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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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The elephant (head) in the room: A critical look at trophy hunting

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Abstract

Trophy hunting has occupied a prominent position in recent scholarly literature and popular media. In the scientific conservation literature, researchers are generally supportive of or sympathetic to its usage as a source of monetary support for conservation. Although authors at times acknowledge that trophy hunting faces strong opposition from many members of the public, often for unspecified reasons associated with ethics, neither the nature nor the implications of these ethical concerns have been substantively addressed. We identify the central act of wildlife "trophy" taking as a potential source of ethical discomfort and public opposition. We highlight that trophy hunting entails a hunter paying a fee to kill an animal and claim its body or body parts as a trophy of conquest. Situating this practice in a Western cultural narrative of chauvinism, colonialism, and anthropocentrism, we argue trophy hunting is morally inappropriate. We suggest alternative strategies for conservation and community development should be explored and decisively ruled out as viable sources of support before the conservation community endorses trophy hunting. If wildlife conservation is broadly and inescapably dependent on the institution of trophy hunting, conservationists should accept the practice only with a due appreciation of tragedy, and proper remorse.

KEYWORDS

anthropocentrism, chauvinism, colonialism, conservation, ethics, trophy hunting

Trophy hunting has attracted wide academic and popular attention in recent years. A wave of scholarly commentary and mainstream media coverage surrounded the now infamous killing of Cecil the Lion outside Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe (e.g., Macdonald, Johnson, Loveridge, Burnham, & Dickman, 2016). Discussion of trophy hunting in the popular media has recently been reignited by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision, initially overturned but since reinstated, to lift the ban on the import of elephant body parts from Zambia and Zimbabwe to the United States. Although empirical research quantifying public perceptions of trophy hunting for conservation is limited, conservation scientists commonly recognize strong public opposition to the practice (e.g., Macdonald et al., 2016; Nelson, Lindsey, & Balme, 2013). Lindsey, Frank, Alexander, Mathieson, and Romañach (2007, p. 882), for example, wrote, "Problems associated with trophy hunting have resulted in increasingly negative publicity and opposition to the industry…at a time when there is widespread public discomfort with the concept of hunting for sport." It is also relatively common in the

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literature to see trophy hunting identified as a practice with ethical implications (e.g., Crosmary, Côté, & Fritz, 2015), although this observation is not explained or substantively addressed.

At the same time, a large body of scholarly conservation literature is generally tolerant if not supportive of trophy hunting (e.g., Di Minin, Leader-Williams, & Bradshaw, 2016; Nelson et al., 2013). Here we observe a strange disconnect between many conservation scientists' perceptions of public disapproval, at times attributed to unspecified ethical issues; and their determined defense of trophy hunting as a conservation tool. Authors allude to an ethical tension precluding widespread acceptance of trophy hunting as a conservation strategy, but this tension remains undefined and unaddressed in the literature. We aim to break the conspicuous silence and highlight an issue we suspect may underpin much of the "public discomfort" around trophy hunting. This is the basic fact that trophy hunting involves a hunter paying a fee to kill an animal and subsequently retain some or all of the animal's body as a "trophy." This practice is intrinsically troubling, and we argue it is also morally inappropriate.

Anthropologists have increasingly sought to understand the roles and representations of nonhuman animals in human societies, which of course include hunting practices (Mullin, 1999). The advent of hunting marked an important development in human biological history and evolution, but hunting is also a cultural act, expressing ideas and beliefs about the (proper) relationship between humans and nonhuman animals (Mullin, 1999). This relationship is variable and dynamic across cultures, and scholars agree its meaning and significance must be interpreted in context (Mullin, 1999). In this essay, by "trophy hunting" we refer specifically to the practice of Western (e.g., North American or European) individuals paying to hunt large mammals such as elephants (*Loxodonta Africana*) or lions (*Panthera leo*). Only in this particular context do we consider what it means, and whether it is appropriate, for hunters to claim some part of an animal's body as a trophy.

1 | ETHICS OF TROPHY HUNTING: ARGUMENTS ADVANCED IN PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Explicit engagement with ethics has been limited in the scientific conservation literature (but see Macdonald et al., 2016 and Nelson, Bruskotter, Vucetich, & Chapron, 2016 for exceptions). However, many authors implicitly and perhaps unknowingly adopt an ethical stance, following a framework called consequentialism (Nelson et al., 2016), by suggesting the debate "hinges on whether trophy hunting supports or impedes" conservation agendas (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 501). Brought to bear on this conversation are the various ways trophy hunting may (or may not) support conservation goals, for example, by generating funds or reducing poaching (Di Minin et al., 2016; but see Ripple, Newsome, & Kerley, 2016 for a discussion of trophy hunting's potentially adverse effects on biodiversity). Revenue or other benefits such as food and employment opportunities for local communities are also frequently cited (e.g., Lindsey et al., 2013). These are all pragmatic considerations, which are quite understandably of interest to conservationists. However, we suggest the literature has become homogenized, stagnant, and perhaps alienated from the larger popular discourse with its almost singular focus on the effects or effectiveness of trophy hunting, to the neglect of other ethical considerations.

Along with the conservation community, we might expect concerted scholarly interest in trophy hunting from the environmental ethics community. And yet, with the notable exception of Gunn (2001), who offers a consequentialist argument remarkably similar to arguments advanced in the scientific literature, environmental ethicists have devoted relatively little attention to trophy hunting, per se (Gunn, 2001). Instead, scholars of environmental ethics have focused more generally on sport hunting, as contrasted with subsistence hunting, and of which trophy hunting is a particular instance (see e.g., List, 2004; Vitali, 1990). Because it is not necessarily our intent to comment on all the activities encompassed under the label of "sport hunting," it is important to identify a morally relevant distinction between nontrophy forms of sport hunting and trophy-based sport hunting (hereafter, "trophy hunting").

Some may think first of a difference in motivation, pointing out that sport hunters are usually motivated by the experience of the hunt or the chase, whereas trophy hunters are motivated by the kill, the glory, or the trophy (Gunn, 2001; Peterson, 2004). Researchers have found many people outside the scholarly community, including hunters, cite motivations as a primary basis for evaluating whether any particular instance of hunting is appropriate (Fischer et al., 2013). And yet, though at first glance hunter motivations may seem highly salient to the ethics of (trophy) hunting, this intuition can be deceptive (List, 2004). Hunter motivations are known to be multiple and mixed, such that any individual hunter can be motivated by a diverse set of goals, for example, to provide meat, to enjoy immersion in nature, and perhaps also to collect a trophy (Ebeling-Schuld & Darimont, 2017; Fischer et al., 2013). For this reason, efforts to draw a conceptual or moral distinction between any two instances of hunting are bound to be frustrated when based on hunter motivations, except in rare and exceptional cases where hunters are singularly motivated (List, 2004).

Others may try to highlight a difference between the ostensibly beneficial outcomes of general sport hunting and the adverse outcomes of trophy hunting. For example, many people argue sport hunting serves an essential ecological function by reducing "overly" abundant wildlife populations, and

maintaining them at sustainable levels (Van de Pitte, 2003). Trophy hunting, in contrast, may increase pressure on wildlife by selectively harvesting individuals with evolved, fitness-enhancing traits (e.g., large body size), or targeting members of threatened populations (Ripple et al., 2016). On these grounds, some may argue sport hunting is generally justified from a consequentialist perspective, but trophy hunting is not. This distinction is open to easy critique, however, since trophy hunting can also be used to achieve population control objectives (Funston, Groom, & Lindsey, 2001; Gunn, 2001), and can arguably be regulated at sustainable levels of harvest (Nelson et al., 2013). But more importantly, the consequentialist argument misses the core concern we seek to raise, namely, that collecting bodies or body parts as "trophies" is an ethically inappropriate way to interact with individual animals, regardless of the beneficial outcomes that do or do not follow. Building upon debates in the environmental ethics and conservation literatures, we hope to make a novel contribution by focusing attention on the "trophy" itself, and the connotations this carries when situated against the backdrop of Western social and intellectual history.

2 | WILDLIFE "TROPHIES:" A CRITICAL VIEW

The creation of relics from the body parts of living entities, including humans, has been observed in ancient and modern societies (Harrison, 2006). Some nonhuman species also display what we might consider "trophies," a behavior that arguably evolved to signal status, and ultimately confer reproductive advantage (Darimont, Codding, & Hawkes, 2017). Although trophies can be interpreted through a biological or evolutionary lens, in human societies they are also steeped in cultural significance. Originating in the Greek word *tropaion* (meaning "of defeat"), trophies are conventionally collected and often fetishized as emblems of conquest, symbolizing the prowess of the (typically male) conqueror (Krier & Swart, 2016). Although all trophies are not emblems of war, particularly in modern practice, they invariably convey power, strength, and status (Krier & Swart, 2016). In Western societies these traits have historically been elevated as expressions of virility and masculinity, according to a dominant narrative of male supremacy (Mullin, 1999). The collection of wildlife "trophies" by Western hunters can be situated, accordingly, within this narrative (Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003; Mullin, 1999). Trophy hunting has also been interpreted as an ongoing rehearsal of Western imperialist history. Mullin (1999) suggests modern trophy hunting reenacts a vainglorious history of colonization, wherein the hunt of wildlife symbolically represents the conquering and subjugation of "subhuman" indigenous peoples. These arguments have been developed in a body of critical scholarship (Mullin, 1999) and are also supported by empirical research. Kalof and Fitzgerald (2003), for example, analyzed photographic records of animal trophies displayed in American hunting magazines, reporting that the images represented sexist, racist norms bespeaking a history of oppression and social exclusion in the United States.

At a more immediate level, trophy hunting exemplifies exploitative, anthropocentric utilitarian human perceptions of nonhuman animals (Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003). In the Western intellectual tradition, humans have systematically and strategically separated themselves from, and elevated themselves above, nonhuman animals (Mullin, 1999). The social construction of human supremacy has been persuasively detailed and roundly critiqued (DeMello, 2012; Warren, 1990), and yet it remains embedded in the mainstream institutions and norms of Western society. Although some animals such as invertebrates or fish may challenge our best efforts at understanding and empathy, the imaginative leap required to relate with generally charismatic "trophy" animals is much smaller. Compelling evidence shows that such animals have intelligence, emotion, and sociality (DeMello, 2012), all of which are profoundly disrupted by the practice of trophy hunting (Muposhi, Gandiwa, Makuza, & Bartels, 2016; Sogbohossou et al., 2014). However, nonhuman animals are not only physically, socially, and emotionally disrupted, but also debased by the act of trophy hunting. Commoditized, killed, and dismembered, these individuals are relegated to the sphere of mere things when they are turned into souvenirs, oddities, and collectibles. We argue this is morally indefensible. Nonhuman animals are not mere objects but living beings with interests of their own, to whom we owe at least some basic modicum of respect (Regan, 1983). To transform them into trophies of human conquest is a violation of duty and common decency; and to accept, affirm, and even institutionalize trophy hunting, as the international conservation community seems to have done, is to aid and abet an immoral practice.

3 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As noted above, arguments advanced from within the conservation community generally justify trophy hunting on grounds that it is indispensable to conservation success (e.g., Di Minin et al., 2016). And yet, the proposition that trophy hunting is imperative to the future of conservation has so far largely been advanced and accepted without compelling empirical support (Peterson & Nelson, 2017; Van de Pitte, 2003). Rigorous impact evaluations establishing clear causal links between specific conservation practices and observed conservation outcomes, though possible, are challenging and remain relatively rare (Baylis et al., 2016). We concur that these sorts of program evaluations are critical to the achievement of current and future conservation goals (Baylis et al., 2016), and we highlight trophy hunting as a key research focus.

However, without robust scientific evidence, trophy hunting cannot and should not simply be presumed integral to conservation success. This is not only logically fallacious, but also potentially stifling. Even the semblance of necessity, whether real or not, can dispel the will and capacity to seek out alternative strategies. Consistent with this claim, prominent voices in the scientific conservation community have expressed hesitation, and at times vehement opposition, to any proposed policy changes that would discourage or restrict the practice of trophy hunting, citing concerns about adverse outcomes for wildlife, humans, and conservation in general (e.g., Di Minin et al., 2016; Macdonald et al., 2016).

Although nonconsumptive wildlife-based land uses, such as ecotourism, could potentially be expanded to offset financial losses associated with the discontinuation of trophy hunting, these approaches face serious challenges and limitations as well (Buckley, 2009), and other alternatives might need to be developed. Rejecting trophy hunting as a legitimate conservation tool could open up much-needed space for innovation and creativity. For instance, the global initiative Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD+) leverages funds through bilateral arrangements or multilateral organizations to incentivize land uses that retain forest cover (Lujan et al., 2018). A program similar to (or housed within) REDD+ could perhaps subsidize protection of other, nonforested ecosystem types, for example, native African grasslands, which not only store carbon over the long term in soils and belowground biomass, but also support high levels of biodiversity (Veldman et al., 2015). Such a funding structure could potentially protect land uses conducive to wildlife conservation goals, while still supporting community livelihood and sustainable development. This is just one avenue to explore, but with coordinated effort and in collaboration with local partners, we suggest the conservation community could successfully channel its intellectual and imaginative energies toward developing viable alternatives to trophy hunting.

Still, we would be naïve to ignore the possibility that rejecting trophy hunting as a financial tool could render conservationists and their mission vulnerable, particularly where the will and means to protect wildlife currently depend on trophy hunting and related infrastructure. Policy measures enacted against trophy hunting could have serious ramifications for many people as well. Community development, human-wildlife conflict, and unsustainable poaching or bushmeat hunting are all real and pressing concerns, and significant changes in international trophy hunting policy would likely reverberate across these and other social domains, with potentially negative side effects. Angula et al. (2018), for example, report broad and nearly unilateral support for trophy hunting in one conservancy-based community in Namibia, where a stable and generally strong economy was built predominantly on the practice of trophy hunting. In these and similar settings, we certainly do not advocate the forcible, top-down restructuring of local societies by Western policymakers and scientists to enforce a ban on trophy hunting. However, we also point out that local communities where financial wherewithal has been established on the practice of trophy hunting remain dependent on Western patrons and Western markets. Trophy hunting understandably garners strong local support among those who benefit from it (Angula et al., 2018), but would a socially, economically, and ethically sustainable alternative that also empowers communities with higher degrees of autonomy and resilience not also receive broad support? We can only speculate, but this seems at least plausible.

If it turns out that abandoning trophy hunting comes at too high a monetary cost, as determined through transparent assessments informed by rigorous scientific research (Baylis et al., 2016), the conservation community may have reason to continue relying on it as a vital source of financial support in some contexts. However, in this case trophy hunting should be used reluctantly and with due compunction. To be inescapably tethered to a system that involves killing and debasing individual nonhuman animals, as the only way to save their populations or species, would be tragic. Although the moral infraction may be somewhat ameliorated by remorse in our hearts for the blood on our hands (see Dickson, 2009), we suggest the bridled enthusiasm with which trophy hunting has already been championed as a (potential) conservation success story (e.g., Di Minin et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2013) is misplaced. We also suggest any claim to "conservation success" is shaky, if "success" is won only by the death and dishonor of those we seek to protect. As Dickson (2009) points out, underpinning any defense of trophy hunting for conservation is an implicit claim that conservation is a worthy goal. Although this seems noncontroversial *prima facie*, at least within the conservation community, such a premise should not be accepted or advanced uncritically. Is the goal of conservation to save wildlife only so we as humans may continue to use and enjoy them as we see fit? It would be bitterly ironic indeed to find the mission of conservation so distorted, and conservationists puppets of an anthropocentric worldview that arguably seeds the ecological damages they seek to reverse (White, 1967).

4 | CONCLUSIONS

Many hunters would perhaps pay to engage in big-game hunting even without the promise of a trophy, for example, to enjoy the recreational experience, support local businesses, or bring home photographs. Critics of the argument we advance in this essay may question whether we would still contest such practices on ethical grounds. We focused on the connotations of the wildlife "trophy," suggesting it is inappropriate and incongruous with the larger mission of conservation, but our

argument is in turn predicated on a more general ethical claim, namely, that human beings ought to engage in respectful relationships with nonhuman animals. In this light, the grounds upon which we would censure any particular hunting practice can be distilled to a basic question: are nonhuman animals being treated as objects, or mere means to our own ends? This question can be asked of any hunter or hunting practice, and we suggest any response to the affirmative gives good cause for moral concern.

Objectification, that is, the regard and treatment of an entity as an inanimate object, is a key component of dehumanization, used to rationalize bigotry and aggression against other human beings (Haslam, 2006). Objectification is also a mechanism of moral disengagement, a psychological process allowing people to temporarily or conditionally suspend moral norms to engage in what would otherwise be condemned as unethical behavior (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Vittorio Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Harrison (2006) argues human body parts were at times collected as trophies by American troops fighting in the Pacific War to consummate the objectification of enemy soldiers, allowing them to minimize the moral conflict of violating an otherwise strong taboo against taking human life. We suggest similar processes may be at work in the creation of trophies from wildlife. The use of euphemism is another known mode of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996). As such, it is striking to note how fluidly the conservation literature has appropriated the word "trophy." What if we were to say not "trophy" but "tusk," "foot," "ear," or "head?" The view across the moral landscape shifts, somehow, when we call things by their common names.

We suggest the scientific conservation community needs to begin thinking more critically about trophy hunting, not just in economic and instrumental terms, but also as a symbolic and perhaps ritual reification of a deeply entrenched Western narrative of (predominantly white, male) human supremacy. Unfortunately, recent political affairs in the United States have seen absurdity naturalized and vulgarity applauded, at least by some sectors of the public. In this social climate we risk moral desensitization, which is why it is paramount to be transparent and unequivocal: for a Western hunter to pay for the privilege of killing an animal, and to then take its body as a trophy of conquest, is alarming and morally reprehensible. Remaining implicated in the practice of trophy hunting does not befit us as moral, rational beings, and it is time for the conservation community to wake up and face up to the chauvinistic, colonialist, and utilitarian anthropocentric undertones of the practice. That critical scholarship has effectively exposed both subtle and overt systems of oppression in society, which yet remain intact and influential as ever, points to a failure in our educational, political, and moral systems. This cannot be sanctioned or dismissed as mere inertia of the status quo. Trophy hunting violates the dignity of individual nonhuman animals, and is beneath our dignity as human beings. Continuing complicity by conservationists without fully exhausting other options is not now nor has it ever been appropriate. As a community, we must at least hope to do better.

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