

Cheltenham, Oxford, Montana, April 9th, 2021

Dear Mr. Habeck, Ms. Baerbock and Ms. Lemke,

In 2019 we, and more than 130 other scientists and conservationists around the world, signed a letter published in the internationally renowned journal *Science* entitled “Trophy hunting bans imperil biodiversity”¹. Nothing has happened since the publication of that letter to change the balance of evidence that strongly suggests that blanket bans, including import bans, imposed by the developed world risk significant negative effects on conservation, largely felt in the developing world.

Much of the public and media debate on this topic is heavily simplified, highly partisan and reveals very little knowledge of understanding of the complexities of real-world conservation. The primary threat for most of the iconic wildlife associated with African trophy hunting is habitat loss, coupled with illegal hunting through cruel and indiscriminate methods including snaring, poisoning and hunting with dogs. Despite scrutinising this issue carefully as independent scientists, we cannot find a single species threatened by regulated hunting. In fact, many species have regulated trophy hunting specifically identified by the IUCN as a conservation tool.

Hunting is a land-use that gives value to wildlife and in so-doing acts to protect habitat that, in southern Africa alone, extends to more than 1.5 million square miles². For many of these areas, there is no better wildlife-based alternatives: already, photo-tourism does not generate sufficient revenue to effectively protect National Parks in Africa, and would not be profitable in most hunting areas³. Therefore, if hunting was removed, the most likely option for many areas is conversion to non-wildlife based land uses such as agriculture, timber extraction, settlement and mining. In all these cases, levels of wildlife killing and biodiversity loss would far outstrip the numbers of animals killed in trophy hunting. This kind of habitat loss is also increasingly recognized to increase the risk of zoonotic diseases spilling over into our civilization. In the absence of legal hunting giving value to wildlife, we can expect a large increase in illegal off-take (poaching) for meat and pre-emptive or retaliatory killing of dangerous species such as large carnivores and elephants. These are not theoretical risks: habitat loss, wildlife declines and increased poaching are well-documented in areas where hunting has been banned (notably Kenya, which has seen a ca. 70% decline in wildlife over 40 years⁴) or suspended (Botswana⁵).

We have investigated the narratives put forward by groups and individuals seeking bans and the relevant media coverage, and found significant falsehoods being perpetuated^{6,7}. As well as suggesting trophy hunting is threatening species with extinction (categorically untrue) they also suggest that hunting contributes nothing to conservation. This is simply incorrect. Of the five top countries in the world for megafauna conservation, four are in southern Africa and have hunting as a core feature of their conservation strategy⁸. Finally, groups seeking bans push forward the fact that, at best, just 3% of revenues go to local communities. This figure, widely repeated, is based on a misreading of a report citing a paper based on revenue dispersal in one location in Tanzania. In fact, that report shows that at least 56% of revenues are distributed locally or nationally and a sizeable proportion of the remainder is likely to remain in-country⁹. A comprehensive report this year by the African Leadership University showed that for key African countries using trophy hunting, the community share of fees ranged from 20 – 100%¹⁰. Of course, there is room for improvement, better regulation and oversight, and this applies to both photo tourism and trophy hunting: improvements need to be targeted and specific to deliver positive outcomes.

Disapproval of hunting by individuals living in countries far away, where remaining wildlife is usually confined to heavily protected areas, ignores the realities of those living on the ground with wildlife in countries that use hunting as part of their successful conservation toolkit. Experience teaches us that wildlife-friendly solutions do not magically materialise when hunting is removed. As clearly recommended by the IUCN¹¹, working alternatives must be in place and agreed locally before hunting and its revenue is removed, and credible alternatives simply don't currently exist at the scale required. Banning hunting without any Plan B is an especially reckless approach to conservation, but to do so based on misinformation and misunderstanding is unforgivable. We would urge you to put evidence before emotion, and science before sentiment in this matter. Once wildlife habitat is lost, it is lost for good.

Professor Adam Hart University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK

Dr Amy Dickman, WildCRU University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Catherine Semcer, Property and Environment Research Centre, Montana, USA

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