



Conservation: Opinion

Cecil the Lion – The Truth

A little more than a year ago, on July 2, 2015, an American dentist shot a very old lion in Zimbabwe. The animal was wearing a collar with a radio transmitter, like many lions from the area. Researchers from the University of Oxford had given him the name 'Cecil' for their purposes. This was catchier than its research code MAGMI, and it ultimately helped to facilitate the campaign that was soon to follow.

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Photos: Philippe Chardonnet/International Foundation for the Conservation of Wildlife



Without Hunting Cecil Would Have Never Been Born

The shooting of a lion in the unfenced Gwaai Conservancy near the Hwange National Park was not unusual. Sixty-five lions, forty-five of them with collars, have been shot there in the past sixteen years. In addition to the national parks in Zimbabwe, there are many private and state reserves where sustainable hunting has replaced the more environmentally damaging practice of cattle grazing. Without hunting, Cecil would probably never have been born. Instead, his grandfather and all of his relatives most likely

would have been shot or poisoned to protect cattle, as is unfortunately common practice in many African countries. Peter Johnstone, one of the pioneers of hunting tourism in Zimbabwe, who converted his cattle farm to hunting in 1969, told me that “For years I spent a lot of money having lions killed in order to protect my cows. Now I make money by conserving them and other game, and occasionally by allowing a guest hunter to shoot an old lion.” Hunting tourism has proven itself effective, and is ecotourism in its true sense, which not only protects lions, but also natural wilderness habitats.

Hunting opponents declared Cecil ‘Africa’s favorite lion’, even though up to that point he was only known to a few researchers and a very few tourists. Zimbabwe’s political situation has made tourism a rare commodity. With obviously strategic thinking, anti-hunting organizations unleashed a never-before-seen and unparalleled media campaign. They claimed falsely, as British lion researchers have since clearly dispelled, that the lion had been lured by the hunters with bait from the national park. US talk show hosts berated the dentist with rude names. PETA demanded that he should be hanged. He received death threats and had to go into hiding. Worldwide, at the peak of the controversy, there were up to 12,000 articles daily in editorial media. Social networks overflowed with emotional comments and pure hatred. The media and the public were presented with intentional misinformation. “We knew immediately that many ‘facts’ were completely fabricated, but no one wanted to hear about it,” said an embittered Zimbabwean wildlife expert, with thirty years of experience.

The Lion Was Killed Legally

We now know that the hunting and killing of collared lions is essentially legal. Legally objectionable in this case – so the current understanding – are only minor offenses. For example, a state game warden should have been present on the hunt. A criminal case against those involved has not yet been opened, and it seems unlikely that it will.

From a conservation perspective, the killing of the animal was not objectionable. The lion was thirteen years old, and his removal

affected the population more positively than negatively. The lion researcher and anti-hunter, Craig Packer, has scientifically proven that the social structure and reproduction cycle are not damaged when lions older than six years are killed. In Tanzania for example, every lion killed is examined by independent scientists to verify its age. If it is too young, the professional hunter is held responsible.

Even though the lion was collared for research purposes, did not speak against shooting it. The purpose of the research project, among other things, was specifically to examine the impact of trophy hunting on lion populations, so as to make hunting more sustainable. In Zimbabwe in general, hunting licenses may be transferred under certain conditions from one area to another. Whether this aspect was handled correctly in this case, is controversial, even in Harare, and probably can only be clarified in court proceedings. That the professional hunter and his client threw away the collar transmitter and did not turn it in, speaks of a bad conscience and of unprofessional behavior. The professional hunter involved was not a member of Zimbabwe’s professional hunters’ association, which is not a good sign. Therefore, the events have left a bad aftertaste in most hunters’ mouths. Bowhunting late at night with an artificial light, regardless of the legality, does not fit my understanding of ethical hunting. According to the scientists from Oxford, the lion died the following morning about 250 meters from the spot where it was initially shot. There are indeed inconsistencies and unanswered questions about this hunt that, as we so often see, are and can be easily used by anti-hunters to denigrate hunting in all of Africa, and reach far beyond this individual occurrence.

Anti-hunters Earned Millions from This ‘Scandal’

As one consequence of this affair, a number of airlines will no longer transport hunting trophies from Africa. France and the Netherlands have, on the same grounds, banned the import of lion and other hunting trophies from Africa and have started a campaign for a complete ban on hunting in Africa. The US has also limited and made imports of hunting



trophies more difficult. For the next CITES General Assembly, the EU Commission has proposed extensive bureaucratic constraints that could choke off hunting. In several countries in Africa, the number of hunting tourists has already fallen drastically, and hunting revenues have decreased. Various conservation administrations now lack the resources for the urgent fight against poaching. For the animal rights activists, however, the campaign has caused millions of dollars to flood into their bank accounts. Even the Oxford lion researchers took in more than a million euros in unsolicited donations. Coincidentally, it is reported from African nature reserves that hardly any of the money from the so-called animal rights activists actually arrived in Africa or is being used for meaningful conservation work.

Clever public relations professionals staged the perfect storm, that could wash away both hunting tourism and conservation in Africa. And, the truth has been left by the wayside.

Africa Speaks

On June 1, 2016 at a Lion Range meeting organized by CITES and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), twenty-eight African countries, and thus virtually all with lion populations, released a very carefully worded declaration. It stated that well-organized hunting can contribute to the protection of lions, that hunting quotas must be determined scientifically, that the social rank, age and sex of the animals have to be considered, and that bans on the imports of trophies can harm stable lion populations. One can imagine what effort was involved in the formulation of this declaration, because only in a minority of these countries are lions actually hunted. It was recognized that the primary cause for the decline in lion populations is the loss of habitat. Also acknowledged was that snaring and poisoning lions as acts of revenge, after they have killed humans or livestock, play a large role as well. CITES and CMS, the organizers of the meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, even spoke of the historical achievement of Africa agreeing on the way forward

to better protect its lions. In a joint communiqué, priority actions for lion protection were agreed upon. These actions include: involving local inhabitants and the better sharing of the revenues from tourism and hunting with them; resolving conflicts between pastoralists and lions; and improving the management of protected areas and combating poaching. Restrictions on lion hunting or hunting bans were not included on the priority list.

It's time to acknowledge and respect Africa's opinion on this topic. Instead, so-called animal rights activists from Europe and America pretend to know exactly what Africa needs. Obviously, they are convinced that Africans themselves are not able or prepared to manage their own wildlife. I call this an arrogant and racist attitude. Hunting opponents and their friends in the EU environment ministries want to decide, in a neo-colonial manner, what is good for the continent, its people, and its wildlife, over the heads of Africans.

Tweets Don't Help Lions

What have the many hundred thousand people who raised their voices for Cecil last year on social networks actually done for the protection of lions? Expressed simply, nothing. According to the *New York Times* (July 1, 2016), tweets do nothing at all to help lions. And even worse, the tweeters have no idea at all on how to even begin to help conserve lions.

They differ in no way from the political demagogues of the European populist parties, or even many of the Brexit supporters, who only know that they are against something, without knowing the basic facts of the matter. Jürgen Kaube, in a commentary in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, speaks of populist politicians who are "planlessly against something", whose speeches are long when they enumerate everything they are against, but that don't have much to say when they are asked to list concrete ways and means to implement effective changes. Green animal rights populists behave exactly the same way. They tweet hate and threats against hunting, hunters, and wildlife managers but haven't a single proposal on how the complex issues of the conservation of lion and other wild animals of Africa could be solved.

Lions in those countries where they are sustainably hunted are doing much better than in countries where they are completely protected on paper. Acreage devoted to hunting far exceeds that set aside for national parks. If hunting tourism were forbidden, these vast stretches of land would be lost for conservation purposes. In Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe alone, thirty million animals could disappear, and with them hundreds of thousands of jobs. Whoever wants to eliminate sustainable hunting tourism in Africa to 'save' a few individual animals from premature death, is actually calling for a death sentence for millions of wild animals.

Hunting is not the universal remedy for the conservation of all wild animals and wild places in Africa. If it is sustainably utilized it can however play an important role in conservation. Therefore my advice to readers: Go to Africa and experience a quality African hunting adventure with a reputable outfitter. By doing this you will be helping both conservation in general and our African partners.

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