

Rhinos Need Not Die...

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I HAVE read Rob Moffett's opinion piece (The Namibian, 1 November 2013) on turning rhinos into a commodity with interest. I have also seen some other press coverage of this issue. All I can say is that this is a morally reprehensible act on the part of the Namibian government and that any serious conservationist who supports this hunt, and by implication auction of a wild animal to some bloated American fatcat in Texas, should reconsider their ethical and moral standards.

The black rhino is being pushed to the brink of extinction in their last remaining pockets of existence and has been wiped out from many of its historic rangelands across Africa.

Namibia deservedly has gained an enviable reputation for innovative rhino conservation, but how often do we hear of the rhinos in what was the Caprivi Strip? This is, or rather was, a sub group of rhino that has been wiped out in Namibia, something that is seldom mentioned.

This permit that is to be auctioned off raises many questions. Perhaps the answers are out there and have been published, but if they have, I have not seen them.

Do we, the Namibian public, or the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), or indeed the brave heroic saviour of Namibia's rhinos who is going shoot a rhino to do it actually know, which individual trophy animal is to be shot? Is the hunter just buying a permit to shoot a rhino or is he buying a specific animal? Does anyone know what the animal looks like?

The justification for this hunt is that a male animal past his prime and no longer of value to the gene pool will be selected and shot.

Great! This implies that the highly professional and competent MET officials are, at this minute, out there studying the animals and know exactly each and every animal's behaviour and contribution to the good of rhinos in Namibia. I am impressed if this is so.

Also, by some quirk of fate, the selected individual will be of trophy quality and worthy of being hunted by a wealthy patron of conservation. If by some bitter twist the animal is not a magnificent trophy worthy of the Safari Club International member I am sure that the wealthy wally will also be more than happy to shoot some obviously decrepit animal on its last legs with a splintered nub of a horn worn down by many years of fighting off younger animals trying to usurp his position.

Maybe there is a photo of the trophy animal to be hunted at the auction? It may even have a mark banded on to make it identifiable to the hunters and hopefully the MET officials tasked to see that the correct rhino is shot.

In recent history rhino populations have been wiped out in many African countries by poachers. Namibia still has a healthy rhino population, which apparently, is increasing. We also have the largest, if not only, wild free ranging population.

To widen the safety net animals have also been put onto private farms as part of the rhino custodianship programme and some have been sold as live animals to farmers. None of these animals were, however, to be shot.

The sustainable use of natural resources for both consumptive and non-consumptive purposes is an important conservation tool. Game populations in confined areas need to be managed. Gaining community support for conservation through benefits to the communities from wildlife is an important conservation initiative.

Conflict animals such as large carnivores or even elephants may need to be shot to keep the community on the side of conservation.

These are all understandable and defensible conservation actions.

Dare I say it, but even trophy hunting of abundant species can be accommodated here or maybe as part of management intervention trophy hunters could shoot trophy wildlife earmarked to be culled. Proceeds from these hunts must then go back to conservation or the community on whose land the hunt took place.

Shooting a species that is extinct in most of its former area and is under threat where it still occurs is not something that should be sold off to a wealthy hunter. Experience has shown that when a lion has caused problems and the problem animal has been allocated to a professional hunter, inexplicably, the wrong animal has been shot and it is usually a prime animal.

There will be pressure by the hunter demanding a decent trophy, which may, in all likelihood, result in a younger prime animal being shot.

The hunter will be happy, the outfitter will be happy, MET will be happy, the tourism sector will be happy, the community will be happy and I suppose through all this we will have advanced the conservation goals for rhino conservation in Namibia.

Rob mentions the term "business model" in the context of conservation success. While I agree to a certain extent on gleaming economic returns from wildlife, there is also a moral and ethical responsibility to conserve wildlife even without making any money while doing it. If conservation only happened for species that could pay their way, then our wild animal populations would be in a sorry state.

In Namibia rhino conservation is the responsibility of the state. It is the state's moral duty to protect them for future generations.

Rhinos should not need to die to pay for their continued survival. We owe it to them.

John Paterson

By email