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# WILDLIFE POLICY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: *Why not crop the game?*

by Dr Brian Child



**T**he key to the recovery of wildlife in southern Africa is not technical or ecological, but carefully crafted legal changes that address 'market failure' by returning the ownership and value of wildlife to landholders. In this article, I would like to give credit to some of the far-sighted conservationists who challenged conservation dogma to lead southern Africa down a bold new policy pathway.

Africa is the only place on earth with five, and as many as 15, large mammals in any one place. However, there is a significant danger that these will be lost in the near future, as Africa's human population doubles to two billion people, unless radical changes are made.

Since the 1970s, West Africa has

lost 80% of the wildlife in its national parks, and even more outside. East Africa has lost half the wildlife in its parks, and some 70% outside them. By contrast, southern African parks have maintained or even slightly increased their wildlife, and after wildlife was nearly annihilated on private land by the 1960s, it has rebounded at least fivefold.

While many factors may be at play, the clear fact is that species of plants and animals that are owned (like cattle and crops) replace species that are not owned (like wildlife). It is only in southern Africa that a deliberate attempt has been made to return the ownership of wildlife to landholders and communities, and it is only in southern Africa that wildlife is thriving. By ownership we mean the rights to sell, use, benefit from, and protect wildlife.

As white people discovered and settled in North America and Africa, on the frontier of the Industrial Revolution, they decimated the wildlife. Better technology (guns) and markets (trains, steamships), in the absence of government controls on offtake, enabled them to harvest vast numbers of bison, elephant, egret feathers and other wildlife on the frontier of white settlement.

Shocked by the devastation of uncontrolled market hunting, President Teddy Roosevelt and his colleagues in America banned the commercial use of wildlife, shifted the control of forests and wildlife to newly emerging state wildlife agencies, and established national parks.

The European colonial powers, meeting at the London Conventions of 1900 and 1933, did very much the same – they effectively nationalised



RHINOCEROS AND HUNTER IN THE SAVANNAH, OLD ILLUSTRATION.

OLD ILLUSTRATION OF EXPLORER JOHN SPEKE SHOWING HUNTING TROPHIES TO RUMANIKA.



wildlife; a legacy (and curse) that we live with today.

What these early policy-makers ignored was that an equal or greater threat to wildlife was replacement by the cow and the plough, driven by human population growth that began in earnest across Africa following World War II. In the 1950s, scientists began to make the case that wildlife was hardier, more disease resistant and better suited to harsh African conditions, such as drought, than livestock. Much of this pioneering conservation work was conducted in East Africa, with people like George Adamson and Ian Parker advocating what we would today call community conservation.

The winds of change began to sweep through Africa, and leading conservationists from across the continent met in Arusha to chart a new course for African wildlife. The mood of the 'Convention of Nature and Natural Resources in Modern African States' was captured by a South African, Rudi Bigalke: "The indigenous mammals had evolved in the country and were well-adapted to local conditions. Every available food niche was occupied... Domestic animals were ruining the country. *Why not crop the game?*"

This was a reaction to the rapid loss of wildlife on production landscapes. In Zimbabwe, ranchers claimed that they "couldn't farm in a zoo". Elephant and buffalo were deliberately

eradicated by government hunters, while ranchers shot hundreds of wildebeest and zebra to protect grazing for livestock, and the highest value for wildlife was for staff rations or dog meat because selling the meat was illegal.

This waste appalled Reay Smithers of *Mammals of Southern Africa* fame. Using the new and far-sighted Zimbabwe Wildlife Act of 1960 that allowed game cropping through government permits, he invited three Fulbright Scholars from the University of Berkeley to experiment with wildlife utilisation and game cropping. Ray Dasmann, Archie Mossman and Thane Riney therefore began experimenting with game cropping on Doddieburn and Manyoli ranches in southern Zimbabwe, with Riney going on to lead the FAO/ UNDP special project that aimed to establish wildlife as an industry in Africa in the mid-1960s.

Motivated by the rapid disappearance of wildlife, the heads of wildlife agencies from across southern Africa began to meet for a week each year as the 'Standing Committee for Nature Conservation, Wildlife Utilisation and Management' under the umbrella of Southern African Regional Commission for the Conservation and Utilisation of the Soil (SARCCUS).

Today, we owe a great deal to these far-sighted wildlife professionals who were confident

enough to entrust landholders with the economic control of wildlife on their land. In 1967, Bernabie de la Butte radically altered Namibia's wildlife ordinances to introduce commercial use and partial ownership of wildlife. Similar changes happened in Mozambique (led by Ken Tinley), Botswana (Alex Campbell, Graham Child) and less explicitly through South Africa's provincial arrangements.

The most progressive leap was perhaps in Zimbabwe, where Archie Fraser (assisted by Graham Child) crafted the progressive Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975. This Act boldly entrusted landholders with almost full ownership of wildlife by declaring them the 'appropriate authority' for wildlife on their land. In seeking to 'maximise the value of wildlife to landholders', commercial uses of wildlife were deliberately encouraged (as long as they were humane) by the Parks agency. The agency also replaced bureaucratic pricing with auctions and tenders to drive up the price of wildlife, and also eliminated as many government fees and bureaucratic regulations as possible to make wildlife as competitive as possible.

Understanding the power of peer pressure, carefully crafted legislation devolved to communities of landholders the powers to regulate each other through a democratic process. An important outcome was

that control over mobile wildlife (as well as soil erosion, deforestation, and so on) was exerted through collective action. This is why, unlike in Namibia and South Africa, the expansion of game ranching in Zimbabwe was not accompanied by game fencing.

By this time, research showed that game produced as much meat as livestock, but was less viable because of underdeveloped venison markets, veterinary restrictions and other factors. Simultaneously, the centre of gravity of the trophy hunting industry began to shift south, away from East and West Africa, as newly independent states adopted a socialist model of governance and centralised rather than decentralised the control of wildlife. In the famous hunting safari countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan and elsewhere, big-game hunting was banned or diminished, and leading professional hunters like Rundgren, John Lawrence (of Hunters Africa Ltd., the first hunting company in Kenya that started as White Hunters Ltd.), Harry Selby and others relocated to Botswana, giving rise to southern Africa's budding hunting industry.

Pioneering game ranchers like the Hendersons, the Styles family on Buffalo Range in southern Zimbabwe and Peter Johnstone of Rosslyn Safaris near Victoria Falls began to experiment with mini-safaris, and soon discovered that wildlife's comparative advantage lay in high-value hunting, rather than meat production. My PhD research on these game and cattle ranchers in the early 1980s showed that the profit per kilogram of biomass from wildlife was two or more times that of livestock. Although faced with strong opposition from the agricultural sector, ranchers responded rapidly to these economic signals, and within two decades the



majority of ranchers in semi-arid areas adopted wildlife as a major, or sole, land use. The same rapid shift occurred in South Africa, especially when agricultural subsidies were phased out in 1994, as well as in Namibia, and to a lesser extent in Botswana, where the amount of private land is relatively small.

It was the unique characteristics of trophy hunting that allowed this transition. With an offtake rate of about 2% of large males, compared to natural growth rates of 10-20%, landholders could make good money while allowing the depleted wildlife that remained on cattle ranches to recover rapidly. In Zimbabwe, early hunting relied mainly on browsers like kudu and eland, and hardy animals like impala and warthog, which had survived the pressures of livestock grazing. When ranchers began destocking cattle, grazing species like zebra, sable, tsessebe and so on began to recover, sometimes helped by reintroductions. This is why the current trend to demonise trophy hunting is so dangerous: it is

the only way to maintain a positive cash flow while recovering depleted wildlife populations, and we owe as much as three-quarters of the wildlife habitat on private land to hunting revenues. Pristine wild areas or African bush, park buffer zones, and wildlife on private and communal land are best preserved, somewhat ironically, through the blessing of controlled and carefully monitored, high-expense hunting.

By the mid-1980s, it was clear that wildlife was a legitimate and competitive land-use option in drylands. However, a superior wildlife resource that included big game in many communal lands was rapidly disappearing. Alarmed by the loss of wildlife in communal lands, ecologists in Zimbabwe's Parks department insisted that the same principles could apply to African communities; indeed, Graham Child set a precedent before independence in the mid-1970s when, as the director of the National Parks, he encouraged the Ministry to bring wildlife management in 'tribal trust lands' more in line with policies in



ROWAN MARTIN



European areas and persuaded parliament that money derived from wildlife in communal lands should be returned to these people. Money from culling in Chirisa Safari Area was returned to communities, and money from a small elephant quota was used to build a school in the Makenye community near Gonarezhou in 1982.

These ideas were theorised in the path-breaking *Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources* document written by Rowan Martin in 1984, noting that simply giving rural people benefits would fail; they needed to be given genuine ownership of wildlife, just like white farmers, with communities establishing 'village companies' to manage these rights.

Although Zimbabwe's wildlife agency was thwarted from creating a village wildlife title, it was nevertheless able to go quite far in this direction, leading to the groundbreaking Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, or CAMPFIRE programme. Starting in 1989, most communities set up democratic structures to manage wildlife and its revenues, and in several communities, like Masoka, Mahenye and Chikwarakwara, people got annual wildlife dividends. In 2003, several years after significant donor support ended, CAMPFIRE was still vigorous and innovative, but then lost its impetus with the dramatic and destructive decline of the

Zimbabwean economy.

Working closely with the Zimbabweans, Namibia developed its own community wildlife programme, but leaders like Chris Brown, Brian Jones and Malan Lindeque from the Ministry fought hard to ensure that 100% of wildlife revenues were returned to the communities that generated them. There was little wildlife left in communal areas in Namibia in the 1980s, but empowered and benefiting communities, supported by high-quality NGOs, ensured that wildlife expanded rapidly, not least populations of desert elephant and rhino and, remarkably, big predators.

Namibia shows clear evidence that a substantial 25-year investment in communities has paid off, not only in terms of wildlife recovery, but also with increased community income and the positive impact of hunting and tourism on the national economy; where there had been only a handful of tourism lodges and hunting concessions in Namibia in the early 1990s, there are now more than 50 of each of these, generating tens of millions of dollars of business.

It is no accident that southern Africa is the only place in the developing world where wildlife is recovering as a major economic sector. This is the legacy of courageous and resourceful wildlife policy-makers who recognised that wildlife was safest in the hands of the people who lived with it, and encouraged them to develop global

markets and new wildlife products to make wildlife an increasingly competitive land use.

It was this combination of strong *proprietorship* and maximised *prices* that led to the recovery of wildlife. By contrast, in countries where the freedom of 'hands-off' wildlife management has not devolved upon landholders, and where sustainable use and markets have been restricted, these government controls have stifled the wildlife sector.

The lessons for rhino conservation are obvious: unless we put control of rhinos back in the hands of landholders, and encourage high-priced global markets, rhinos are unlikely to survive the massive pressures piled up against them. Indeed, rhinos are the ultimate sustainable product, with non-lethal harvesting of horns being far more valuable even than trophy hunting.

In the 1960s, we were blessed with conservation paradigm-shifters and rule-changers with the vision and tenacity to swim against the tide of conservation orthodoxy. They brought wildlife back from the brink of extinction on private land by giving ownership of wildlife back to landholders and communities, and recognising in global markets the power to drive a massive expansion of wildlife. We have reached a similar point again in the conservation of rhinos. But will our current conservation leaders be as bold, brave and far-sighted as their predecessors?