Dzoti and Namibia’s Wildlife Successes

conservationfrontlines.org/2020/01/dzoti-and-namibias-wildlife-successes/

January 1, 2020

Africa’s wildlife is rapidly declining. Legal hunting is seen by many as part of the problem. Namibia has its own story to tell. We may need to rethink some of our viewpoints.

The setting

Campfire drinks in the fading light of dusk, after a long, full day in the African bush. Animated talk about the day’s activities and diverse wildlife sightings, about conservation and the state of the world . . . Later, a superb three-course meal in the dining tent, including a perfectly grilled game fillet. Ah, the good life. The wild life . . . This is not a scene from a luxury tourist camp in a national park or some pristine “last wilderness.” This is a fond memory of one of my visits to the small and stylish Ondjou Safaris hunting camp in Namibia’s Dzoti Conservancy.

Africa’s declining wildlife—and Namibia’s difference

The media is filled with news of rapidly declining African wildlife. Calls to save the last elephants, the last rhinos, the last lions are more urgent than ever. Yet the story of “the last” should not be applied everywhere. Namibia is not part of this story.

Namibia has a different tale to tell. Through effective conservation, wildlife in this country has, over the past five decades, recovered from historic lows. Most of the country’s game populations are healthier today than at any time in the past 150 years. This is not a wild claim. It is fact, backed by a wealth of scientific data. Elephant numbers have tripled since the mid-1990s. Namibia has one of the healthiest black rhino populations on Earth. After local extinction more than a century

ago, the white rhino was reintroduced and occurs again in many places and in good numbers. The famous “desert” lions of the northwest are not “the last” but instead have increased from about two dozen in 1995 to well over a hundred today.

Yet Namibia’s effective conservation methods are controversial because they include the *persona non grata* of environmental activism: the hunter. It’s a rapidly escalating issue.

There are now close to eight billion people on Earth. Wildlands—habitat for wildlife—are a quickly shrinking resource. People need land. For homes, for agriculture, for football fields and golf courses, for dams and mines and roads and railways and power lines and rubbish dumps. Namibia is no different. While Namibia has a comparatively small human population, most of the country is arid and its soils are shallow and low in nutrients. Great swathes are covered by the sands of the Kalahari and Namib. In such an environment, large parcels of land are needed to generate a living from livestock. Cropping is viable in only a few parts of the country, where there is enough water and soils are suitable.

Yet income from one of Africa’s greatest natural resources, wildlife, offers an alternative land use through photographic tourism—and through hunting, especially in the many places where tourism isn’t viable.

Dzoti and the good bad boys

The Zambezi Region, in the north, is the wettest part of Namibia. There are extensive woodlands here, and permanent rivers with floodplains and swamps. Rainfall averages around 600 millimetres (24 inches) per annum, the highest in the country. There are also a lot more people here than in most other parts of Namibia—people with a genuine ancestral claim to the land and its resources.

Dzoti Conservancy, registered in 2009, is a little-known communal area in the Zambezi hinterlands. In an area of 287 square kilometres (71,000 acres), slightly more than 2,000 residents live on a mix of livestock, cropping, informal trading, occasional salaries, pensions and remittances—and a vital boost provided by diverse returns from legal hunting and wildlife harvesting.

In Namibia, hunting free-roaming indigenous wildlife in an open system, which generates direct income for conservation activities and rural communities, is called *conservation hunting.* It is clearly different from *trophy shooting*, which is usually carried out in fenced areas where introduced species offer easy targets and the trophy is everything. For conservation hunting, passion for intact wildlands is everything—wildlands that are maintained through hunting inputs.

Just as the diverging status of wildlife in countries with different management systems is often overlooked, the differences between trophy shooting and conservation hunting are not widely appreciated—to some people, all hunters are the

bad boys. But in Namibia's communal hunting concessions, conservation hunters are the *good* bad boys—good for local communities and for the health of their wildlife. The communities decide for themselves how to use their land and resources—whether to form a conservancy and whether to create a hunting concession. Most such communities welcome conservation hunting because it generates significant returns—and because hunting, and meat, are traditional parts of rural lives.

Ondjou Safaris and conservation hunting

Ondjou Safaris has held the Dzoti hunting concession since 2010. Up to the end of 2019, Dzoti Conservancy earned more than N$13.2 million (US$897,000) from Ondjou's hunting activities. In addition, Ondjou has provided support for a range of local development initiatives, including a school hostel (N$1.11 million), water supply infrastructure (N$473,000) and the construction of two bridges (N$40,000). Ondjou has conducted staff training and provided annual anti-poaching support (N$34,000). The meat from all hunted animals is distributed to the local community and Ondjou has helped the conservancy with their own-use quotas (i.e., harvesting surplus animals to provide meat for local festivals, etc.). And Ondjou provides a great variety of ad hoc assistance as the need arises.

Opponents of hunting like to point out that individual households in a hunting area don't benefit enough from hunting. They saddle hunting with the impossible burden of being the cure-all that will make everyone in the community wealthy. Hunting can't do that. Tourism can't, either. Few industries can. But hunting can provide enough returns to motivate landholders to set aside valuable habitat for wildlife and to keep wildlife on the land instead of eradicating it as a threat or competition to crops or livestock. Hunting is particularly important in areas where tourism potential is limited, and where subsistence farmers struggle to deal with serious damage from large wildlife such as elephant and buffalo—such as Dzoti.

Hunting revenue is the only significant income for Dzoti Conservancy. Without hunting, this conservation structure would not exist here. Between 2011 and 2018, income from harvesting devil's claw (*Harpagophytum*, an herb whose roots and tubers are used to make medicine) and other sources amounted to less than N$180,000.

Hunting income covers the salaries of 16 game guards, the conservancy manager, an accountant, a secretary, an enterprise officer and two cleaners, as well as committee allowances. In total, the conservancy reported operational expenditures of more than N$5.8 million between 2011 and 2018. The conservancy also invested just over N$3.9 million of its income into a variety of community-development initiatives during this period. These included cash benefits to conservancy members, social projects and payments to offset human-wildlife conflicts such as livestock losses and

crop damage. If there were no hunting income, there would be no conservancy: no game guards, no patrols, no mitigation of human–wildlife conflicts, no anti-poaching efforts, no core wildlife area—and certainly a lot less wildlife.

The small and stylish Ondjou Safaris hunting camp in Dzoti Conservancy. Helge Denker photo

Dzoti borders two national parks—Mudumu in the northwest and Nkasa Rupara in the southwest—and to the southeast, the Linyanti River creates the international border with Botswana. None of the boundaries are fenced. Wildlife moves freely. The two parks are small by Namibian standards (730 and 345 square kilometres, respectively; 180,400 acres and 85,250 acres). The three conservancies wedged between them—Dzoti, Wuparo and Balyerwa—act as buffer zones and wildlife movement corridors that link the parks. Other conservancies extend the linkages northward to Bwabwata National Park and beyond it to Angolan and Zambian conservation areas. The parks and the conservancies are segments in the much larger wildlife landscape (more than 200,000 square miles, or 518,000 square kilometres) of the Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area.

Nkasa Rupara is accessible via a single dirt track, which is either very dusty or very boggy, depending on the season. A lodge and a few campsites are clustered near the entrance, in neighboring Wuparo. Yet no tourism benefits spill over into Dzoti. Nkasa is not a park for high tourist volumes. It shouldn’t be—its wetland ecosystem is too fragile. In 2018, there were about 5,500 visitors.

The overlooked importance of land use

Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton recently tweeted that the way to save the planet is to become vegan. Even though he got some backlash for his personal environmental footprint as a professional racing driver, his message was clearly deeply felt and well-intended. The vegan argument is getting more and more traction among urban trendsetters. In rural realities, and particularly in African wildlands, it has fundamental flaws.

There is no doubt: Human demand for food is putting a lot of pressure on Earth's environments. The impact of the meat industry (including animal fodder production) is huge. Yet in Namibia, wildlife continues to live alongside free-ranging livestock in a healthy balance. And on a global scale, it is the vast croplands—the wheat, soy and corn fields—that are amongst the biggest destroyers of biodiversity. They not only displace wildlife, they eradicate all indigenous plant life, too. In some countries, soy plantations cover more than half of all arable land. Not much space left for wildlife there.

Globally, we need to find a better balance of land uses, one that leaves more natural habitat intact—Edward O. Wilson's Half-Earth concept. In Dzoti, and Namibia in general, this has long been the case. Cropping remains at the level of patchwork fields and gardens surrounded by healthy wildlife habitat. Namibians eat meat from free-roaming wildlife, as well as beef and mutton. Hunting areas, where habitat remains intact and all indigenous plant and animal species can thrive, provide one of the most environmentally sustainable land-use options in the country.

The conservation battle cry should be "Save the last wildlands!" Save them from logging and agriculture and other fragmenting land use, because we can't have healthy wildlife populations, or indeed a healthy planet, without healthy habitats and healthy ecosystems.

The hunter v. the poacher

A couple of months ago, in Dzoti, a man walked across open grassland with an elephant tusk slung over his shoulder as if this were nothing unusual. But in Dzoti, people know each other and they know right from wrong. Dzoti's community game guards were quickly alerted by mobile phone. They contacted the co-owner of Ondjou Safaris, Hentie van Heerden. He immediately dispatched a vehicle to take the game guards to the scene. When he heard gunshots, soon afterwards, he alerted the police and went himself to investigate. After the dust settled, sometime later, one rhino horn and one elephant tusk had been confiscated by the police. One poacher had been arrested while another had managed to flee, presumably with the second horn and tusk. Both the rhino and the elephant appeared to have been killed in neighboring Botswana.

For Dzoti, this was the most high-profile wildlife crime case this year because it involved Africa's primary poaching targets. For Hentie van Heerden, it was just one of more than a dozen cases over the past decade in which he has provided active

support to conservancy game guards and the police, usually with a positive outcome: arrested poachers.

The presence of a legal hunting operator in a conservation area has immediate positive impacts. It's not just about the income that funds the game guards; it's also about daily keen-eyed movement through the area, especially its less accessible parts. One of the most important aspects is the willingness of a hunting operator such as van Heerden to go out at any time of the day or night to investigate gunshots or other suspicious activities and to confront suspected criminals.

In Namibia's communal lands, conservancies and community game guards take over the role of wildlife custodians, which government and its rangers play in national parks. It's a highly effective system which is enabled and continually strengthened by conservation-hunting funds. Without the conservancy and the ongoing support of the hunting operator, the Dzoti community would have no benefits from wildlife, and thus no incentive to protect it. Poachers would have free rein.

A clear distinction needs to be made here: Poaching is not hunting. While conservation hunting is a legal, regulated industry, poaching is theft. It is stealing from the community, the rightful custodians of the wildlife. Poaching is indiscriminate killing with no regard for animal welfare and impacts on animal populations. Conservation hunting works for the community, which has the right to use the land for crops or livestock or to zone some of it for wildlife. Hunting and poaching can never be equated.

More than half of Namibia’s 22,000 elephants inhabit the far northeast of the country. They are an important tourist attraction, but also a significant burden for subsistence farmers. Helge Denker photo

The elephant controversy

The main target for Ondjou’s hunting clients, and the main source of income for Dzoti, is the elephant—“ondjou” means elephant in the local Herero language. Yet elephant hunting is a controversy that continues to embroil Africa. Botswana recently decided to re-open elephant hunting because the government concluded that the hunting ban (imposed in 2014) was having too many detrimental effects. Local communities had lost an important income stream that was not replaced. Human–elephant conflicts had increased. The communities most affected by the ban wanted it lifted. A misinformed international outcry has ensued, with a sad disregard for local realities and the autonomy of democratic African governance.

Namibia has allowed a limited number of elephant hunts each year for several decades, based on a system of population counts and quotas. Yet in the past 20 years, the country’s elephant numbers have increased from 7,500 to more than 22,000 and the great pachyderms have expanded their range. More than half of Namibia’s elephants are in the country’s extreme northeast. It’s a mobile population that roams freely across international borders, between Botswana and the Zambezi Region (with Nkasa Rupara and Dzoti important movement corridors) and onward into Zambia and southeastern Angola.

In Dzoti, Ondjou Safaris’ elephant quota has varied from four to five elephants each year. Over the past decade, 35 trophy elephants have been hunted in the conservancy. They have provided the bulk of conservancy income. The average ivory weight has remained consistent, and the heaviest tusk of the past 10 years (65 pounds) was obtained in 2019. Hunting has clearly not had a detrimental effect on the overall population. Instead, it has enabled Namibia’s conservancies to establish sound conservation structures that help to protect not only the elephants, but all wildlife in the area. Hunting also helps communities to deal with the daily realities of living with large, potentially destructive wildlife.

Elephants have a direct impact on the lives of rural residents. I’ve stood in the trampled fields, I’ve inspected the mangled infrastructure. I’ve also sat with the relatives of people killed by elephants. Theirs is a different reality to that of urban animal-rights activists calling for hunting bans. Most victims did not act irresponsibly towards elephants, but simply went about their daily rural lives, which include fetching water and firewood in places where elephants roam. This is a reality that an urbanite can’t readily relate to.

The moral of the story

The lion is perhaps the most sought-after wildlife sighting for tourists on safari. Yet lions are hunters. Lions are killers. They survive exclusively on meat. They kill anything from baby antelopes to sub-adult elephants—and include even the occasional human in their diet. Strange that the hunting of lions by people should cause some of the biggest outcries against hunting. Nothing has ever rocked the hunting industry, and the conservation sector, like Cecil the lion.

Will we at some point try to teach lions to become vegan, like the sabre-tooth tiger in Disney's "Ice Age," who learns not to kill? How would a world without predators, without carnivores, function? All life feeds on other life. It's a cycle that needs death; it needs carnivores. The concept of avoiding—prohibiting—all killing in an attempt to create some benign, Disneyesque world is simply not compatible with life's fundamental realities. It certainly does not provide any conservation solutions. What is needed are pragmatic approaches, a healthy balance of appropriate land and resource uses, and respect for the dignity of all living creatures.

It's easy for opponents of hunting to claim the moral high ground with statements like "How can you kill such a magnificent creature?" or the mantra "Elephants [lions, rhinos, etc.] are worth far more alive than dead." Both sentiments seem to present some moral truth. Both elicit immediate anti-hunting emotions. But such statements are simplistic and misplaced. They ignore the fundamental realities of life. These "magnificent creatures" regularly kill each other (and occasionally us) for food, in fights over females or territory, and sometimes out of some unfathomable rage.

African wildlands are harsh. Wild animals generally don't get very old. Every animal will die. That's the cycle of life. Drought and disease, predation and fighting all take their toll in the perpetual fluctuation of populations. Male lions very rarely reach 15 years of age. Most antelopes have a life span of less than 20 years. Elephants do live to more than 50 years, and as adults face no predators—except humans. This is an important reality: Homo sapiens evolved in Africa, we and our hominin forbears have been an integral part of African ecosystems for several million years.

No doubt about it: Our resourcefulness in producing ever more sophisticated weapons quickly led to the wanton destruction of wildlife. The arrival of Europeans and their guns soon drove many southern African species to the brink of extinction before 1900. But the indiscriminate shooting was stopped. Wildlife populations were rebuilt—not through strict preservationism, but through controlled, sustainable use that gave the animals a value in our money-oriented world. The white rhino is a prime example, recovering from only 20 individuals in the late 1800s to more than 20,000 in southern Africa today.

Yes, wanton shooters are still around. But they are the ugly outgrowths of an industry. They are not conservation hunters.

It is understandable that many of us can't easily reconcile calls to "save the last [lion, rhino, etc.]" on the one hand with the idea that hunters are killing some of those same animals "for fun" on the other. Yet we are confusing the death of individual animals with the health of populations. Individuals always die. But when individual animals are able to live a free life, and propagate another generation before they die, the population remains healthy.

To make hunters the bad guys is a fundamental attribution error. We are attributing the problem of wildlife declines to a perceived bad guy, rather than to the actual cause: habitat destruction by inappropriate land uses, pollution and human-induced climate change. Our crime is not eating meat, for which animals must die, it is the large-scale destruction of habitat that leaves no space for a diversity of life.

The passion of the hunter

Late into the evening, with the sounds of the African bush drifting into the dining tent, I sit talking with Hentie and his wife Denise. Their passion for wildlife and wildlands is manifest. Mention the elusive sitatunga, or the enigmatic serval, and watch Hentie's eyes light up. Not because he wants to hunt them, but because he has a genuine connection to the wild and all its creatures. Hunters may decorate their homes with the skulls and skins of their quarry, but these simply serve as tangible, authentic reminders of memorable times spent in wildlands. For someone who loves such authentica, the sight of a buffalo or kudu or bushbuck with a magnificent set of horns is undeniably stirring. Hentie recently showed me a photo of what he estimates to be a 50-inch buffalo, glimpsed in the woodlands of Dzoti—a photo to stir a hunter's heart. But that is only one part of a complex whole. Hunters love the dynamics of wildlands, where buffalo and elephant and bushbuck have space to roam, where secretive species like sitatunga can thrive . . . and where, for brief periods, the hunter can return to the rhythms of nature.

I share this passion for wildlands and wildlife; for game sightings that make the heart race, that put a smile on my face for days. Not the removed, quickly forgotten views of habituated animals from a game-drive vehicle, or from the deck of a lodge overlooking a waterhole or river—chewing breakfast while occasionally glancing over at the sitatunga skirting the edge of the reeds. No, it's the experience of being out there, out in the wild in the last light of day, on foot, in the thicket among the scratching thorns and biting insects and creepy-crawlies, finding oneself suddenly face to face with a surprised serval, that stares us down for several seconds and then slinks away . . . or knee-deep in the mud of a reed-fringed backwater when a sitatunga breaks cover, stops for a long look over its shoulder and then disappears quietly downstream.

When Dzoti Conservancy was formed, wildlife was scarce and skittish. A decade later, a wondrous transformation has taken place. Warthog and impala are once again common. Bushbuck and waterbuck are thriving. Sitatunga are regularly

encountered. Lion, leopard and serval all hunt here. Buffalo and elephant come and go in large herds. Even giraffe, which had become locally extinct in the early 1990s, are back. A series of reintroductions into Mudumu and adjoining conservancies between 2006 and 2011 have allowed them recolonize Dzoti.

The transformation is much bigger than Dzoti. It is a national recovery—one that is particularly impressive in the Zambezi Region. Tourists are enjoying great wildlife sightings in the region's national parks. But the parks are small and could not survive as islands within a sea of agricultural land uses. Through the mosaic of core wildlife areas, movement corridors and buffer zones that the conservancies create, a vast landscape of wildlife habitat can be maintained. But the conservancies depend on conservation hunting to function. If animal-rights activists succeed in banning all hunting, a proven conservation model will collapse. Wildlife will be the loser. The community will be the loser. There will be no winners.

The two opposing factions, hunters and animal-rights advocates, both passionate about wild animals, continue to argue about the right and wrong of hunting and about the best approaches to conservation. Scientists and conservation experts are choosing sides. Tourism operators are choosing sides. The communities who live with the wildlife and have a right to determine their livelihoods are all too often ignored. And people who are indifferent to the plight of wildlife simply go on cutting forests and plowing fields and building dams and mining the Earth, because they can make a living without being shamed and vilified—even as they eradicate countless indigenous animals and plants along the way.

Helge Denker is a Namibian writer–naturalist. He has worked in various sectors within the Namibian tourism and environmental spheres for three decades and has published many articles on the country's conservation issues.

Banner Image: The Cape buffalo is a threat to crop farming and cattle ranching (stringent veterinary restrictions apply to livestock that may be in contact with Cape buffalo). But the Cape buffalo is a significant source of hunting income and meat for conservancy residents. Helge Denker photo