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LEOPARD SHOOTING AND THE HUNTING DILEMMA

Condemn cruelty to animals

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The Namibia Professional Hunting Association (Napha) has publicly emphasised the need to distinguish between illegal and ethical practices related to leopard hunting but has not clearly condemned the illegal activities that are being exposed by the media as well as being investigated by law enforcement and prosecuted in the courts.

Behind the scenes, parts of the trophy sector are lobbying to legalise hunting with dogs and hunting at night. This is highly disingenuous, and could be interpreted as an admission of guilt, and an attempt to absolve that guilt by having the illicit activities legalised. Clearly, these practices are much more widespread than the industry would like to admit, otherwise, there should be no need to attempt to legitimise them. Out in the bush, some operators obviously feel they are a law unto themselves.

In the past, a group within the hunting sector attempted to legitimise the introduction of exotic trophy animals, by arguing that all game indigenous to southern Africa should be considered indigenous to Namibia. At the time, enough well-established hunting operators opposed attempts to make this official Napha policy. The practice of introducing exotic species, and selectively breeding colour variants and exceptional trophies, has nonetheless crept insidiously into wide acceptance within the sector. Game-proof fences to keep in valuable trophies, species far from their natural habitats (e.g., blesbok, waterbuck) and colour variants (e.g., black springbok, golden oryx) have become widespread across much of Namibia's freehold land.

A similar shift to legitimise indefensible practices to bag leopard trophies is clearly underfoot.

Shooting leopards that have long been accustomed to feeding at a bait, by using electronic detectors and lights under cover of night, has nothing to do with hunting. Similarly, using trained dogs to chase a leopard up a tree, from which it can be easily shot down, cannot be considered ethical hunting. Both practices are

only small steps removed from the canned lion hunting being practiced in South Africa – and defended there as 'legal'. Canned lion hunting has contributed substantially to global anti-hunting sentiments. Current activities in Namibia pose a comparable risk to the sector.

Abhorrent practices

Abhorrent practices related to leopard shooting are being recorded. Leopards are being caught using box traps, and at times kept in small cages for weeks – until the next trophy client arrives. Information indicates that in some cases brutal methods are used to disorient or hinder the captive cats so that when they are released to be shot, they cannot flee effectively from the shooter's bullets.

It is understandable that hunting operators are wary of publicly calling out bad behaviour. It reflects badly on the industry, and on one's own peers. How did Bruce Springsteen sing it? 'When it's your brother, sometimes you look the other way' (Highway Patrolman, 1982). But if the industry reaches a point where being a part of it reflects badly on the ethics and integrity of the individual, it will be too late to restore.

Napha has repeatedly distanced itself from unethical or illegal operators as not being Napha members. This is an easy way out for both parties. Rogue operators can avoid industry controls by not being Napha members, and Napha can simply distance itself from disgraced operators. Instead of condoning efforts to legalise indefensible practices, Napha should work with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) to create structures whereby all registered hunting operators must also be members of a national regulatory body, which together with government seeks to ensure well-managed, conservation-orientated, lawful and ethically defensible activities. Ignoring or attempting to secretly deal with malpractice only shines a brighter light on illegal behaviour once the truth emerges – as it usually will.

Sustainable values and reputation

Namibia takes pride in the sustainable use of indigenous natural resources for the benefit of current and future generations. Conservation hunting forms an important component of this sustainable use, with an emphasis on indigenous resources and healthy ecosystems. Hunting in this context is a balanced interaction with nature and a participation in the natural dynamics of predator and prey. For many years, MEFT has promoted this concept, which has measurable conservation outcomes and community benefits, as a clear way for Namibia to distance itself from trophy-shooting practices that continue to erode the value of sustainable use.

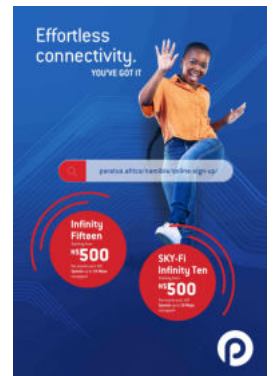
Game breeding has expanded as a lucrative sector of the agricultural mainstream, mirroring typical agricultural approaches of breeding animals for market and is portrayed as such in agricultural magazines in South Africa and Namibia. But it is not a conservation activity. It pollutes the genetic integrity and natural distribution of species and threatens natural genetic variants and subspecies. When trophy shooting is practiced as a sport in a highly controlled manner with artificial aids in pursuit of profits, with animals kept and bred solely for off-take under captive conditions, it is simply a part of that agricultural sector. Yet even here, there is a need to ensure that activities remain within the law and to condemn cruelty to animals.

Namibia has a positive global reputation for sound and pragmatic conservation approaches. The hunting industry, and the wider conservation community in Namibia, need to decide how to approach sustainable use locally and globally to ensure this reputation remains intact. If current trends on freehold land continue, conservation hunting will mostly be possible in hunting concessions in community conservation areas, where free-roaming indigenous species occur in natural systems.

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