



## Hunting trophy imports from southern Africa: A time to reconsider the roles of stakeholders in Europe and Africa?

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Nkasa Rupara National Park, Namibia (Photo credit: Derick Mwilima)

### ABSTRACT

This policy brief challenges the rationale behind the political initiatives against trophy hunting in southern Africa recently proposed by European governments. First, it questions the assumption that elephants are generally endangered. We note that large faunas are widely perceived as a threat to people and their livelihoods in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Second, it argues that trophy hunting provides significant income for rural communities, aiding local conservation and preventing poaching. Third, it examines the ethical aspects of current trophy hunting rights, highlighting the difficulty in justifying that these rights should be held by former colonising nations. Instead, it suggests hunting arrangements that benefit local communities without perpetuating neo-colonial dependencies, such as targeting regional customers and redefining the role of tourists and tourism.

### INTRODUCTION

In April 2024, Botswana's former president Mokgweetsi Masisi suggested Botswana would send 20,000 elephants to Germany, sparking global media coverage about human-wildlife relations (Bild, 2024). The president had protested against a proposition by the German Minister of the Environment - Steffi Lemke - to join an initiative that bans the importation of elephant tusks or ivories from trophy hunting. Proponents of such a ban adduced ecological and ethical reasons for their standpoint. Ecologically, European countries support the European Union's Biodiversity Strategy 2030 ambitions of protecting species vulnerable to extinction as red-listed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). African elephants were listed as endangered wildlife in 2022.



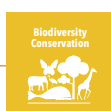
Climate Change



Food Security



Water Security

Biodiversity  
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Ethically, the argument disapproves of recreational hunting as a cruel relic of a colonial past that has no place in the modern world, and thus should not be allowed to continue. In this vein, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands have been lobbying the European Commission to impose a ban on imports of specimens from trophy hunting. In March 2024, the UK parliament passed a motion to ban the import of ivories/tusks (Ares & Kelly, 2024).

This policy brief examines the arguments behind the hunting ban proposed by the European governments in three steps. First, supported by a review of evidence, we call into question the apparent perception that elephants are a generally endangered species across southern Africa. In the main trophy-exporting countries, which include Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, complaints are mounting that large fauna are threatening human wellbeing and livelihoods. Second, we argue that trophy hunting provides a significant income to rural communities and thus a potentially powerful mechanism to pursue local conservation goals and prevent poaching. Third, we examine the possible interpretations of current trophy hunting rights from an ethical point of view. Consistent with the recent policy initiatives in Europe, we find it difficult to defend that trophy hunting rights should reside with representatives of the former colonising nations. Given that hunting fulfils legitimate economic, environmental and cultural functions, we propose pro-poor hunting arrangements that generate local benefits without the flavour of perpetuating neo-colonial dependencies by re-orienting the business, for instance, to regional customers and redefining the role of tourists and tourism.

## LEADING EXPORTERS AND IMPORTERS OF HUNTING TROPHIES

Table 1 presents exports and imports of elephant trophy specimens from top exporters in southern Africa to top importers in the West, respectively, between 2013 and 2022 – among them the countries that recently supported a ban on trophy imports. The United States was the world’s largest importer of African elephant hunting trophies, having imported 79% of the global total trophies imported. Germany followed at 11.5% and is also the largest importer of hunting trophies in Europe (Humane Society International, 2021 & 2023).

**Table 1:** Exports and imports of African elephant trophy hunting specimens between 2013-2022 (number of specimens)

Exporters	Importers						Grand Total
	Belgium	France	Germany	The Netherlands	UK	USA	
Botswana	59	54	142	0	27	2267	2549
Mozambique	26	71	56	0	7	20	180
Namibia	3	44	92	0	4	439	582
South Africa	2	42	48	6	54	691	843
Zambia	0	19	5	0	2	3	29
Zimbabwe	42	163	518	6	87	2510	3326
<b>Grand Total</b>	132	393	861	12	181	5930	7509

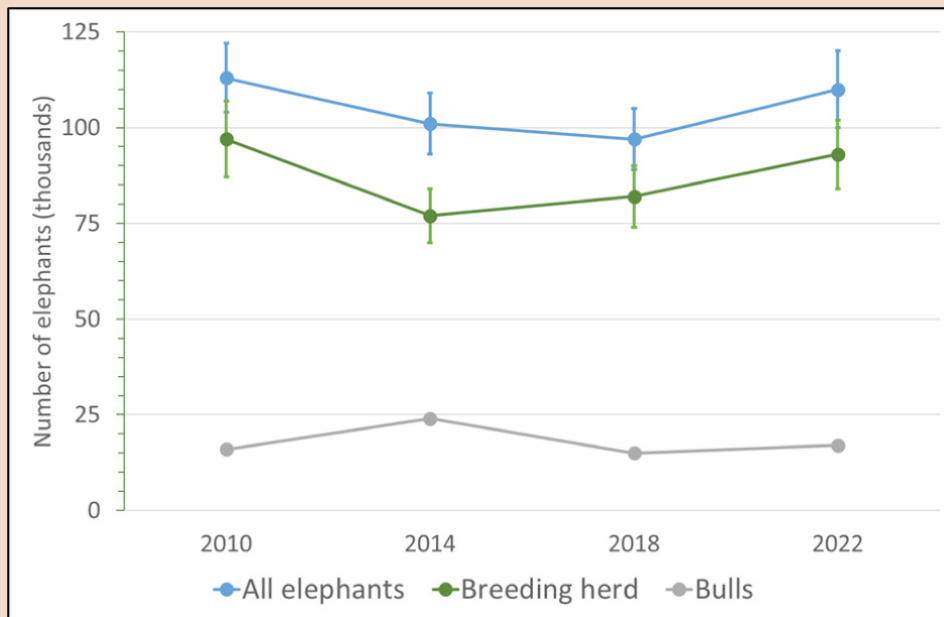
**Source:** Data from CITES Wildlife Tradeview (2022) (<https://tradeview.cites.org>)

## HOW ENDANGERED ARE THE ELEPHANTS REALLY?

Many Europeans appear to hold the view that trophy hunting is unethical and runs counter to wildlife conservation. The idea of killing wildlife for fun, most especially for the public, seems cruel and irreconcilable with conservation goals since the popular understanding is that most wildlife species are in critical danger of extinction. In fact, the situation is different in different countries and for different species, such that in some contexts, trophy hunting is an important strategy for ensuring ecological balance and for funding wildlife conservation efforts.

In southern Africa, CITES (2022) categorises elephants as critically endangered in Mozambique and Zambia. Nonetheless, the species is not endangered in the other countries exporting hunting trophies from southern Africa. As a way to reduce the population of elephants, Botswana has in the past donated elephants to its neighbouring countries such as Angola and Mozambique, which, however, had little effect on bringing down the numbers. Communities surrounding national parks and game reserves in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe complain about increasing conflicts between humans and elephants due to growing elephant populations, validating a wildlife protection success story (Lawal, 2024). Where elephants are not endangered, they are proving to be a danger to human life and property.

While the exact number of elephants in the region is unknown, a 2022 Elephants Without Borders survey found that the Kavango-Zambezi Trans-Frontier Conservation Area (KAZA) hosts about 228,000 savanna elephants, which is the world's largest population (EWB, 2024). The survey indicated a 1.2% annual growth rate from 2014 to 2022. Figure 1 presents the estimated elephant population size in northern Botswana, home to the world's largest population (about a third) in the period 2010-2022. EWB (2024) found that the changes over time have been statistically insignificant since 2014. A population of 125,000 elephants if not limited by food and other density-dependent factors, has the potential to grow at least at five percent per annum, meaning that it can produce 6250 new calves each year. Considering that at most 400 elephants are on trophy hunting quota each year, it becomes starkly apparent that trophy hunting is far from being a threat to the elephant population in Botswana. What the numbers don't show are the severe impacts on local communities, including crop depredation, property damage, and human fatalities (Noga et al., 2018).



**Figure 1:** Estimated elephant population ( $\pm 1$  SE), northern Botswana 2010-2022 (Source: EWB, 2024).

## TROPHY HUNTING STRENGTHENS LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THUS ENABLES REGULATED CONSERVATION

Many community conservation programs depend on the income from trophy hunting. In addition, the meat from hunted animals provides a highly valued source of protein, where many of these communities are too poor to purchase meat regularly, hence hunted meat is very important and cannot be provided by photographic tourism. Banning it would, therefore, disenfranchise communities in their vital roles in conservation and restrict them in their livelihoods. In Namibia, revenue sharing of a 14-day elephant hunting expedition revealed that on average, 30% of the income went to communities, including staff salaries, investments in local infrastructure, and meat, and another 19% to communal conservancies (Kalvelage et al., 2023). Clearly, travel bans during the COVID-19 crisis exposed how much community conservation depends on incomes from international tourists (Lüder & Kalvelage 2023). Conservancies in Namibia relied on donor funding to sustain themselves, especially by keeping

game guards in employment. Donor funding was a stop-gap measure, which proved to be insufficient for conservancies to carry out their mandates of wildlife protection, employment creation, and development projects.

Without community involvement, many unintended consequences of conservation will be witnessed in communal areas, in particular through the rise of illegal poaching (Child et al., 2023). However, local communities have the ability to combat poaching only if they benefit from conservation and have ownership and decision-making rights over conservation areas (Fynn & Kolawole, 2020). There is now a large body of theory and empirical evidence that local communities can more effectively conserve wildlife than state conservation agencies if they have good benefits from conservation and local decision-making rights (Lewis et al., 1990; Dawson et al., 2021).

Some commentators propose photographic tourism as an alternative to trophy hunting. However, in many areas where communities reside, the scenery is not suitable for high-income photographic tourism and trophy hunting is the only viable way that local communities can benefit from conservation (Child et al., 2023). For example, communities such as Tsau, Habu, Nokaneng, Gumare, Etsha, Chi Chi and others, located on the western side of the Okavango Delta, do not have any access to wildlife concessions and can only benefit from trophy hunting of elephant in the dry woodlands where they are located. Phudukudu village near Makgadikgadi Pans derives all its income from trophy hunting as

tourism potential is very low in its dry sandy woodlands. Allowing a well-planned and sustained trophy hunting would grant local communities a stake in conservation and encourage the people to live convivially with the elephants and wildlife. As human and elephant populations grow in southern Africa, the clash between the two species for scarce resources will deepen, and an instinct of survival of the fittest will kick in. An economic incentive to conserve wildlife in countries doing trophy hunting has the potential to ensure the continued survival of both the local communities and the elephant population.

## HUNTING RIGHTS FOR WHOM?

Until recently, trophy hunting in Namibia and Botswana used to take place in areas where people had hunted in addition to farming and herding cattle for their subsistence (Huntley, 2023). Hunting is an important part of the local people's culture and cultural heritage. However, strict hunting restrictions have forced them to change their ways of life considerably. The indigenous Khwe San, who are primarily hunter-gatherers, have been the most affected (Heim & Pyhälä, 2020). While the hunting restrictions strive to keep the population of large savannah fauna alive and healthy, people's cohabitation with these healthy wildlife populations exposes them to threats in their economic livelihoods, cultural heritage, and personal safety.

While trophy hunting can be depicted as a tool empowering rural populations cohabiting with wildlife and compensating them for the costs of this cohabitation (Child et al., 2023), trophy hunting can also be seen as a mere payment for ecosystem services (Sullivan, 2023). Trophy hunting

is a way of redistributing money from Europeans to communities for conservation. If European countries have stakes in the conservation of these large mammal populations, then they should pay. Supporting the market for trophy hunting is one way to do so.

Parallel to this seemingly ethic-free monetary exchange depiction, trophy hunting is embedded in the post-colonial discourse. Trophy hunting appears culturally as a remnant of colonial domination associated with privileges, here hunting privileges. Ethically, the image of a white man going on a hunting Safari with a group of local guides, and who is exclusively privileged to shoot an elephant, and then return to Europe with a trophy head at the expense of the local population who is restricted from hunting but can only have the elephant meat is now considered highly questionable. If hunting elephants is a privilege, then why should it be an exclusive right of the European or Westerner?

## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: POST-COLONIAL IDENTITIES OF THE HUNTING STAKEHOLDERS

Imagine that the ban on trophy hunting proposed by stakeholders in the Global North expresses their honest desire to change the current relationship with local communities in southern Africa. Just imagine a scenario that all stakeholders including the powerful African elite and their Western counterparts wish to move beyond a relationship that is structured by colonial legacies and economic dominance. Visualise a process in which all parties agree that the conservation and hunting of large fauna are concomitantly necessary and societally desirable. Then it is time to address the issue of trophy hunting

from the perspectives of local communities, vis à vis the domineering effect of the powerful insider elite, and their European collaborators who do not want to identify with hunting. This might create an opportunity to genuinely redefine, inter alia, the conservation relationships existing between different stakeholders in wildlife management. Given the extremely unequal distribution of the costs and benefits from conservation among external and local stakeholders, this will require considerable effort to achieve.

Perhaps it is now the right time for southern African stakeholders operating in the tourism sector to engage in self-reflections on whether they perpetuate colonial patterns in tourism activities. It is indeed necessary to evaluate the appropriateness of ceding trophy hunting to the elites in southern Africa or allowing indigenous communities to provide leadership in the administration of trophy hunting in their areas. In other words, trophy

hunting must be discussed in its entirety from an ethical standpoint by both parties. We are convinced that a holistic hunting approach could be an ethical strategy for managing wildlife populations while sharing conservation costs between Europe and Africa. However, this will require redefining the actors' identities and ethics of exchange.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

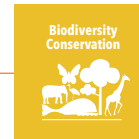
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