

A Namibian's view on hunting in his home country

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I was born in a village outside **Sesfontein**, one of the remotest parts of Namibia. I grew up experiencing daily encounters with wildlife so I feel very well qualified to enter the Namibian hunting debate.



The side against hunting reminds me of the era when the colonial government used different means to prevent local people from benefitting from wildlife. The apartheid government regarded us as too irresponsible to look after the wildlife that we lived with. It had to be protected from us and it belonged to the government. The anti-hunting lobby is behaving in exactly the same way: they, outsiders who want the privilege of seeing wildlife when it suits them, seem to think they are needed to protect our wildlife – from the independent Namibian government and from local people because we believe in sustainable hunting. I cannot, right now, think of any explanation that will make me understand why these people are blowing hunting in Namibia out of proportion. Is this a plot by some groups to ensure that rural people do not benefit from sustainable utilisation?

It is very important for people to realise that in most of Namibia wildlife is free-roaming, outside national parks, in communally-owned conservancies where the local communities have taken it upon themselves to live with wildlife, some of it extremely dangerous such as elephant, rhino and predators. This is in areas where these same people are farming to make a living. The Government of the Republic of Namibia has given its people, in communal areas who so wish to live with wildlife, the rights to also benefit from it as they would do with their livestock.

I do understand that there are people out there who don't want to see wild animals being killed. To me this is totally illogical as many animals all over the world are being killed every day – be it fish, cattle, pigs, sheep and chicken. And the way most of these animals are being killed is without any respect, and crueler than we can imagine. Why are these people not shouting about this? Or are their mouths too full of beef, pork or mutton?

Hunting in our beloved Namibia is a carefully thought through business by our politicians and our local environmental scientists. We do selective hunting only after an annual game count in conservancies. This is backed up by monitoring initiatives such as routine weekly and monthly wildlife patrols by conservancy staff.

So we do all we can to ensure our hunting initiatives are sustainable. We are not perfect and make mistakes but our aim is good conservation done in an African way.

I would think if people were so much concerned about wildlife, the focus would be on how to curb the immense poaching activities that are happening in South Africa, Kenya and other countries. Why are they picking on Namibia where we have found our own road to conserve and increase our wildlife populations, while at the same time helping rural people to diversify their local economies?

The Namibian initiative is geared to empower our local people. If they did not see some benefits coming from wildlife, most of us would not be prepared to go on sharing our lands with wild animals. Let us not discourage practices that have ensured that today we can proudly say that our wildlife population have increased outside national parks to the point that we have more wildlife outside our parks than inside. This has happened only because ordinary citizens regard wildlife as theirs. Take away this sense of ownership and their right to benefit, and we will lose the ground we have gained. People out there who are shouting about hunting behave as if the wildlife belongs to them, not to us.

We have come a long way to get local people on board with wildlife conservation. Let us not take them backwards. It's our Namibian communities who help us to do better conservation.

I am asking those who are against hunting to put themselves in the shoes of the local people who have to bear costs of living with elephants, lions and other dangerous animals on a daily basis. I am a serious conservationist but I would not be happy to ask my children to walk to school knowing that lions were roaring nearby last night. And what about elephants? Which one of the animal rightists would allow their children to play soccer when an elephant herd is passing? Do they know or care how many people were killed by elephants in Namibia last year?

Our people of Namibia are amazingly tolerant of wildlife. I know of many cases where families have had to stay without water for a day just because an elephant has destroyed their water point the previous night. Yet they will continue to live with elephants, even in cases where someone they love has been trampled to death by an elephant. Hundreds of farming families tolerate stock losses to lions, leopards, cheetah and hyena. Yet we do our best to manage our predators, not merely kill them all. Hunting is a part of our strategy.

I can argue that Namibia is doing very well in protecting its wildlife, even if we hunt some animals. Please, those of you sitting in your comfortable houses stop doing damage to conservation in our country. We who live with wildlife are just being realistic and seeing the big picture – we want wildlife to be around for our grandchildren and their children to enjoy.

I am inviting those that are so concerned about hunting to join me in some of these rural villages – not a lodge – for three months. Let's level the playing field. We can only really talk about this once we all have seen what it takes to live in rural areas and how it feels to share your land with wild animals. Only then has one earned the right to make a fair comment on this topic.

Lastly let us rather focus on the more crucial issue of rhino and elephant poaching which is devastating populations of these key species. If people really want to help conservation, they could contact us for some ideas of how they could support us.