

The important link between hunting & tourism in Namibia

– both working for conservation

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I am not a hunter. Nor have I ever been. I am a vegetarian (since the age of about 11), I am part of the environmental NGO sector and I have interests in the tourism industry in Namibia.

So, it might surprise you that I am a strong supporter of the hunting industry in Namibia, and indeed, throughout Africa. Having said that, I should qualify my support. I am a strong supporter of legal, ethical hunting of indigenous wildlife within sustainably managed populations, in large open landscapes. The reason is simple. Well-managed hunting is extremely good for conservation. In many areas, it is essential for conservation.

There is much confusion and misconception, particularly in the urban industrialised world and thus by most western tourists that visit Namibia, about the role of hunting in conservation. Urban industrialised societies, and I include many biologists and recognised conservation organisations in this grouping, see hunting as undermining conservation, or the anathema of conservation. And they see protecting wildlife and removing all incentives for its consumptive use as promoting and achieving good conservation. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Much of the hunting and sustainable utilization debate within conservation has been taken over by the animal rights movement. I have sympathy for people who stand up for animal rights – I think we all should. None of us want to see animals suffering or being treated badly by members of our species. But the problem arises when animal rights agendas are passed off as conservation agendas. Animal rights agendas are **not** conservation agendas. Conservation works at the population, species and ecosystem levels. Animal rights works at the individual level. And what might be good for an individual or a collection of individuals might not be good for the long-term survival of populations, species and biodiversity. Take a simple domestic example. When the farm carthorse was replaced by the tractor, carthorses no longer had to work long hours in the fields. But they also no longer had a value to farmers. Once common, they are now extremely rare. Indeed, carthorse associations have been established to keep these breeds from dying out. The truth is, if animals do not have a value, or if that value is not competitive with other options, then those animals will not have a place, except in a few small isolated islands of protection. And island protection in a sea of other land uses is a disaster for long-term conservation.

Animal rights are important. But for wildlife they must be placed within a sound conservation and animal welfare setting, where conservation decisions on behalf of populations, species and ecosystems take priority over the rights of individual animals, but with due consideration of their welfare. Ethical and humane practices are an integral part of good conservation management and science.

The wildlife situation in Namibia provides a very good example of this. When the first western explorers, hunters and traders entered what is now Namibia in the late 1700s, crossing the Orange

/ Gariep River from the Cape, the national wildlife population was probably in the order of 8-10 million animals. Over the following centuries wildlife was decimated and numbers collapsed, first by uncontrolled and wasteful hunting by traders and explorers, then by local people who had acquired guns and horses from the traders, then by early farmers, veterinary policies and fencing, and finally by modern-day farmers on both freehold and communal land who saw wildlife as having little value and competing with their domestic stock for scarce grazing. Traditional wildlife management under customary laws administered by chiefs had broken down under successive colonial regimes. By the 1960s wildlife numbers were at an all-time low in Namibia, with perhaps fewer than half a million animals surviving (Figure 1).

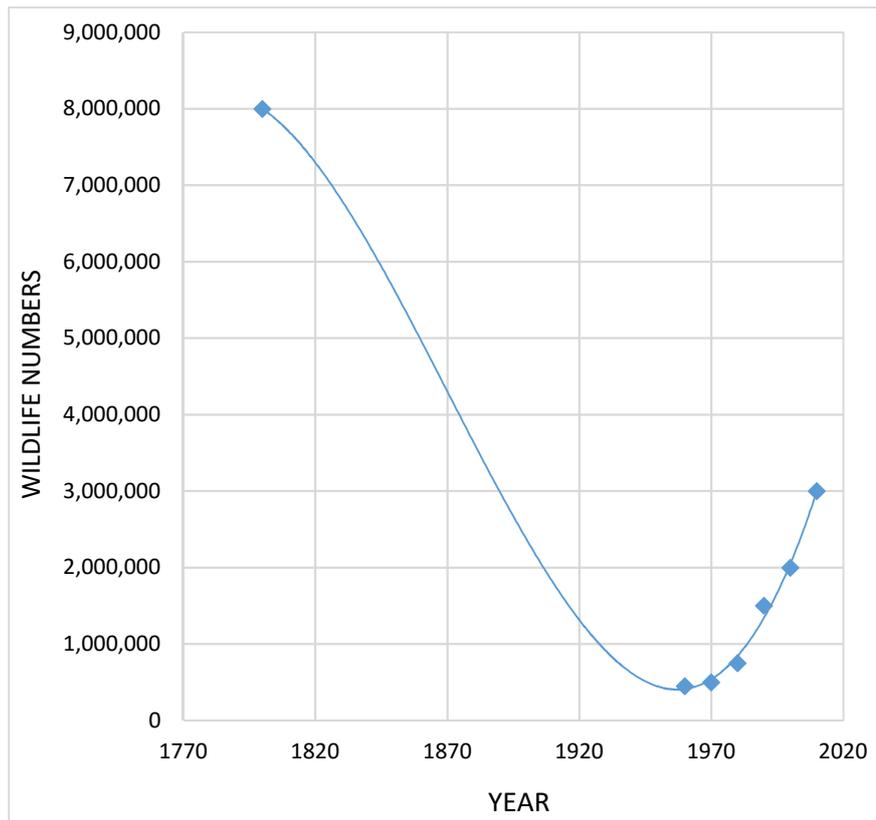


Figure 1: Wildlife numbers in Namibia, from about 1770 to 2015

At that time wildlife was “owned” by the state. Land owners and custodians were expected to support the wildlife on their land, but they had no rights to use the wildlife and to derive any benefits from wildlife. In response to declining numbers and growing dissatisfaction from farmers, a new approach to wildlife management was introduced. In the 1960s and 1990s, conditional rights over the consumptive and non-consumptive use of wildlife were devolved to freehold and communal farmers respectively, the latter under Namibia’s well known conservancy programme. The laws give the same rights to farmers in both land tenure systems. This policy change led to a total change in attitude towards wildlife by land owners and custodians. Wildlife suddenly had value. It could be used to support a multi-faceted business model, including trophy hunting, sport hunting, meat production, live sale of surplus animals and tourism. It could be part of a conventional livestock farming operation, or be a dedicated business on its own. As the sector developed, so farmers discovered that they could do better from their wildlife than from domestic stock. Both small- and large-stock numbers declined on freehold farmland while wildlife numbers

increased. Today there is more wildlife in Namibia than at any time in the past 150 years, with latest estimates putting the national wildlife herd at just over 3 million animals. And the reason is simple – wildlife is an economically more attractive, competitive form of land use than conventional farming in our arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid landscapes. Markets are driving more and more farmers towards the management of wildlife. This is good for conservation, not just from the perspective of wildlife, but also from the broader perspective of collateral habitat protection and biodiversity conservation. The greater the benefits that land owners and custodians derive from wildlife, the more secure it is as a land-use form and the more land there is under conservation management. Therefore, all the component uses of wildlife, including and especially trophy hunting, must be available to wildlife businesses. These uses include the full range of tourism options, live sale of surplus wildlife, and the various forms of consumptive use – trophy and sport hunting and wildlife harvesting for meat sale, value addition and own use. It is this combination of uses that makes wildlife outcompete conventional farming. And it is the “service” component of tourism and hunting that elevate wildlife values above that of primary production and the simple financial value of protein. As the impacts of climate change become ever more severe, so will primary production decline in value, but not so for the “service” values derived from arid-adapted wildlife. And why especially trophy hunting? Because there are large areas of Namibia comprising remote, flat terrain with monotonous vegetation that are unsuited to tourism, but very important for conservation.

If Namibia had adopted an animal-rights based, protectionist, anti-sustainable use approach to wildlife management, we would probably today have fewer than 250,000 head of wildlife (just 8% of our present wildlife herd) in a few isolated large parks and a few small private nature reserves. We would have lost the connectivity between land under wildlife, and we would have lost the collateral conservation benefits to broader biodiversity, natural habitats and ecosystem services. Today, Namibia has well over 50% of its land under some form of wildlife management, including one of the largest contiguous areas of land under conservation in the world – its entire coast, linking to Etosha National Park and to conservation areas in both South Africa (Richtersveld) and Angola (Iona National Park) – over 25 million ha (Figure 2).

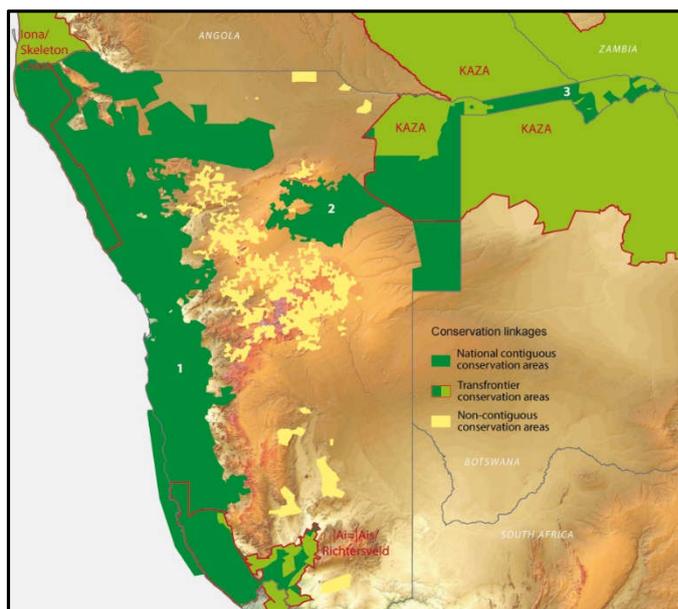


Figure 2: Contiguous land under wildlife management, including state protected areas, private nature reserves, communal and freehold conservancies and communal forests (Source: State of Conservancy Report 2015, NACSO)

There are some people in the tourism sector in Namibia and in our neighbouring countries who oppose trophy hunting because it is perceived to conflict with tourism and is thus not good for conservation. Some of these tourism operators and guides attack the hunting sector to their clients. These tourism operators and guides are naive and wrong. They are undermining an important part of conservation, an important contributor to making land under wildlife competitive and, in the final analysis, they are undermining the viability of conservation. The greatest threat to wildlife conservation, in Namibia and globally, is land transformation. Once land is transformed, often for agricultural purposes, it has lost its natural habitats, it has lost most of its biodiversity and it can no longer support wildlife. Hunters and tourism operators should and must be on the same side – to make land under wildlife more productive than under other forms of land use. They are natural allies. They need to work together to ensure that land under wildlife derives the greatest possible returns, through a multitude of income earning activities. And where it is necessary for both hunting and tourism to take place on the same piece of land, they need to plan, collaborate and communicate so that all aspects of wildlife management and utilization – both consumptive and non-consumptive – can take place without one impacting negatively on the other. Conflicts between hunting and tourism are simply failures of management and communication, nothing more profound than that.

It is also the vital task and duty of tourism operators and guides to educate visitors from the urban industrialised countries about conservation in this part of the world. Visitors need to understand what drives conservation, the role of incentives, markets and what is meant by sustainable wildlife management. The tourism sector should not skirt around an uncomfortable discussion on hunting, but face it head-on and explain its importance to conservation. This is what good education is all about. Tourists come to Namibia to be enlightened, to be exposed to new ideas and to better understand the issues in this part of the world. They come here to take back new and interesting stories. What better story than Namibia's conservation successes. But visitors need to understand it properly – its incentives, its market alignment, its strong links to the local and national economy, and its role in addressing rural poverty. It is the task of the tourism industry to help visitors understand why Namibia has one of the most successful conservation track records of any country in the world.

If we look for a moment at the conservation trajectory of a country such as the United Kingdom (an urban industrialised example) through its agrarian and industrial development, the indigenous wildlife at that time had no value. Thus, it lost the elk, wild boar, bear, wolf, lynx, beaver and sea eagle – essentially its most charismatic and important species. While small-scale attempts to reintroduce a few of the less threatening species are underway, it is unlikely that it will ever reintroduce the bear and wolf into the wild as free-ranging populations. And yet that country and others like it, with poor historic conservation track records, are keen to influence how Namibia should manage its wildlife. Its own farmers are not prepared to live with wolves, but many of their politicians and conservation agencies, both public and non-governmental, expect Namibian farmers to live with elephant, hippo, buffalo, lion, leopard, hyaena, crocodile and many other wildlife species that are far more problematic from a human-wildlife conflict perspective than a wolf. And they try to remove the very tools available to conservation to keep these animals on

the land – the tools of economics, markets and sustainable use, to create value for these animals within a well-regulated, sustainably management wildlife landscape.

I believe that the problem is essentially one of ignorance. People think that they are doing what is best for conservation, but they simply do not understand the economic drivers for wildlife and biodiversity conservation in biodiversity-rich and rainfall-poor developing countries. And many African countries are sadly falling into the same trap. Kenya, for example, with its Eurocentric protectionist conservation approaches, has less wildlife today than at any time in its history. We need to share the message. And the message is, I believe, most powerfully explained using the simple graphic in Figure 3 below.

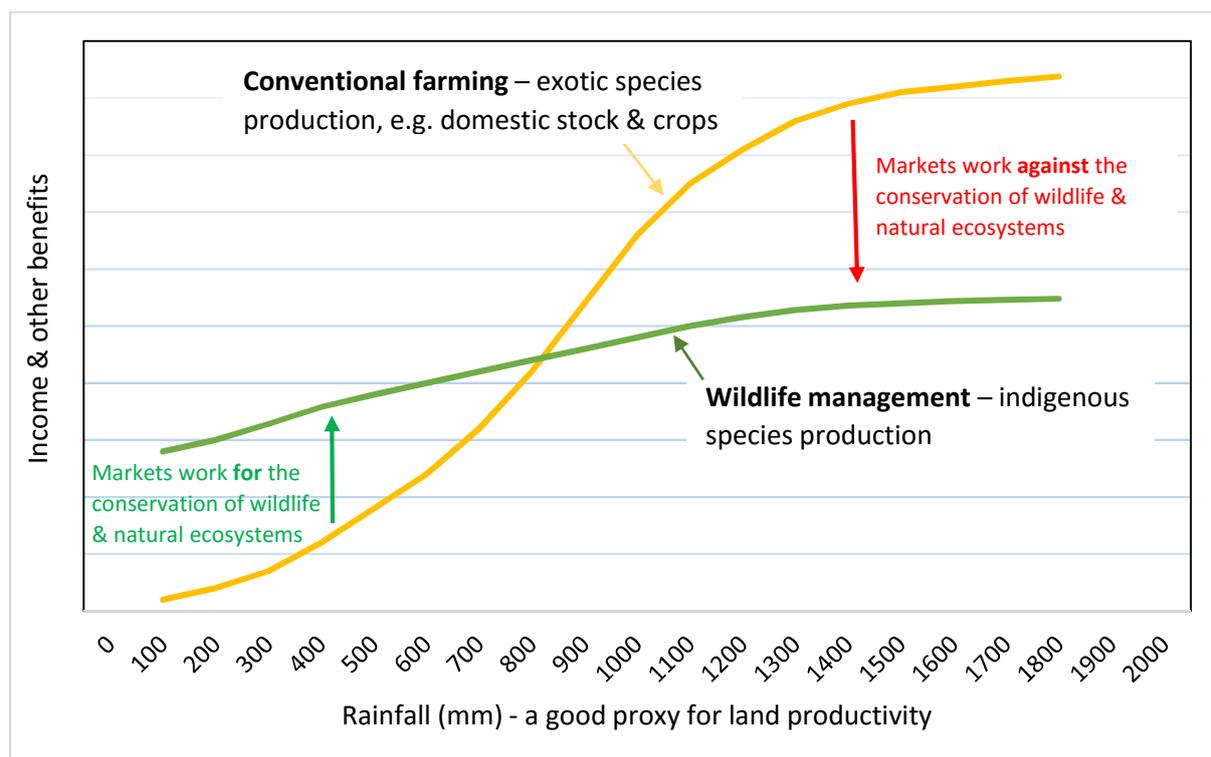


Figure 3: Economic returns to conventional farming (yellow line) and to wildlife management (green line) in areas of different land productivity, with rainfall being a good proxy for productivity

The yellow line represents the return to land use under conventional farming, e.g. domestic stock and crops, across a rainfall gradient – rainfall being a proxy for land productivity. The green line shows the returns to land under wildlife. On the left side of the graph, in areas of rainfall below about 800 mm per year, returns from “indigenous production systems” – i.e. wildlife, are greater than the returns from “exotic production systems” – i.e. farming. However, this only applies if the rights to use wildlife are devolved to land owners and custodians. Markets then create a win-win situation for optimal returns from land and for wildlife conservation in these more arid areas. If utilisation rights are not devolved, then wildlife has little value to the land owner and custodian, and people will use the land for other activities. On the right side of the graph, above about 800 mm, the lines cross over and here conventional farming outperforms wildlife management. If land owners and custodians are given rights over the wildlife and other indigenous species on their land, they will get rid of these species and transform the land for farming in response to market forces. Most of the western, industrialised world falls into the right side of the graph.

Conservation agencies and organisations from countries on the right side of the graph, and areas where rights over wildlife are not devolved to land owners, are so conditioned to resist and fight against market forces having negative conservation impacts in their countries, that they automatically carry the fight across to those countries falling into the left side of the graph and which have devolved wildlife rights, not realising that the lines have switched over and that markets here are working for conservation. This is the important message that we must get across to policy makers, conservation organisations and the broader public in the urbanised and industrialised countries. And in some other parts of Africa. People need to understand the conservation drivers, incentives and markets, as well as the role of sustainable use within good conservation policy and practice. Well-intentioned but poorly informed efforts to influence conservation in this region seriously undermine good conservation policies and practices.

A second insight from the graphic above is that the greater the value earned from wildlife, not only is the gap widened on the left side of the graph over conventional farming, but the cross-over point is pushed further to the right. This means that higher rainfall areas become competitive under wildlife management, opening more of Africa to this form of land use. How could the wildlife industry increase its earnings? Certainly, not by introducing unethical practices and practices bad for conservation such as intensive breeding, colour morphs and canned hunting – all activities that undermine the wildlife profession, the reputation of Namibia and the very values on which the wildlife sector is built. No, we have other far better options. The first is to allow disease-free buffalo on wildlife ranches. The livestock farming sector is in decline in Namibia, and with the impacts of climate change, it will continue to shrink. The wildlife-based sector is growing. It already contributes twice as much to GDP as the farming sector. It is no longer appropriate for a declining sector with no future growth prospects to restrict a larger growing sector from achieving its potential. Allowing buffalo into wildlife areas will be good for buffalo conservation and good for the economy.

The second important step is, together with South Africa, to prepare a submission to the next CITES meeting for an international trade in rhino horn. This initiative would, primarily, be in the interests of rhino conservation. Now, markets and conservation are at war, and the markets are winning. They will always win. We need to stop doing more of the same and start doing things which will work. We need to align markets and conservation and have them work on the same side, to achieve a win-win for conservation and our economy. This is what Namibia has done so successfully for all other wildlife species in its control. An international trade in rhino horn would allow Namibia and other African countries joining the approach, to release its most valuable renewable natural resource into the marketplace, under carefully controlled conditions, for the benefit of rhino conservation, land owners and custodians and the national economy.

However, there is one growing problem within the wildlife sector, not foreseen at the time when rights were devolved to freehold farms. It is the issue of habitat fragmentation through game-proof fencing. The most important adaptation of arid-adapted species to their environment is that of mobility – the ability of wildlife to move over large areas to find resources. Cutting off largescale movements of wildlife has serious conservation consequences.

It is also in the interests of the tourism sector in Namibia to promote a policy of open landscapes – both for the wildlife product and for the positive impact that open landscapes have for tourism. This is clearly see in our national parks, communal conservancies and freehold land in parts of the central Namib and the Fish River Canyon, where land owners and custodians have come together

to create co-managed landscapes, removing both internal and boundary fences and thereby opening up many hundreds of thousands of hectares of land for wildlife and tourism. The central Namib landscape has adopted a “Fence Free Namib” slogan and logo to emphasise the importance of open systems, particularly in hyper-arid regions. Open, unfenced natural landscapes make lasting impressions on visitors from industrialised regions of the world and boost our tourism marketing and potential, as well as the value of our tourism product.

In addition to anything the tourism sector can do, the wildlife regulating authority needs to create innovative incentives for freehold farmers not to fence, and indeed to begin dismantling fences. The regulating authority has several tools in its toolbox for doing this. The first is to reduce bureaucracy and essentially devolve rights of regulation to freehold conservancies, landscapes and/or other voluntary associations of land owners for group decision-making on all utilisation matters, including issuing own permits – provided large open systems are maintained. The open systems could, for example, be at least 80,000 ha in the north-eastern higher rainfall areas, 120,000 ha in the central savanna semi-arid areas and at least 200,000 ha in the low rainfall Karoo and Namib areas. The second incentive is to allow freehold conservancies to introduce disease-free buffalo – provided large open systems are maintained. And the third option is to allow the ownership of Black Rhino by land owners and custodians – provided large open landscapes are maintained.

Namibia’s record of environmental accomplishment speaks for itself. Through the implementation of appropriate policies, it has created incentives for wildlife conservation, unmatched anywhere in the world. But wildlife must have value otherwise land owners and custodians will move to other forms of land use. And it must have the greatest possible value to be as secure a land use as possible, over the largest possible landscape. And that is why I strongly support well-managed and ethical hunting. It is good, and in some cases essential, for the conservation of wildlife, of habitats and of biological diversity. And that is why hunting and tourism must work together, in mutually supportive ways, to optimise returns from wildlife for the land. Well managed and ethical hunting should in fact be called “conservation hunting”. And conservation hunting is essentially an integral part of tourism.

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