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Necessary evil: Is trophy hunting ethical?

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Introduction

Trophy hunting is a controversial topic. On the one hand, the idea that a handful of the wealthy elite pays top dollar to shoot iconic and rare animals for ‘sport’ draws the ire of a far greater number of sensible (and sensitive) humans. On the other, trophy hunting is touted as a ‘necessary evil’ that brings in much needed funds to support the conservation of targeted species, while at the same time providing economic benefits to impoverished local and indigenous communities living among and alongside trophy hunted wildlife. Whereas the exact figures are impossible to evaluate, global financial contributions number in the several millions of dollars. A single polar bear will cost a trophy hunter in the region of USD30,000¹, an African elephant up to USD50,000² and a critically endangered black rhinoceros has fetched upwards of USD350,000³.

Proponents of trophy hunting often argue that without such funds these targeted animals will not be better protected, especially in remote wilderness areas that do not enjoy the financial benefits of mass wildlife-watching tourism. For the opportunity to blast the life out of an iconic animal, trophy hunting ostensibly provides much-needed capital for anti-poaching measures, fences and wilderness protection from anthropogenic habitat encroachment. Furthermore, proponents of trophy hunting recognise the need to include local and indigenous human communities in the activity, both in the form of direct employment and wider community economic benefits. Most significantly, in response to the increasing clamour of public outcries, trophy hunting defenders caution against such emotional responses, stating that hard facts and reason should be the only factors to consider when judging the activity.⁴

This last point is where, ethically, the pro-trophy hunting argument unravels. The sole reliance on reason while at the same time ignoring the emotive responses to the practice, places trophy hunting firmly in the camp of iniquitous wrong-doers. Taken on its own, the act of destroying

the life of an endangered wild animal for fun makes no ethical sense. This explains trophy hunting's reliance on economic justification and its moniker 'necessary evil'.

Economic utilitarianism

Trophy hunting proponents base their ethical justification on the simple economic model of a Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA). Under the CBA model, trophy hunting of wild animals is supposed to have value – but it's specifically instrumental value. This approach acts impartially as it ignores individual or intrinsic values (the life of a single bull elephant) and forms into a collective preference (conservation of all elephants). CBA is not bogged down by nebulous and complex ethical notions of intrinsic value of individual lives because it favours the universal outcome over the particular. This, it is argued, is an approachable and understandable construct that is also easy to apply in practice. CBA is regarded as a win-win situation in that the funds from trophy hunting both serves to conserve overall wildlife populations as well as provide economic upliftment to impoverished local and indigenous human communities.

I will come back to the question of local and indigenous community aspect later, but for now let's consider trophy hunting as a conservation 'tool'. The benefit of the collective at the expense of an individual is a classical utilitarian/consequential one. At a foundational level, consequential utilitarianism is an 'ethic' that considers the consequences or outcomes, rather than the means of getting there. Consequential utilitarianism is the only moral framework that can be used to justify military force or war, for example. It is also the only 'ethical' means of justifying trophy hunting. The deaths of a few hundred or thousand or tens of thousands or millions of individuals is justified if a greater number can be saved.

The problem with this is that the model is that ignores essential moral considerations. The utilitarian approach closely follows Jonathan Swift's famous eighteenth-century analogy called *A Modest Proposal* (1729). In his satirical essay, Swift adopts the persona of a concerned, clinically rational economist who suggests that in order to better combat poverty and overpopulation of Ireland, the children of the poor be sold as food to the wealthy. The result, he argues, will not only reduce the population, but the income of the poor will increase significantly and raise the general standard of living.⁵ Throughout, Swift's satire relies on the persona of the economist, an ostensibly well-meaning visionary whose sympathy for the poor leads through the faculty of reason to suggest a remedy of murderous cruelty. His arguments,

rationally presented, support a profoundly irrational proposition, and their appalling callousness radically undermines their benevolent intent. The horror of such a suggestion is manifest when the intrinsic value of children's lives is removed in favour of a favourable collective outcome.

While Swift's essay is a dig at the British aristocracy at the time, and their attitudes to the poor and the Catholic Irish in particular, the same line of argument is adopted for proponents of trophy hunting, albeit theirs is not a satirical hyperbole. 'Kill to conserve' is the slogan often used by trophy hunters themselves. Like Swift's economist, who believes the killing and selling the flesh of children to the rich will solve poverty and overpopulation in Ireland, the same line of reasoning shows just how trophy hunting lacks any form moral obligation to the tens of thousands of lives of endangered individuals, even though the claim will help conserve the species.

Fundamentally, the insistence of reason over emotion leads to a complete ethical collapse. Pure reason, as philosopher David Hume once said, is ethically inert. Hume, a contemporary of Swift, maintained that ethical behaviour is, and should be, based on emotion or sentiment. Hume's words were prophetic many centuries later. The Nazi Holocaust showed just how dangerous the adherence of reason over emotion can be. The Holocaust made it clear how the role of reason and lack of emotion in planning and orchestrating human suffering on a grand and horrific scale could be achieved. The Holocaust forced post-war philosophers to reconsider their faith in reason and its ability to produce that which is universal, true and eternal. In the lead up to the Second World War, reason led to dangerous political certainties that insisted on a hierarchical dualist world of us and them. 'Them' as the 'other' in the form of powerless and vulnerable minorities. Proponents of trophy hunting, therefore, may need to be a little more careful in their thought processes and adherence to reason over emotion.

The human factor

One could argue (as many do) that the lives of human children (and human adults) carry far more ethical currency than other animals, even endangered ones. After all, humans (even immoral ones) have always been placed on a higher moral valuation than all other animals.

In philosophy, this separation of humans from other animal life forms began with Aristotle who claimed that humans are different (ergo superior and therefore worthy of more moral consideration) because humans are the only rational animals. René Descartes, took the human-animal divide to a whole new level when he effectively placed the human mind above and beyond everything animal, which included the human body. Descartes also considered all other animal life as mere automata in that non-human animals could only respond mechanically to stimuli of their surrounding objective world. This attitude is not dissimilar to trophy hunters and their apologists who regard individual animals as mere instruments to be killed, stuffed and mounted on walls or converted into rugs.

It was only in the mid-to-late twentieth century, that philosophers began to understand the ridiculousness of such hierarchical and egotistical attitudes. Peter Singer accused humans of ‘speciesism’. French thinker, Jacques Derrida, said the human insistence of placing humans on a higher moral plane than all other animals is bad philosophy: “To put all living things that aren’t human into one category is, first of all a stupid gesture – theoretically ridiculous – and partakes in the very real violence that humans exercise toward animals”.⁶ Derrida’s point is that it makes no logical sense to separate humans from all other animals just because one can cite various mental capacities that are seemingly unique to human animals. Nobel-prize winning South African author, J.M. Coetzee, expertly highlights the problem with this interpretation in his book *Elizabeth Costello* when he looks at the question of the human subject-animal object issue. Here, unsurprisingly, he evokes the Nazi Holocaust:

It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say “Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, ‘Treblinka - 100% human sterate’.⁷

Coetzee’s shocking statement here is that most humans don’t flinch for a second knowing that the lampshade is made from the skin of a piglet, or the soap made from the bones and teeth of bovines, yet if we exchange the decoration of animal skins with human ones, we experience a revulsion at the horror. Associate Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fullerton, Matthew Calarco, states that the comparison with the Nazi Holocaust obliges us “to

consider precisely the anthropocentric value hierarchy that places human life always and everywhere in a higher rank over animal life”.⁸

Many, however, may still flinch if that rug was a polar bear instead of the hide of a cow, or a lamp stool an elephant foot. The issue here, following Hume’s concept of human sentiment, is that some animals – charismatic and endangered ones like elephants and polar bears – enjoy more ethical consideration than pigs and cows. The rationale could go beyond sentimentality in that it may be that endangered animals are in greater need of protection than non-endangered ones. Nevertheless, trophy hunting proponents often highlight this problem in response to trophy hunting antagonists: that if one is going to consider the lives of endangered animals, why not all animals? Is it acceptable to slide the insuperable line down just a fraction to include some but not most animals? Many anti-trophy hunting activists have no ethical objection to eating meat and wearing leather. The point, of course, is a valid one, but that does not let trophy hunting off the hook.

While the question of where to place the insuperable line is a discussion for another time, trophy hunting still lacks a moral reaction to the violence toward endangered animals, which are seen as instrumental objects not worthy of ethical considerations. In their mindset, humans trump all other animals every time. This is why the insistence on the aspect of economically benefiting human communities in their argument. Without that rider, trophy hunting would not survive an ethical scrutiny.

Impoverished humans living with wildlife

The reason why trophy does survive an ethical enquiry, is because there is a case to be made that economic well-being for humans is in itself an ethical consideration. This is especially true if impoverished local and indigenous community livelihoods are improved, and if they are granted the right to manage and profit from natural resources. The concept behind the inclusion of humans in a wildlife economic framework is that it aims to both alleviate poverty and empower communities to manage the natural environment for their long-term economic benefits. The central idea is that local and indigenous communities living in wildlife areas will have a greater interest than a centralised, distant government or private management institutions. It is now widely accepted that local and indigenous communities have a greater understanding of, as well as vested interest in, their local environment. Hence, they are seen as

more capable of effectively conserving the natural environment through local or traditional practices. This bottom-up concept is regarded as a far more effective conservation method than the more established top-down approach.

But again, the trophy hunting economic model fails. It remains a top-down approach, or rather a top-trickle-down approach. On community-managed land in Namibia and Botswana, for example, the USD50,000 to shoot an elephant gets paid directly into the bank account of a hunting safari company, called an outfitter. The outfitter claims the lion's share of the money, typically about eighty percent of the funds, which goes to pay travel expenses, luxury lodge accommodation and food as well as a sizeable profit for the outfitter. The remaining twenty percent is given to the local community. That is paid into a community trust fund and is handled by a manager and a staff compliment of about a dozen employees. Most of those funds are used for running expenses of the community trust – vehicles and vehicle expenses, staff salaries, office and office expenses etc. This means that on average roughly USD1,000 is left remaining for the few thousand or so members of the community. If that money is handed out directly to each community member, it amounts to around a few dollars or cents per person per year (depending on the size of the community), hardly a figure that will improve the livelihoods of people. The fact that money is hardly ever paid directly to community members makes it worse. Corruption and allocation of funds to other sources ensures that most community members who are supposed to benefit never receive a cent.⁹

What if the model could be switched to a bottom-up economic approach? If members of a local community could effectively *be* the outfitter and score the bulk of the proceeds, that could potentially be a better scenario? Unfortunately, not all members of an impoverished community could be an outfitter. In reality, only one or two outfitters could operate thus only benefitting a handful while the majority remain impoverished. As trophy hunting is based solely on a utilitarian model this then fails since it guarantees the greatest happiness for the smallest number. That, of course, is not very utilitarian.

Trophy hunting is neo-colonial...and neo-apartheid

Trophy hunting is an elitist Western concept. While trophy hunting takes place in a dozen or so African countries, Africans don't trophy hunt...they never have. Neither do the Inuit in Canada's territories. Canada is the only polar bear range state that permits the trophy hunting

of polar bears. While the Inuit hunt bears based on subsistence or cultural needs, all the trophy hunters come from outside the communities, mainly wealthy white males from the United States of America. The notion of paying to kill trophy animals goes against the cultural fabric of many of these societies. Kenya banned the practice in 1977, not only because trophy hunting was decimating wildlife populations but because it was regarded as a throwback of those forgettable colonial times where European colonists wiped out great swathes of Africa's wildlife. In Kenya, elephants and lions are regarded as cultural, not commercial assets to the nation. India banned trophy hunting right after independence for the same reasons.

In countries where trophy hunting persists, the colonial mentality is still evident. One of the main justifications for trophy hunting is that it protects wilderness areas from human encroachment. This means in some countries, local and indigenous communities are blocked or removed from areas that allow trophy hunting for wealthy foreigners. In Tanzania, Maasai herders, who have occupied the Ngorogoro region for decades, have been forcibly removed from their grazing lands to make way for a trophy hunting reserve.¹⁰ In the Congo Basin, indigenous Baka have been blocked from entering newly proclaimed forest reserves. They are now regarded as poachers on land they have traditionally occupied for thousands of years.¹¹ In South Africa, conversion of agricultural land into privately-owned and fenced trophy hunting game parks has removed farm labourers from land their ancestors have always lived on.¹²

In Namibia, a different dynamic occurs. While local and indigenous communities have retained their traditional land, trophy hunting exacts a terrible toll on them in the form of neo-apartheid. Namibia was under the yoke of South Africa's apartheid laws until its independence in 1990. Since then, the country has actively encouraged trophy hunting on community land ostensibly in an effort to allow rural communities and indigenous peoples a slice of the trophy hunting pie too. The Namibian government has instructed these communities to manage their natural resources themselves, effectively removing central government's responsibility. This is done with the creation of communal conservancy areas through a process known as Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM). CBNRM areas are self-governing entities with fixed geographical boundaries. They are managed by a small committee of members, which then permits outside (white-owned) hunting operators a lease-hold to trophy hunt on the conservancy. As mentioned, around twenty percent of trophy hunting proceeds goes to the conservancy committee for distribution among community members, which turns out to be next to nothing.

Worse, most of Namibia's eighty-six community conservancies are situated on land where marginalised ethnic groups live – San, Nama, Damara, Caprivian, Kavango and Himba. Due to the de-centralised nature of the system, these minority groups have little political representation at a national level and are mostly prevented from seeking employment outside of their conservancies. The minority communities remain as poor as ever. They are expected to stay in their so-called self-governing conservancies and live off their natural resources relying on the nearly non-existent proceeds of trophy hunting. This is reminiscent of apartheid.

Beginning in 1968, homelands or 'Bantustans' were established for the different ethnic groups by the South African government in Namibia (then South-West Africa). Bantustans were areas to which the majority of the non-white population was moved to prevent them from living in the urban and profitable agricultural areas. The idea was to give the various ethnic groups of non-whites the responsibility of running their own independent governments, thus denying them protection and any remaining rights they could have in the rest of the country.

The CBNRM process is essentially the same system, only now it's the dominant ethnic group, the Ovambo, that have replaced the South Africans as overlords. It is telling that the old map of the Bantustans in Namibia almost exactly mirrors the map of CBNRM areas of the current political geography.

As with trophy hunting, apologists of colonialism and apartheid argue that it was a 'necessary evil' that brought economic benefits to its victims. This revisionism is re-emerging within a context where some conservative right-wing apologists of the former empire who try to weigh up the costs with the benefits of colonialism.¹³ Some beneficiaries of the empire based in Africa are also adopting a revisionist approach, such as Helen Zille, the white former leader of South Africa's opposition Democratic Alliance party, who caused a storm when she said that apartheid and colonialism was beneficial – by building the infrastructure and governance systems that Black Africans now use.¹⁴

This then is the same mode of thinking adopted by trophy hunters. Trophy hunting, like colonialism and apartheid, is just plain wrong, and all rational justifications conjured up to support an activity that otherwise is violent and archaic, remains ethically questionable. In light of the adherence to reason over emotion and the blind faith in economics over ethics, trophy

hunting ought to be cast on the pyre of violent wrongs of the past, along with slavery, the Nazi Holocaust and racial segregation.

¹ Polar Bears in Canada *Economic Importance* <https://www.polarbearsCanada.ca/en/polar-bears-canada/economic-importance> (Last accessed: 25/01/2024)

² Cruise A.J. (2023) *Investigation into the trophy hunting of elephants in Botswana's Community-Based Natural Resource Management areas* Journal of African Elephants <https://www.africanelephantjournal.com/investigation-into-the-trophy-hunting-of-elephants-in-botswanas-community-based-natural-resource-management-areas/> (Last accessed 25/01/2024)

³ The Guardian (2015) *Hunter pays \$350,000 to shoot black rhino: 'I believe in survival of species'* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/21/hunter-paid-225000-shoots-black-rhino-i-believe-survival-of-species> (Last accessed: 25/01/2024)

⁴ Dickman, A. & Semcer, C.E. (2020) *Saving Africa's lions will rely on evidence around trophy hunting, not emotion* The Hill <https://thehill.com/changing-america/opinion/481669-saving-africas-last-lions-will-rely-on-evidence-not-emotion/> (Last accessed: 25/01/2024)

⁵ Swift, J. (1729) *A Modest Proposal: For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden on their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick* Project Gutenberg

⁶ Derrida, Jacques (2008) *The Question of the 'Animal'* uploaded by Hiperf281 (YouTube, 18 Dec)

⁷ Coetzee, J.M. (2003) *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Seeker & Warburg)

⁸ Calarco, Matthew (2008) *Zoographies: the Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press)

⁹ Cruise A.J. (2023) *Investigation into the trophy hunting of elephants in Botswana's Community-Based Natural Resource Management areas* Journal of African Elephants <https://www.africanelephantjournal.com/investigation-into-the-trophy-hunting-of-elephants-in-botswanas-community-based-natural-resource-management-areas/> (Last accessed 25/01/2024)

¹⁰ Amnesty International (2023) *We Have Lost Everything Forced Evictions Of The Maasai In Loliondo, Tanzania* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr56/6841/2023/en/> (Last accessed: 25/01/2024)

¹¹ Vidal, J. (2020) *Large-scale human rights violations' taint Congo national park project* The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/26/you-have-stolen-our-forest-rights-of-baka-people-in-the-congo-ignored> (last accessed: 25/01/2024)

¹² Cruise A.J. (2019) *The Value of Being Wild: A Phenomenological Approach to Wildlife Conservation* University of Stellenbosch

¹³ Porter A. (1988) *A Balance sheet of Empire, 1850-1914* The Historical Journal

¹⁴ Aljazeera News (2017) *Outrage over Helen Zille's Colonialism Tweets* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/16/outrage-over-helen-zilles-colonialism-tweets> (Last accessed 25/01/2024)

