

seeing the LIGHT

The recent decision by the governments of Botswana and Zambia to halt trophy hunting has been praised in some conservation circles in southern Africa. Ian Michler explains why.



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TOWARDS THE END OF LAST YEAR THE Botswana government announced that trophy hunting will no longer be allowed on any state or community land from the end of 2013. The ban extends to what is known as 'citizen hunting' for the pot and covers all species, including elephants.

And then in early January this year the government of Zambia annulled the tender process for hunting concessions in 19 Game Management Areas (GMAs) and cancelled all hunting licences and quotas for at least one year. It also introduced an immediate and indefinite ban on the hunting of lions and leopards and committed to a thorough review of the hunting industry.

These are extremely sensible stands and both governments should be congratulated for their vision. Although taken independently, the decisions are based on similar factors that clearly indicate a further loss of support for trophy hunting as an effective wildlife management option.

On the economic front, the contribution of hunting has always been overplayed. In most countries the industry has only a six-month season and the benefits delivered to local economies by the small camps, with their limited complements of staff and clients, are insubstantial. The real money goes into the pockets of the operators and is often collected outside the home states.

In the case of Botswana, the photographic sector has steadily replaced hunting over the past two decades. In the process, the ecotourism industry as a whole has grown significantly and its comparative advantages have become increasingly evident. The government now has records relating to concession fees, employment numbers and opportunities, wages and taxes paid, contributions to conservation and a host of other criteria that enable them to make direct comparisons between the two industries.

In Zambia, where approximately US\$3-million is earned annually from trophy hunting, Tourism and Arts Minister Sylvia Masebo said it loud and clear: 'Why should we lose our animals for US\$3-million a year? The benefits we get from [photographic] tourist visits are much higher.' And as reported in a number of stakeholder meetings held after the bans were announced, remuneration to local people from hunting is simply not materialising; communities located within or on the borders of GMAs are as impoverished as ever.

The ban on hunting makes just as much sense when it comes to ecological considerations. The primary claim in this regard is the industry's much-touted anti-poaching role, but this is totally misrepresented. Poaching occurs

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in all protected areas and the intensity of it is driven by factors such as the prevailing socio-economic conditions and levels of policing. It is certainly true that the presence of tour operators and their clients acts as a deterrent to poaching, and while hunting concessions claim the same advantage, the protection they offer to wildlife is no better. If anything, it could be argued that whereas the hunting season lasts only six months, most photographic operators are in business year round, which translates into a far more significant presence on the ground.

In both Botswana and Zambia, the hunters have occupied concessions around the perimeters of national parks and reserves, and this is where the poaching starts. Further afield, Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve serves as a more obvious example of the connection between hunting and poaching. Almost 95 per

Whereas all hunting licences in Zambia have been cancelled for one year, the ban on hunting lions and leopards in the country is indefinite.

cent of its land is parcelled out among more than 40 hunting concessions yet, as reported by conservation agencies and the Tanzanian government, thousands of elephants are being lost to ivory poachers each year.

Another spurious claim put forward by advocates of hunting pertains to the gene pool. Rather than targeting the old and infirm, as they assert, trophy hunting is actually all about pursuing the prime animals within the gene pool of individual species. That is why record books are kept and why every operator aims to get as many entries in them as possible and thus obtain a marketing edge. The loss of established animals year after year hammers the breeding stock and is extremely disruptive to the social systems and behavioural patterns of the different species. Given the existing pressures on wildlife in most protected areas, this is why trophy hunting is at odds with conservation. How can any activity that seeks to kill what everyone else is so diligently trying to protect be making a contribution?

When viewed comparatively, there is no contest as to which land-use option for nationally protected areas is superior. The money involved and a powerful lobby will no doubt keep hunting grounds open in some countries for years to come, but Botswana and Zambia, by breaking ranks, at the very least have laid down a marker to the conservation world – the role of trophy hunting as a conservation tool needs to be thoroughly reviewed.

Also read Ian's blogs on the subject at <http://bit.ly/12bzuGF>, <http://bit.ly/V058T6> and <http://bit.ly/11mhc5x>

