a ban could be designed to prohibit the import of trophies associated with bad practice, be it from 'canned' hunting operations, those that fail to demonstrate an equitable sharing of hunting revenues with local communities, or trophies which originate from countries that fail to establish or observe sustainable hunting quotas, or otherwise fall short of exacting criteria relating to industry regulation and corruption.

America has already adopted a similar policy, dropping various recent bans on elephant and lion trophy imports in favour of a "case by case" approach designed to enable each import permit to be assessed on the "status of and management program for the species or population to ensure that the program is promoting the conservation of the species".¹³ Similarly, the EU has a requirement for hunting import permits guaranteeing that the origin of the trophy is legal and meets its criteria for sustainability.¹⁴

The IUCN recommend that legislation aimed at restricting trophy hunting should be based on meaningful and equitable consultation with affected range state governments, indigenous peoples, and local communities, and should not undermine successful local approaches to conservation. They further recommend that action should be taken only after exploration of other options that might promote improved standards of governance and management of hunting, and only ***after identification and implementation of feasible, fully funded and sustainable alternatives to hunting that respect indigenous and local community rights and livelihoods and deliver equal or greater incentives for conservation over the long term.***²

The currently proposed UK ban does none of these things. However, a modified 'smart ban' focused on sustainability and community rights could drive real positive change, encouraging the adoption of better regulation of the hunting industry, supporting development goals, and incentivising good conservation outcomes.¹⁵ In contrast to the proposed legislation, such a 'smart ban' would be one that we – as concerned professional conservation and development practitioners – would welcome and support.

Signed:

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