

# THE REAL THREAT TO WILDLIFE – THE FACTS FROM A GAME RANGER

What are the real issues to discuss when talking about conservation?



**TOP:** Photographic tourism has a place, argues Richard, but it is only viable in certain areas. Photo: Johan van Wyk.

**BOTTOM:** A herd of buffalo in the Kruger National Park. Photo: Nic de Bruine.



I started my conservation career with a BSc degree, majoring in Grassland Science and Zoology, followed by an honours degree in wildlife management at the University of Pretoria. After that I started working for Conservation Corporation Africa (now known as &Beyond) as a field guide for two years at their Londolozi and Singita Lodges in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve adjoining the Kruger National Park (KNP). I was one of the first guides to qualify in the then-newly-established Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) Level 3, SKS Dangerous Animals category, and then

became a KNP Wilderness Trails Ranger.

My first position in wildlife management was as assistant-warden at Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, bordering KNP. I worked there for a year and experienced a different side of wildlife management, learning the facets of more intensely managed wildlife areas. Since 2002, I have worked for South African National Parks as a section ranger, commonly known as a 'game warden', or just plain 'game ranger'.

I'm based in central KNP, at Kingfisherspruit Section near Orpen Camp. I'm responsible for a 95 000ha portion of the

park along the western border, halfway between Skukuza and the Olifants River. It adjoins and is open to the Timbavati and Manyeleti Game Reserves, to the west.

A section ranger's job is basically that of custodian of the environment. I'm very fortunate to be based at Kingfisherspruit where my duties include not only anti-poaching and wildlife management, but also the environmental management of two game viewing/photographic concession areas. The first of these is a new concession, Imbali Safari Lodge, and the second is an existing operation situated in the contractual national park portion of my section known as Kempiana. The lodge is called Ngala Private Game Reserve. The Southern African Wildlife College (SAWC), which accommodates up to 200 students at a time, is situated in the southern portion of Kempiana. Both Ngala's and the SAWC's operations were based on older models and required transformation to conform with the best practice principles of the National Parks Concessions Operations Model, which was also the model used to develop Imbali.

As a neighbour and open to the Timbavati Private Game Reserve, I have also been involved in the joint management committee of the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR). It was here that I started to gain exposure to the other side of conservation's revenue generator, namely the hunting safari business.

In the nearly 18 years I have spent here, I have had unrivalled exposure to all sides of the tourism industry and have learned a lot about the impacts, positive and negative, of the photographic/game viewing and the safari hunting industries. I believe that I'm well qualified to voice an opinion on the two, and I have learned that it is not which of the two you favour, but rather how you make the choice.

### THE THREAT OF POACHING

When I started my career in the 1990s, wildlife was thriving in South Africa. Game was growing in value and distribution was expanding across the country. In those days, the most obvious threat to wildlife was poaching.

Before I continue, it is necessary to understand why poaching is a threat. To put it simply: it is unsustainable. The Cambridge Dictionary describes the word 'unsustainable' as '*something that cannot continue at the same rate*' or '*causing damage to the environment by using more of something than can be replaced naturally*'. It is vital to understand this because successful conservation is underpinned by sustainability.

A second important concept, and not something that was taught back when I qualified, is holistic management. This means dealing with or treating the whole of something and not just a part of it. In successful modern conservation this approach is essential. To view the sustainability of poaching holistically three key points should be considered:

- **Ecologically** poaching is unsustainable because the offtake/harvest is not determined by number, age class or sex and is also not based on sound science. It therefore usually exceeds what is sustainable.
- **Economically** none of the revenue generated from poaching goes back into the management of the wildlife system and the law-abiding society does not benefit from it.
- **Socially** it has an impact. Because poaching is illegal the means of killing is usually inhumane and disrespectful to wildlife and is therefore unacceptable.

### THE PLANET PRINCIPLES

It is here that I must add another concept that I refer to as "Planet Principles". These are principles»



**TOP:** In the wildlife areas adjacent to the Kruger National Park on the western side, starting in the south, we have the highly productive Sabi Sands Game Reserve where photo tourism is huge. As one progresses further north, photo tourism starts to dovetail with hunting as the most responsible resource use.

**BOTTOM:** Protected areas in Africa according to the World Database on Protected Areas. The three top destinations of choice are circled.



» that are unavoidable on Planet Earth. They mostly relate to environmental sustainability, but some relate to how human society functions. Let's look at three Planet Principles that are relevant to this discussion:

**1. ECONOMICS.** This deals with the material welfare of people. Humans are the dominant creatures on the planet and there are 7.7 billion of them, therefore economics is unavoidable.

**2. THE RESOURCES CHAIN.** In other words, what is dependent on what for its survival? It determines what our conservation priorities for a sustainable planet should be. In order of priority they are soil and ground water conservation, followed by the conservation of plant communities, and then animal communities. Animal communities can be broken down further into prey and predators. The upper level never exists without the lower level. (Please note that I refer to 'communities' and not 'individuals')

**3. HOOVED ANIMALS.** All the rangelands of the world – grassland, savannah and tundra habitats – are kept productive and sustainable by hooved animals. They achieve this by their hoof action which breaks up and aerates capped and hard soils and by depositing dung and urine. If

hooved animals are absent, these areas will degrade and become deserts. I was not taught this principle at university as it was not well known back then. It was only when I met Allan Savory, the doyen of holistic management, that my understanding of these systems became clearer.

If 7.7 billion humans are a fact, and hooved animals are essential for the planet's sustainability, the relationship between the two is critical. So, what about the claim that cattle produce methane which is contributing to climate change? Well, to explain it simply, hooved animals are very important for carbon cycling into the soil, plus many thousands of years ago when the world was healthy and sustainable, there were many more hooved animals roaming the planet than there are today. So, it is illogical that this should now suddenly be a major factor in driving climate change. The problem does not lie in livestock numbers, but rather in the way livestock are being kept. They should be on the rangelands fulfilling important functions. The conversion to this way of farming will simultaneously solve numerous welfare issues as well.

**THE THREAT OF DEVALUATION**

During the last decade, a new threat to wildlife has emerged, namely the devaluation of wildlife. I believe this is a greater threat than poaching. Devaluation means that wildlife is no longer the method of choice of utilising land. This is because the income generated from wildlife no longer covers operating costs, including its protection, and ultimately there is less money to be made. The end result is habitat loss. Habitat cannot be lost without the conscious decision of man, so this should rather be referred to as land use change. In Africa, this change is usually in favour of agriculture or mining.

The devaluation of wildlife has been happening in two ways. The first is the intensive use and management of wildlife, commonly known as intensive (canned) breeding, canned hunting and other canned activities that de-wild and fragment our wildlife areas. None of these practices are natural, and the term "fragment" refers to the fencing of camps and the reduction in size of continuous wildlife areas. The inherent value of wildlife is in the wildness of the land and the animals, and any activity that detracts from this, devalues

it. A good example is the fascination wildlife lovers have with the great wilderness areas of the world compared to zoos. Most people visit a zoo once or twice during their lifetime but will visit natural places repeatedly. It stands to reason that humans become bored with things that are controlled and predictable but remain fascinated by those things that are not.

The second way of devaluing wildlife has been through the Animal Rights Movement, also known as the Animal Extremist Movement. This is very different from environmentalism and animal welfare. It basically implies that humans have no right to use animals or their products, and that animals should have an equal footing on the planet. It is better described as the anti-sustainable use movement. This threat is not widely acknowledged or understood, and it is doing great harm to conservation. Many misguided animal lovers believe they are saving wildlife by supporting these movements but are unaware of the unintended consequences of their actions. It defies the Planet Principles and is therefore detrimental to the preservation of nature.

Through social media, people »

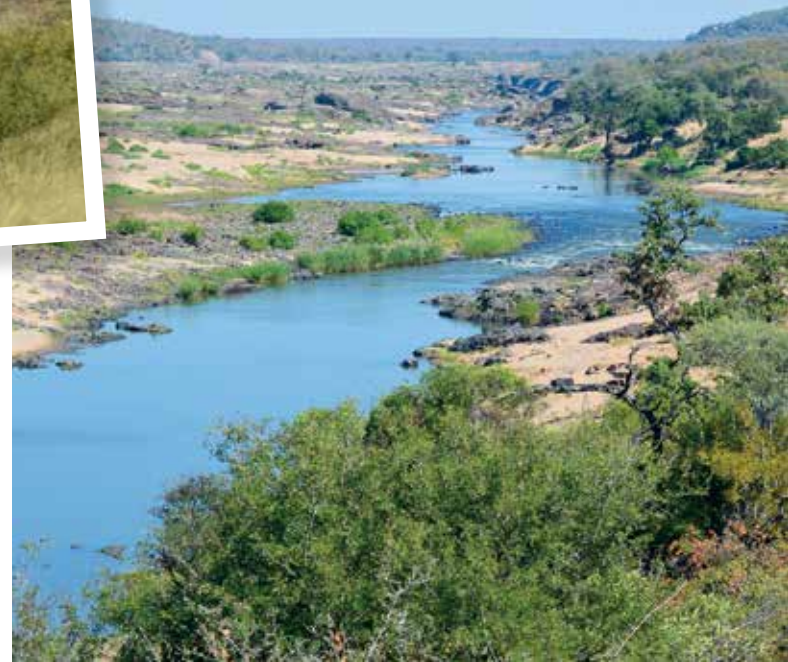


Tourists on a game viewing excursion in a wildlife area. Photo: Nic de Bruine.



**LEFT:** A magnificent elephant bull in the Kruger National Park. Such animals are huge tourism drawcards. Photo: Johan van Wyk

**BELOW:** Wildlife areas must be kept "wild" to retain their attraction.



» are now able to insert themselves into issues, and influence discussions even though they may not be qualified to do so. Where in the past decisions were made by trained experts, this is no longer the case. The biggest failing of modern conservation has been its failure to embrace the age of information and to use communication tools to reach out and educate society. This must change urgently.

So, how is the Animal Rights/Extremist Movement impacting negatively on conservation? Firstly, it is reducing the ability of wildlife managers to give value to game as a land use. In most African wildlife areas, including all national parks, game reserves, conservancies and game ranches, the primary way to viably generate income is through photographic/game viewing tourism or hunting. However, from an economic and ecological perspective, not all wildlife habitats are productive enough to sustain the photographic/game viewing tourism model.

A good example of this is the 'productivity gradient' (based mostly on soils and rainfall) which decreases from south to north in the wildlife areas adjacent to the KNP. What this means is, as you travel north, the area becomes drier and the land less productive, and because of this, animal densities decline. Photographic/game viewing operations are highly dependent on great game viewing to keep their customers satisfied and thereby ensure eco-

nomie success. There should also be sufficient ground water (from boreholes) to meet the needs of guests and staff. If these factors are not present, then such an operation is not economically and ecologically viable and another wildlife-based land use model needs to be utilised. If no other acceptable wildlife-based land use model can be utilised, wildlife is replaced.

Add to this the fact that most photographic/game viewing tourists do not go to remote areas. I have asked many people where they would go if they received a free photographic/game viewing safari to Africa. More than 95% of them chose one of only three wildlife areas; either the Serengeti, the Okavango or Kruger National Park. Looking on a map, you will see that these destinations represent a very small portion of the protected areas in Africa! It was clear to me that the people's choices were influenced by the following factors:

- Nature channels on television depicting abundant wildlife in these areas.
- Ease of access because of infrastructure such as international airports, tarred roads, etc.
- Regional stability (safety).

If, however, the photo/game viewing tourism model is not generally viable, how are most wildlife areas in Africa going to sustainably generate revenue and benefit the local people? Simple: responsibly practiced trophy hunting.

#### **FACTS ABOUT TROPHY HUNTING**

The overwhelming majority of the urban-dwelling privileged have a very negative view of trophy hunting. But when asked to explain what exactly trophy hunting is, not many people are able to do so, and those that have any 'facts' are heavily influenced by propaganda spread by animal rights/extremists/anti-sustainable-use NGOs, and certain journalists.

#### **Let's look at some of the REAL FACTS about trophy hunting:**

- The word 'trophy', when used in the context of hunting, is misunderstood. The common urban interpretation of the word 'trophy' is a prize for having won a contest. Trophy in the context of hunting means a memento of the experience and could refer to horns, skins, skulls, photographs and videos. The important question to ask is whether these mementos were acquired in a responsible and sustainable manner. What is the difference between these mementos and

those that tourists acquire when visiting different parts of the world? I visited Scotland last year and brought back a bottle of whisky as a memento. The impact of whisky production on Britain is that vast tracts of wildlife and indigenous vegetation were cleared to make way for something of greater value: barley!

- Whether you are hunting for 'meat' or a 'trophy', an animal is harvested.
- Trophy hunters utilise the whole carcass, the same as meat hunters.
- The value of a Cape buffalo hunted for 'meat' equates to R10 000 (approximately US\$650), whereas the value of a Cape buffalo hunted as a 'trophy' is approximately R350 000 (US\$25 000). As a wildlife manager, which income would you rather receive for the utilisation of that buffalo?
- \* Is trophy hunting any less or more ethical than golf or many other activities humans engage in? Think of the environmental impact of golf courses: water use, herbi- »

- » cides, pesticides, as well as the clearing of indigenous bush and the animals living there.
- Have you heard of the word “complicit”? Well, it is extremely relevant here. When we eat meat, we are complicit in the living conditions and the killing of those animals that produced the meat. Conversely, when we eat vegetables, we are complicit in the killing of animals, deforestation, erosion caused by the ploughing of soil and the insect holocaust when crops are sprayed. These are the realities of modern agriculture through which most of our food are produced. It is not possible to live impact-free.
- A century ago, when the world was a lot healthier, the hunter was the hero in the village, but today he’s the villain. This is because mankind has lost touch with what it takes to survive on Planet Earth and the realities of our daily existence. Hunting is actually a natural process.
- What man values is directly reflected by the land use we see around us. In South Africa we had previously given great value to wildlife, so much so that about 17 million hectares of land in the country are preserved (the KNP comprises merely 2 million of this). Approximately half of this preserved land generates an income from hunting. Giving value to wildlife means that one sees it everywhere when driving through our beautiful country. However, when travelling through most developed countries, it is apparent that they have devalued wildlife as it has been replaced by something else. Banning trophy hunting therefore does not result in another use for wildlife, it results in land use changing to agriculture or mining.

**THE REAL ISSUES**

So, as rational and responsible nature lovers, what should be the real issues we discuss when the

topic turns to sustainable hunting? They are the same as those we used to assess why poaching is unsustainable, namely:

- **Ecologically:** Are the hunting quotas in terms of number, age class and genetics sustainable? What was the water use and the waste that was generated by the activity, and is the area being kept ‘wild’? Simply put, was the use of resources and the land management sustainable?
- **Economically:** What was the monetary value of the hunt? Does it equal the worth of the use of resources? Was the revenue generated used in stewardship of the wildlife system? Did society (especially those communities living in the vicinity) benefit from it?
- **Socially:** Was the hunt conducted in an ethical (respectful and humane) and lawful manner?

It is ironic that many of those who are passionate about wildlife are so focused on hunting and the negative issues that stem from a few isolated botched hunts, that they overlook the impact that other industries, which use wildlife areas, have on the environment. In relation to photographic/game viewing businesses, one never sees headlines such as “Outrage over Lodge’s Water Use” or “Outrage about Off-road Driving”. The stark reality of the photographic/game viewing industry is that most lodges use well in excess of a million litres of water per month, and off-road driving results in erosion and the killing of plants, if not managed properly. Are water and vegetation resources not equally as precious as the animals?

The real question to ask is whether or not wildlife thrives in its natural environment. So, let’s stop trying to ban hunting and the importation of hunting trophies and start working towards understanding what the responsible principles of resource use are, apply them, and give wildlife back its value. ☺