

“Something Rotten in the State of Hunting”

By Gareth Patterson

Published in South Africa's Mail and Guardian May 1998

The hunting fraternity initially blamed the animal rights lobby for the expose of "canned" lion hunting this year.

They said it was a means of tarring South African conservation of International Trade in Endanger Species and of dampening the Southern African countries' call for a resumption of the trade in ivory.

But almost a year has passed now, canned lion hunting is still very much alive and the hunting fraternity is at last admitting publicly that a re-assessment and an overhaul of its won industry is badly needed.

This has resulted in the Professional Hunters' Association of South Africa (Phasa) restructuring and reinforcing its code of tactics.

Greater self-regulation is required if sport hunting as a business is to survive. Personally, I feel the industry has allowed the rot of malpractice and declining ethics to sink in too deeply for South Africa ever to regain credibility among overseas trophy hunters. They will, I believe, increasingly steer away from South Africa as a hunting destination.

The South African hunters themselves are admitting the country's reputation is seriously flawed. A letter from a hunter published in a recent issue of Magnum magazine stated: "We South Africans are the world's worst when it comes to hunting ethics. The majority of our hunters prefer this kind of slaughter. Most hunters are not physically fit enough to walk and stalk: they have to shoot from a vehicle. Despite popular opinion, we also do not like physical sport. We'd much rather watch it, while we sit and drink our beers." It seems indeed that the majority of hunting in South Africa is the "point-and-pull-the-trigger" type, hunting from the back of vehicles. Should proposed new hunting legislation outlaw such practices, hunting as many South Africans have known it will be over.

The canned lion expose has ramifications for the hunting industry beyond our boundaries. The Safari Club International, the world's largest hunting association, recently reacted to the scandal by suspending from its record books all lion trophies registered as having been hunted in South Africa and Namibia. It will not be surprising if trophy hunters are unwilling to admit bagging trophies in South Africa, or are unwilling to hunt here.

Last year Phasa's president reported to its members: "I am sure that most of our members are familiar with the [canned lion-hunting expose]. Let me tell you, what has happened so far is only the beginning. [Hunting] cancellations continue to come in...I don't know how we will eventually assess the total damage."

He urged Phasa's members to "do their utmost to avoid actions that may reflect negatively on this industry."

Presently the trophy-hunting business in South Africa is worth about R300-million. But if local hunting trends follow those in the United States, there will be a tapering off of business anyway. In the US there has been a continual decline in the number of people buying hunting licenses, and demographic researchers believe that hunting may be extinct in that country by 2050. What's more, I have to question the appropriateness of trophy hunting in a country of emerging Africanism, in a

era of "African renaissance." It is, after all, an industry rooted in colonialism, and is an unholy relic of that same colonialism.

The trophy-hunting industry has, in Africa, historically been dominated by whites while, ironically, the people it is ultimately dependent upon are black.

In South Africa, for example, it is the black trackers and other staff who do most of the physical work in the field. It is they who track and spot the animals for the hunter, they who load the animals on the vehicles after they have been shot, and they who skin and butcher the animals while the "hunters" are enjoying a celebratory drink or two after the hunt. Yes, the hunting industry does provide jobs for blacks, but that doesn't change the fact that it is a white controlled industry.

The game farm owners, the professional hunters, the hunting outfitters and the membership of the various hunting associations are almost exclusively white.

What is often forgotten is that the very notion of killing an animal for sport is generally not an African idea. As Professor Ali Mazrui wrote in his book The Africans: A Triple Heritage: Only in the culture of Western secularism is hunting almost purely for sport, with the food factor being virtually incidental.

"The [Western] economic value of animals does not lie in their capacity to satisfy an empty stomach, but in their capacity to satisfy a greedy thirst for blood and greedy yearning for masculine performance."

The hunting fraternity may argue that trophy hunting is "of Africa" and will cite examples such as the Masai warriors in Kenya killing lions. Such hunting did occur, but this was a "rite of passage." Hunting in Africa otherwise is overwhelmingly for food.

On this subject, Credo Mutwa wrote in his recent book Isilwane: The Animal: "Africans did not hunt animals for fun. They were hunted for food and for religious reasons. In many instances a religious hunt was conducted by the king once, and only once, during his lifetime."

I have written about South Africa's growing international reputation for unethical hunting, but what is "ethical" hunting?

Hunters will talk about the principles of "fair chase" and so on--but what about killing another being when your own survival is not dependent upon its death? What is ethical about killing another purely for "sport" or recreation?

Many white South African males, I believe, were conditioned during their youth to kill, and therefore do not question why they hunt. Perhaps similar conditioning in youth produced unquestioning attitudes in white males in this country to, say apartheid or how they view women. Then there are those who, like serial killers, see beauty in death and not in life.