

Hunters Conserve Biodiversity

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A few months ago I scrambled around in the Gredos Mountains in Spain. I was hunting for Gredos ibex. There was plenty of game, and I eventually shot an old ram. It wasn't a big trophy as far as measurements were concerned, but it was thirteen years old. "They don't get much older here," said my guide, who hails from the fifty-person village in the middle of the hunting territory. "The winters are tough, and he probably would not have survived the next year or two." It is a perfect ram as far as I am concerned, because inches aren't important to me.

The fact that more than 10,000 ibex roam the mountains in the Gredos National Park and in the surrounding hunting areas is not a matter of course. A hundred years ago they were almost extinct. Only three hundred were counted in the Gredos at the beginning of the twentieth century, and only about a thousand ibex remaining in all of Spain. Competition from domestic sheep and goats had pushed the survivors into a few remote areas. The rest had been done in by meat poachers. The local inhabitants were very poor, and the wild goats a welcome addition to their sparse menu. Something had to change. It was hunters who recognized the signs of the times, and who implemented a protection program, together with aristocratic, private and municipal landowners, authorities, and scientists. The King himself set up a reservation. The ibex and other game species recovered in the national parks and on the surrounding land belonging to local communities.

Eventually hunting resumed, and has now been reinstated for quite some time. The ibex populations are still growing, and the harvest quotas have steadily increased. Instead of facing extinction, today ibex are the charismatic symbol of the mountain wilderness of Spain - with a bright future!

The regions where ibex are found are still poor and offer local residents only limited income opportunities. Typical tourism has not really found its way there yet, and the few cows in the barren pastures, surrounded by ancient stone walls, certainly don't provide enough income to make a living. The lease fees from the hunting territories flow to the municipalities and serve as



welcome support for infrastructure and social measures. Both the local governments and the leaseholders have hired gamekeepers and hunting assistants. Every job counts in these regions. Local people are also very interested in the ibex themselves, both their management and hunting are important elements of their cultural heritage. I was told with pride that shortly after my departure a two-day hunting celebration would take place. Five or six lambs had already been purchased, and plenty of beer and whisky would flow during the party. The whole village would participate. Of course the leaseholders would foot the bill.

Everyone with practical experience knows that wildlife on the mountain cannot be left to its own devices. The naturally-increasing red deer and wild boar populations must be kept at low levels, the ibex are monitored for certain diseases, and above all, the gamekeepers must keep poaching under control or it once again will become a serious problem. The difference is that these days poachers come from outside the area and are in search of trophies. Without the local gamekeepers and hunter-friendly inhabitants, who keep their eyes open for suspicious activity, the problem would not be under control.

The situation is quite similar in other mountainous regions of Spain. There are currently around 100,000 ibex in the country. Sustainable hunting ensures growing populations. Hunting tourists bring money to the mountain villages. Given the stark increase in numbers, ibex hunts are becoming less expensive, and the number of hunters from abroad is increasing.

The ibex in Spain is a good example of how sustainable hunting conserves and enhances biodiversity. As the ibex populations recovered, so did the populations of predators and scavengers that feed on them. It only took a matter of minutes after I shot my ram for vultures to start circling overhead.



Left: Ibex like this are the results of years of careful game management.

Top: An H&CAT training program: School children are taken on excursions to study wildlife.

Middle: A trail camera photo of a mature ibex ram.

The Conservation and Hunting Alliance of Tajikistan trains village youth in conservation techniques. Trainees install a trail camera for monitoring snow leopard.



A photo of a snow leopard taken with a trail camera: numbers have increased since their prey has been protected by sustainable hunting.



A similar situation in Switzerland also shows the important role played by well-organized hunting in the management of the once-eradicated Alpine ibex. Today, they too are quite numerous again. Another example is in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan, which I know well from my own experiences there. The mountain ungulate species - markhor, ibex, and Marco Polo sheep - were poached and eaten due to the poverty in the region. Predators, such as snow leopards, starved or were killed, as they increasingly turned to domestic animals as their prey. Ten years ago, the traditional hunters, many of whom could be described then as poachers, came together and decided to change the unsatisfactory situation. They did not want to lose their mountain ungulate species. They, too, had heard that in other countries, such as in Pakistan, village communities allowed well-paying hunters to hunt highly-sought-after game. Even in the remote Central Asian mountains, in this age of globalization, people know what is happening in the world.

They put a stop to meat hunting, and in return tried to acquire the right to sell a sustainable quota of animals to hunting tourists. It took years for the Academy of Sciences, the conservation agencies and the Minister of Finance to agree. Then the program began. In the first few years there were very few hunting guests, and in some villages I was told that without paying guests it would be impossible not to resume the meat hunting. With temporary support from the German International Development Agency, the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC), and the wild cat conservation organization PANTHERA, the traditional hunters developed a functioning system of game management and sustainable hunting. The villages joined forces and created the Hunting and Conservation Alliance of Tajikistan (H&CAT). In the meantime, word has spread in the hunting community that first-rate hunts are available. Demand is growing. In addition to hunters, the alliance wants to interest other tourists as well, although the income potential is small.

The population growth of ibex and markhor, which were in danger of extinction

just a few years ago, has been remarkable. Scientific censuses have confirmed this. Simultaneously, the numbers of snow leopards, which prey on mountain ungulates, are increasing. This, too, is a wonderful example of what sustainable hunting can achieve for the benefit of biodiversity.

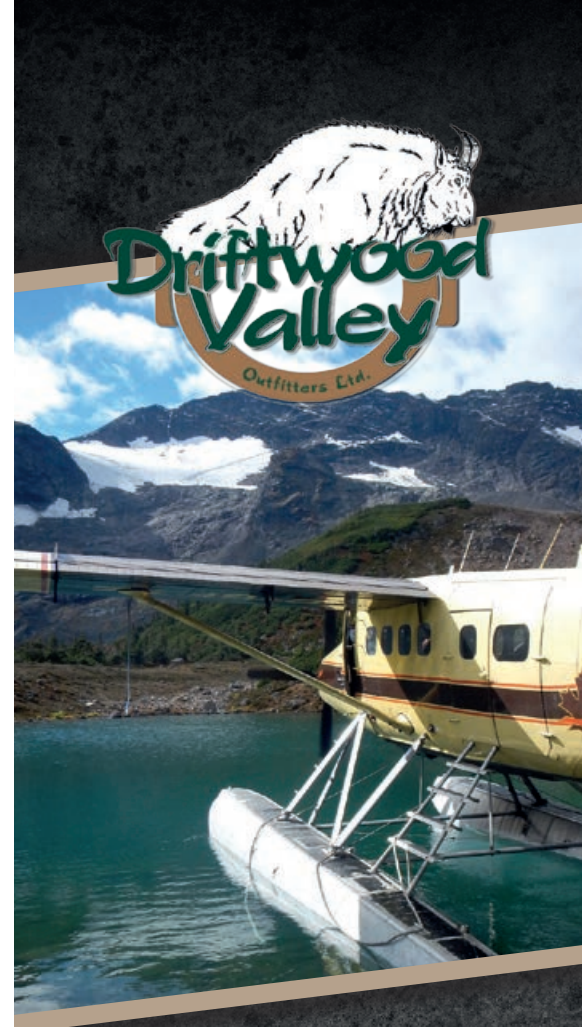
Conservation is not our primary goal when hunting in foreign countries. However, we contribute to preserving biodiversity or even increasing it, as the example of the ibex shows. International hunters shouldn't hide from the public. We can openly show the positive results of hunting tourism.

However, we also have to make sure that we hunt with reputable outfitters who offer sustainable, conservation-based hunting. Otherwise, we are not credible. When booking a hunt, just looking for the best price isn't enough. We should always do due diligence, and make sure the hunting is legitimate and ethical. There are black sheep everywhere. We must make sure we do not land with one of those.

Those who want to take hunting away from us have so far shown no effective alternative to sustainable hunting. Above all, they cannot provide any practical conservation success stories. Their interest is obviously focused primarily on getting funded by national governments, the European Union, and by well-meaning, but perhaps uninformed, animal lovers. This has unfortunately become the standard corporate concept for hundreds of non-governmental organizations. They have had hardly any demonstrable success in conserving local biodiversity. Instead, their practical action is often counterproductive. Nevertheless, they enjoy the power in the media and social networks.

Hunters get no money from public funds nor from good-faith donors. Hunters spend their own money for conservation in the form of licenses, levies, taxes, and anti-poaching activities. Anti-hunting activists do nothing of the sort. ■

For more information regarding the Conservation and Hunting Alliance of Tajikistan look online: tajwildlife.com



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