

“Elephant hunting does not help species conservation” – A Rebuttal

Terra X - the knowledge column of 28th April carried a story with a heading “*Elephant hunting does not help species conservation*” authored by Mona Schweizer. This article seems to suggest that the move by the Botswana Government to allow elephant hunting does not help species conservation in Botswana hence should not be allowed. This narrative is misleading and a distraction when considering the elephant population, the need for wildlife conservation, improved rural livelihoods and human wildlife conflict mitigation in Botswana. My argument is informed by the following:

1. ***A Strong Wildlife Legislative Framework*** - Botswana has a strong wildlife legislative framework governing wildlife conservation and protection which this article ignores. Botswana’s legislation include: the Wildlife Conservation Policy of 2013, Tourism Policy of 2021, CBNRM Policy of 2007, Wildlife Conservation and National Parks Act of 1992 and an effective institutional approach in the form of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, the Botswana Defence Force Anti-Poaching unit etc. This legislative and institutional framework has resulted in Botswana sustaining a healthy elephant population in the last 40 years.
2. ***Large Areas of Land reserved for wildlife areas***- The Article also fails to appreciate efforts made by Botswana to achieve conservation as the country has set aside over 40% of its land for wildlife conservation. That is, a total of 17% of Botswana’s surface area is designated as National Parks and Game Reserves. An additional 22% of Botswana’s land is designated as Wildlife Management Areas while 1% is designated as forest reserves. In total, Botswana has reserved above 40% of its land reserved for wildlife conservation. I do not know of any country in the world which has designated over 40% of its land for wildlife conservation.
3. ***A Healthy Elephant Populations*** - Because of these conservation practices in Botswana, the elephant population in Botswana has continued to expand in the last 40 years. That is, in 1984, Botswana had an estimated population of 40,000 to 60,000 elephants. In 2012, Chase (2012) reported that the numbers had escalated to 130,000 elephants. The KAZA Elephant Survey of 2022 reported that 58% or 132 182 of 227900 (± 16743) elephants in the KAZA TFCA survey area were in Botswana. These numbers of elephants are those which are found in an area designated as KAZA. However, there is an estimated 40,000 elephants that are in Botswana but outside the KAZA area in places such as those in Tuli Block in Eastern Botswana, Central Kalahari Game Reserve, and other central parts of Botswana. If all these numbers are added, Botswana is likely to be having over 152,000 elephants. Mona Schweizer writes: “*Botswana is considered a country with too many elephants*”. This statement is true considering the elephant numbers which now roam every part of the country searching for food and water even far away from their habitat range. In this regard, the article overlooks the fact that elephant numbers in Botswana in the last four decades remained healthy because the strong conservation legislation and institutional framework the country has. Elephant numbers escalated even though trophy hunting was undertaken expect between 2014 and 2019 when hunting was suspended.

Mona Schweizer fails to appreciate that communities living in wildlife areas of Botswana are confronted with human elephant conflicts which often result in the following: Crop damage by elephants, damage of livestock watering infrastructure by elephants, human injuries and at times death caused by elephants. In 2022 -23 financial year, a total of 11,938 cases of human wildlife conflicts were reported in Botswana. It is also estimated that a total of 80 people were injured and 57 were killed by the wildlife between the years 2009 and 2019. There is no government in the world which can ignore damaged by wild animals especially when its people are killed by wildlife. As a result, is in some areas known as human wildlife conflict hotspots especially in crop fields, elephant hunting is used as a mitigation measure against these conflicts. If not managed well, human elephant conflicts can have far-reaching negative consequences on elephant populations, undermine conservation efforts and negatively impact the livelihoods and well-being of communities living in wildlife areas.

While the African elephant is on the decline, the Botswana elephant is not. Mona Schweizer argues that “*an increase in poaching, drought, and disease*” contributes to elephant decline. These factors have so far had not affected the elephant population in Botswana. Therefore, it’s a misconception to claim that elephant hunting in Botswana is destructive and uncontrolled. This misconception contributes to the misinformation entertained by most western media. The misinformation is informed by literature from Animal Rights Groups and the unethical research conducted by “animal lovers” who in most cases do not have firsthand information and the reality of elephant hunting in Botswana. However, I would like to correct the misconception and state that elephant hunting in Botswana is controlled and undertaken guided by the following:

- a. **Hunting Quota** – the Botswana Government determines an elephant hunting which is decided based on existing ariel surveys of healthy species. In this regard, elephant hunting in Botswana is done based on hunting quotas allowed by government.
- b. **Observing CITES Requirements** - Botswana is allowed by CITES to harvest 400 elephants annually and elephants are in Appendix II. Botswana has never exceeded 400 quota when allocating hunting quotas to hunters or communities involved in trophy hunting in Botswana. In addition, Botswana always complies with all the CITES paperwork and approvals before any hunting can take place. In addition, the 400 elephant figure is insignificant and has not been proven to contribute to elephant decline nor does it indicate that elephant species in Botswana are in danger.
- c. **Selective hunting** – elephant hunting in Botswana is selective since it targets old bulls which are no longer productive. Breeding females and young animals are not hunting;
- d. **Buffer and Marginal Areas** - Trophy hunting in Botswana is carried out in marginal areas which otherwise not profitable for photographic tourism. These marginal areas are peripheral and do not attract photo tourists. They also act as buffer zones between human settlements and wildlife areas;

Based on the above consideration, it can be argued that Botswana has measures in place designed to achieve sustainable wildlife conservation in the country. Botswana acknowledges that elephant hunting is a land use option that supports conservation. In this regard, elephant hunting is carried out in marginal and peripheral areas while photographic is carried out in prime areas. These two land use options complement each other and support the sustainable use of wildlife resources in Botswana.

Banning of elephant hunting may be detrimental to conservation if we consider the experience from three case studies on what happens to wildlife conservation when a trophy hunting Ban was effected in an areas. These experiences include the following:

- a. **Trophy Hunting Ban in Kenya** - Kenya banned hunting in 1977. Between 1977 and 1996, Kenya experienced a 40% decline in wildlife populations, both within and outside of its national parks (Scott, 2013). Kenya's wildlife numbers have continued to fall with wildlife numbers today being less than half of that which existed before the ban (Scott, 2013). Therefore, a ban on hunting does not necessarily halt decline in wildlife populations, instead it can escalates it.
- b. **Trophy Hunting Ban in the Luangwa Valley, Zambia** - Lewis et al (1990) argues that in the lessons in Zambia that sought to halt the drastic loss of elephants and rhinos to poaching in and around protected areas in the Luangwa Valley indicates that the key things that brought in community benefits from wildlife were (1) Trophy hunting, (2) meat from hippo quotas to the community, and (3) employment as community scouts. When communities in the Luangwa Valley were benefiting from wildlife resources through their community project, consequences were a tenfold reduction in rhino and elephant poaching and improved attitudes to conservation. Chiefs in the area instructed their people to report any suspicious people in the area. This was an amazing success story. However, when Government banned trophy hunting in this area, the

whole community project collapsed because of this ban on trophy hunting. The consequences were that rhino and elephant population were extirpated in the Luangwa valley.

- c. **Increased wildlife poaching in Botswana (2014-2019)** – The hunting ban or suspension in Botswana between 2014 and 2019 resulted in increased poaching and human wildlife conflicts. For example, in 2014, there were 2,500 cases reported, by 2018, such cases had increased to 7500 and to 11,938 cases by 2022. Research has established that the hunting ban this period resulted in increased incidents of crop damage by wildlife, livestock predation, reduced benefits from wildlife by communities, increased negative attitudes by rural communities towards wildlife conservation. The lack of benefit from wildlife by communities laid down the foundation for poaching and indiscriminate wildlife killings (e.g. through wildlife poisoning). Better put, lack of benefits from wildlife resulted in increased incidents of poaching in Ngamiland, Chobe and Boteti. It was inconceivable that 4000 wild animals were being harvested illegally each year in Ngamiland District, and that 620,000 kg of bush meat was harvested annually from the Okavango Delta (Rogan et al. 2017). This was not good for the conservation of wildlife resources and tourism development.

The above case studies indicate that if hunting is banned in a country and communities fail to derive meaningful benefits from elephants, they will not be obliged to conserve those hence poaching will increase. Finally, it should be noted that trophy hunting is a management/conservation tool when applied appropriately with the knowledge of wildlife populations. Conversely, poor science, including misinformation in decision making and policy development may result in devastating results in elephant populations. I am therefore noting that Mona Schweizer's article is misinformed and has potential to mislead the world on elephant conservation and hunting in Botswana.

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