

have experienced substantial population declines and range contractions throughout the world during the past two centuries. Because of the high metabolic demands that come with endothermy and large body size, these carnivores often require large prey and expansive habitats. These food requirements and wide-ranging behaviour often bring them into conflict with humans and livestock. This, in addition to human intolerance, renders them vulnerable to extinction. Large carnivores face enormous threats that have caused massive declines in their populations and geographic ranges, including habitat loss and degradation, persecution, utilization, and depletion of prey. We highlight how these threats can affect the conservation status and ecological roles of this planet's 31 largest carnivores.

Ecologically important carnivores. Seven species of large carnivores with documented ecological effects involving (A) "tri-trophic cascades" from large carnivores to prey to plants, (B) "mesopredator cascades" from large carnivores to meso predators to prey of mesopredators, and (C) both tri-trophic and meso predator cascades. [Photo credits: sea otter (N. Smith), puma (W. Ripple), lion (K. Abley), leopard (A. Dey), Eurasianlynx (B. Elmhagen), dingo (A. McNab), gray wolf (D. Mclaughlin)]



STOP PRESS: 350,000 Reasons to Kill a Black Rhino

Ivo Vegter 13th January 2014 (South Africa)

[The Daily Maverick](#)

Editor's Note: African Indaba brought already several opinion pieces of Ivo Vegter, a columnist of The Daily Maverick in the past. In view of the high resonance the Dallas Safari Club Auction created around the world, we decided share this article with our readers immediately, although the January issue of African Indaba was already finalized by the time Ivo Vegter's article appeared on January 13th, 2014. Make sure that you click on the links provided in Vegter's article in order to get a complete view of the issues at stake. At the time of writing this note there were already over 150 comments on the Daily Maverick webpage – most likely there are hundreds more by the time you get this in your inbox. Make sure to access the Daily Maverick webpage to read these comments – you will be surprised!

Here is Vegter's article:

A black rhino in Namibia is about to get shot. Legally, of course. The permit was auctioned off for a not insignificant \$350,000. The public outcry – including death threats – was reserved for an unsympathetic target: an anonymous American hunter. Equally predictably, the outcry is entirely wrong.

Nobody batted an eyelid in 2012 when Namibia instituted a policy of permitting five black rhino hunts per year, in the hope of deriving some revenue from animals that are, for conservation reasons, surplus to requirements.

Last week, however, it was reported that an unidentified Texan hunter bid \$350,000 for one of the permits, and immediately, the hysteria flared up. Ben Carter, director of the Dallas Safari Club which hosted the permit auction, told [Agence France-Presse](#), a wire service, that his staff and their family members had received "more than a dozen ... death threats" and reported the matter to the police.

One of my correspondents blamed it all on former US president Ronald Reagan's cuts to the education and mental health budgets, suggesting that Texans are both stupid and insane.

For hunter-conservationists and all people who are interested in the conservation, management and sustainable use of Africa's wild natural resources. African Indaba is the official CIC Newsletter on African affairs, with editorial independence. For more information about the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation CIC go to

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Meanwhile, Namibian wildlife authorities have defended the sale, saying that the funds are to be used for anti-poaching and other conservation measures, and that the targeted animals are individuals that in any case would have to be culled to ensure the health and survival of the rhino population in that country.

I've had a number of occasions to argue in favour of [commercial game hunting](#), [farming rhino](#), [free trade in rhino horn](#), and [hunting lions](#). Not because I like hunting, you understand. I'm no gung-ho sinews-in-the-teeth hunter. I'm not even a sophisticated high-tech ninja assassin.

However, rationally speaking, it is clear that animals that have economic value to their owners get protected by those owners. Even if they're owned by a government, the ability to earn a larger sustainable revenue from a thriving wildlife population than mere photographic tourism can provide is a powerful incentive to conserve and manage valuable and rare species.

If this is true for some species, why not for all of them? If this is true at some population levels, why not also for critically endangered species?

The era of the colonial big game hunter demonstrated the consequences of unowned wildlife. The destruction of once-thriving populations of large game was a clear case that an asset that is everyone's responsibility gets exploited by everybody, and protected by nobody. The same happened in many post-colonial African countries, as it did in Asia and South America. Uncontrolled poaching drove several species to extinction, and left many others decimated and reeling. Ocean fisheries are another case, in which property rights are notoriously hard to establish and enforce, leading to acute threats to species survival that are hard to combat.

Campaigns to halt species decline, and in particular the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), have largely been ineffective. As I wrote [two years ago](#), such prohibition campaigns are notorious, for not succeeding at best. They sometimes even make matters worse by artificially raising the price of a commodity, thus making it profitable for crime syndicates to establish black market trade.

I made the case in the context of rhinos, and the Property and Environment Research Centre (PERC), an independent lobby group that advocates private solutions to conservation problems, makes a [similar case](#) in the context of tiger conservation.

Ironically, the few species that CITES officials cite as [success stories](#) are, in fact, cases where private property rights and legal farming or hunting saved species from the brink of extinction. Among them are crocodiles, turtles and perhaps the most eloquent example, the South American [vicuña](#). These creatures, prized for their fine wool, are once again thriving, thanks to a programme legalising trade in vicuña fleece, and extending property rights to local communities.

Of course, neither private property rights nor legal trade in animal products are panaceae. They do not remove the threat of poaching altogether, as more recent academic [research on vicuña](#) shows. Stock theft remains a problem even with common farm animals such as sheep and cattle.

However, by providing a legal alternative to black-market products, placing downward pressure on prices, and raising revenue for farms and conservation agencies, legal trade makes the threat of poaching considerably less acute and easier to combat. Poaching happens with sheep and cattle, but it is not a financial crisis for farmers, nor an existential problem for the species.

There are a few misconceptions that need addressing when discussing legal hunting, or legal trade in the products of endangered species.

The first is that there is a single right way to manage any given species. If there is, everyone might have an opinion, but few likely know the right solution. The management of game ought to be up to the private owners and individual conservation agencies. They, like the Namibian conservation authorities in the case of the black rhino under their care, are best placed to judge which animals need to be culled for conservation reasons, and which additional animals can safely be taken without harming the remaining population.

The same is true for the question of whether animals are more productive when their products are harvested by non-lethal means, such as shearing vicuña or dehorning rhino, or by killing animals for their products, like we do with many animals for leather and meat. This is a decision best made by farmers. This is a local, practical decision, informed by business and conservation considerations. Not all farmers will do things the same way. Not all farmers will even make the right choice. But by distributing the management responsibility among multiple private farmers, rather than establishing a single centralised policy, one reduces the impact of mistakes. If some farmers fail, or act irresponsibly, it will harm only their own businesses, and the animals on their property, rather than the wider population.

Another factor that inflames public sentiment is money. The irony is that while high prices paid for hunting permits tend to whip up resentment, it would be far worse if conservation authorities or game farmers couldn't get high prices for their animals.

A similar dynamic is at play when environmental groups and newspapers trumpet prices for bluefin tuna. Last year, a record price of \$1.76 million was paid for the first fish of the season in Japan. According to Andrew Revkin at the New York Times, environmentalists [claimed](#) that this "masks a real and pressing problem", namely declining fish stocks – as if it would make sense for an abundant fish species to fetch such a price. [This year](#), the ceremonial sale earned just five

percent of what was paid last year, “despite signs that the species is in serious decline.” Can’t win. Does a low price or a high price mask these signs?

The price mechanism is a fascinating thing. When a commodity is scarce, relative to demand, prices rise. This has the double effect of incentivising higher production, if possible, and rationing consumption, if necessary. Conversely, if scarcity declines, so will prices, and more people will have their demand for the commodity met at reasonable cost.

So, a high price for a hunting permit (or a tuna, or a walnut side table) is to be expected if the species in question is under pressure. That means they have high revenue potential, while demand will be limited, both of which serve to protect the resource. And should the price decline over time, it will be an even better sign, because it means that demand is being sustainably supplied by producers.

The notion that economic value trumps altruism as an incentive to breed and protect rare game is borne out by hunting ranches in the very same state of Texas where this black rhino hunting permit was sold. Although Reagan made Texans crazy and stupid, ranchers in the Lone Star State have brought several species back from the brink of extinction. This happened neither by accident, nor by the sort of green idealism espoused by self-righteous urban elites that condescend to call people who aren’t like them stupid.

Three antelope that are extinct in the wild in their native Africa, the dama gazelle, addax and scimitar-horned oryx, thrive in Texas. According to the state’s Exotic Wildlife Association, as quoted by the [Houston Chronicle](#), the populations grew from two addax, nine dama gazelle, and 32 oryx in the 1970s, to thriving herds of 5,000 addax, 800 dama and 11,000 oryx today.

Only, they’re under threat again. This time, environmental groups such as Friends of Animals and the Humane Society of the United States – the same groups that led the outcry over the black rhino hunt – managed to get the species listed under the US Endangered Species Act. Ranchers, interviewed for [60 Minutes on CBS](#), have declared that their revenue potential is the only thing that keeps them alive, and a hunting ban would ensure their extinction.

Priscilla Feral, the CEO of Friends of Animals, retorted that she’d rather see them extinct than accept legal hunting. She may well get her wish, but last I checked, we frown on people who actively try to wipe out endangered species.

So-called environmentalists quite openly say they’re willing to let endangered animals go extinct to advance their radical green agenda. They are supported by a howling mob wielding torches and pitchforks, coming after the children of people who disagree with them. Evidently, their ideology is a smokescreen for pathological, psychopathical misanthropy.

Is that an ideology worth saving from lunatics who scream blue murder? Perhaps the rest of us – economists and conservationists alike – should have a rational discussion about how economic value is more likely to ensure the survival of endangered species than any measures we’ve tried to date.

In this sense, \$350,000 is a very good reason to allow someone to shoot a black rhino.

This animal would have had to be culled anyway, and the revenue from the hunt is explicitly earmarked for anti-poaching and conservation efforts. But even if neither of these were true, and the profit went straight into a greedy rancher’s back pocket, the price paid for a trophy hunt is a splendid incentive to sustain healthy populations of rare and endangered animals. Especially when hunting bans, nationalisation, emotional appeals and most other tricks we’ve tried have failed to save endangered species. **DM**

Ivo Vegter is a columnist and the author of [Extreme Environment](#), a book on environmental exaggeration and how it harms emerging economies. He approaches issues from the perspective of individual liberty and free markets. He grew up in the deep south of Johannesburg, and learnt his politics reading the Weekly Mail and Vrye Weekblad at Wits University during the early years of the country's transition to democracy. He recently left the city for the lower cost of living of Knysna, where he continues to write about everything under the sun. He is always right.



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