

Hunting For Conservation?

Hunting wildlife in the tropics and subtropics.

Fa, J.E., S.M. Funk, & R. Nasi., 2022. Cambridge, 436 pp. £39.99. This open access book can also be read online at <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316338704>

Trophy hunting.

Bichel, N., & A. Hart, 2023. Springer, 386 pp. £32.99

It would be difficult to read two more different books on hunting and its contributions (or otherwise) to conservation and sustainability.

Hunting Wildlife in the Tropics and Subtropics provides an exceptionally detailed overview of hunting for subsistence and income by local and Indigenous people throughout the tropical regions. This wide-ranging review is combined with an equally thorough discussion of different approaches to the quantitative assessment of sustainability. The tropical contexts of their research are often marred by defaunation with “cascading effects on animal and plant community structure and ecosystem functioning”. The authors’ intention throughout is toward “radically reconstructing a new paradigm for a sustainable and culturally respectful wild meat sector”. This new paradigm focuses on how to design “effective policies on sustainable wild meat use” such that wild meat supply can be maintained while demand is reduced to sustainable levels. To further this effort, the authors draw on their own extensive field-based research on hunting levels and sustainability assessments, providing an exhaustive summary of diverse hunting studies in the tropics and subtropics.

Trophy Hunting considers relationships between the trophy hunting industry and wildlife conservation. This book is based on Bichel’s thesis for a PhD in environmental philosophy at the University of Hong Kong (*Comprehending Trophy Hunting: Hunting, Hunters, Trophies and Antis*), for which Hart was an examiner. The text provides an equally detailed review of literature and structures related to the international trophy hunting industry, but less field-based ecological research by the authors. Nonetheless, the book was recently named as the Marsh Ecology Book of the Year by the British Ecological Society.

Conservation

Core to both books is the issue of how current hunting practice may affect conservation and sustainability. The emphasis in *Hunting Wildlife in the Tropics and Subtropics* is on the rights of people dependent on wild meat as sources of protein, focusing on supporting local harvesting while ensuring sustainability. As the authors note, this is a very difficult balance to achieve. Rising demand for wild meat in urban markets and from diaspora consumers farther afield, alongside expanded access to previously remote animal populations through road building, contributes to unsustainable harvesting in many places in the



tropics. Distressingly from an animal welfare perspective the use of snares is widespread, although firearms are increasingly deployed. At the same time, relationships between social exclusion, expulsion of people from land, and a heightened connection between urban wealth and wild meat consumption, are amplifying demand. This set of circumstances frequently drives illegal hunting and wildlife crime.

In contrast, *Trophy Hunting* focuses on external access to land dedicated to trophy hunting, partly on the principle that the income thereby generated sustains the conservation of habitats and wildlife populations. One success story celebrated in this text is the increase in numbers of black and white rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis* and *Ceratotherium simum*) on private lands in southern Africa. For white rhinoceros the authors assert that this increase is “thanks in large part to trophy hunting and the incentives it offered to landowners and reserves to take on rhinos”. Significant

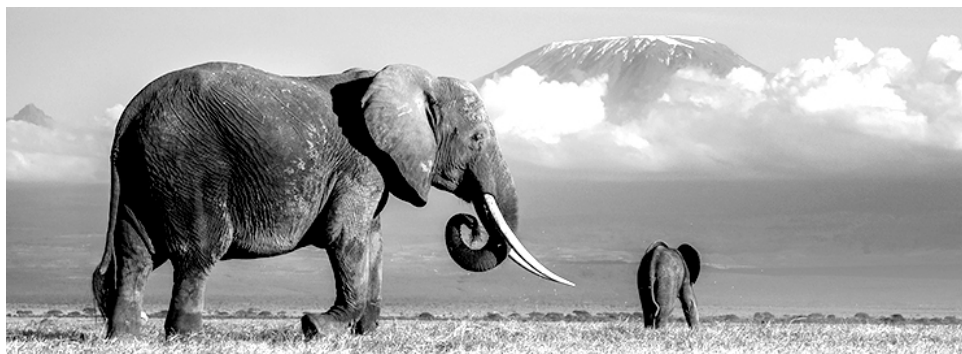
complexity, however, often underlies such trends. It is true that rhinoceros populations increased after limited trophy hunting was permitted for each species in 2004 and 1968 respectively, but this correlation does not necessarily equate with causation. In these same years, intense conservation efforts expanded the distribution of these endangered and threatened species, improved conservation management, and enhanced patrolling and security of rhinoceros-inhabited areas. As the manager for Namibia’s Black Rhino Custodianship Program writes, “the scale of program costs versus the potential for recovery through hunting is a considerable challenge and other means of creating revenue must be explored”.

A particularly timely focus of *Hunting Wildlife in the Tropics and Subtropics* is on accelerating risk factors for the emergence of zoonotic disease, a concern highlighted by the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its possible links with wet markets where live wild animals are sold. The figures recounted are alarming, with about one new disease being detected a year. More successful regulation of live and butchered wild meat is clearly needed to reduce future disease risk. At the same time, Fa *et al.* are clear about the difficulties of enforcing such regulation, given potential consequences for the food security of rural communities and Indigenous peoples who have “hunted for millennia”.

While some mention of zoonotic diseases is also made in *Trophy Hunting*, much of the detail in this text comprises overviews of the measurement and awards systems run by hunting clubs worldwide, of CITES and other trophy trade regulations, and of the motivations and ethics of trophy hunters. These comprehensive reviews are extremely informative in terms of clarifying the values and guidelines shaping and supporting the global hunting industry. For Bichel and Hart, a major justification

The Amboseli elephants, known for their huge tusks, are part of a population which has been studied continuously for over 50 years. They range freely across the border between Kenya (which bans trophy hunting) and Tanzania, which last year allowed five mature males to be shot by trophy hunters.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adq9074>



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for trophy hunting is that income and meat from the industry may be distributed to local and Indigenous communities and constitute incentives for conservation. They additionally affirm that in some contexts, habitats and lands set aside for access by trophy hunters would effectively be lost to conservation without this option. Specific cases to support these points are varied, however. Some research shows declining numbers of key trophy species in hunting areas and argues that trophy hunting is “a weak incentive-based conservation scheme, which is based on an inefficient business model and on a questionable governance”. Industry revenue also tends to be consolidated among investors, land owners, and professional operators through structures that are often strongly racialised, leading to accusations of “green whiteness” toward protagonists of the environmental benefits of this intractably unequal industry, especially in the Global South.

Economics

Bichel and Hart’s rather neutralising definition of trophy hunting as “any hunting of a nonhuman animal where part of the animal is kept for personal display purposes and souvenir” risks forgetting the particular economic structures the trophy hunting industry upholds, and the lingering class and colonial legacies in which it is embedded. The industry relies on structures of commodification and accumulation that tend to benefit elite investors, operators and consumers, amplifying social exclusion through displacement from land sequestered as game farms or licensed for trophy hunting. A question here, then, is how sustainable these conservation structures are, given their consolidation of a powder keg of inequality.

Bichel and Hart focus less on these industry structures, but go hard on analysis of mostly anonymous Twitter/X comments by animal rights activists (ARAs), positioning “activist antihunters” as akin to football hooligans. A particular emphasis in *Trophy Hunting* is on misinformation promulgated by those campaigning against the industry, the authors’ position being that “pro-hunting misinformation is less of a concern than antihunting misinformation”. In emphasising this pushback against ARAs, the authors minimise engagement with academic research raising concerns about inequalities built into the industry or the reduced “social license to hunt” linked with changing societal perceptions of trophy hunting legitimacy, particularly when apex predators or endangered species are concerned.

Local Voices

One dimension missing from both books comprises the voices and perspectives of local and Indigenous hunters and hunting industry workers. Fa *et al.* review debates from the 1990s regarding the so-called ecologically noble savage, affirming a perspective that wild meat hunters themselves do not necessarily

conceive their hunting practices in terms of conservation or sustainability. More acknowledgment of the cultural meanings and values with which wild meat hunting is imbued might instead show that in some contexts sustainability thinking, as well as acknowledged relational connections with hunted animals, are very much part of these meanings. Bichel and Hart provide an extensive historical discussion on the acquisition of a trophy through primarily elite hunting practices, linking these souvenirs somewhat tenuously with human head hunting and scalping by subsistence hunters. Beyond a single narrative early in the book, there is little original content on how contemporary hunters, or the workers on which the trophy hunting industry relies, articulate the experience and meanings of trophy hunting. I likewise missed more recent theoretical engagements from the domains of animal studies and multispecies ethnography. These contributions would have helped problematise statements such as this one from *Trophy Hunting* that “[t]o the animal, the only thing that matters is that it dies as quickly and painlessly as possible.” Well, no – the animal wants to live.

Overall, *Hunting Wildlife in the Tropics and Subtropics* aims “to secure wildlife and food security for the benefit of biodiversity and humans” amid severe constraints posed by ecological determinants of wild animal numbers, land-use change, rising demand, and possible zoonotic disease transmission through wild meat processing and wet markets. *Trophy Hunting* reads almost as a manifesto for elite recreational hunting, albeit with important caveats, such as its stringent critique of canned lion hunting and its acerbic engagement with gendered and often misogynistic attitudes in the industry.

Both books are written against the backdrop of a litany of losses, from habitat degradation to defaunation through varied hunting practices. As predicted by one of conservation biology’s core theoretical tenets, these circumstances imply further ‘relaxation to equilibrium’, suggesting the future is predisposed toward population and species declines of hunted animals, with consequences for their habitats. The current pace of environmental and climate change warrants precaution in the hunting of animals globally. It also calls for more generous reflection on how relationships between privilege and access, combined with multiple pressures on wildlife species, may provoke societal frustration with the practice of conserving large areas of habitat for ‘sport’ hunting.

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The original fully referenced version of this review was published in the journal Conservation Biology, and is freely available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14258>. For more on this topic, see The Land, issue 31: ‘Hunting Africa’: Trophy Hunting, Neocolonialism and Land.’