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Kill to Conserve: Ethical Implications of Trophy Hunting Conservation Measures

By,

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Honors Philosophy 1110: Ethics

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On the eleventh of January 2014, a permit to kill a black rhinoceros in Namibia was auctioned off for \$350,000. The Dallas Safari Club stated that the purpose of the auction was to raise funds for the conservation of the black rhinoceros, as well as other threatened and endangered species.³ Corey Knowlton, the winner of the auction, will be able to hunt a rhino of his choosing and has made it clear that he will target an individual that is harming other rhinos.¹² Conservationists across the United States decried the auction from the moment it was announced, claiming that hunting an endangered species in the name of preservation is a ridiculous plan. Despite the various underlying reasons for these protests, the controversial nature of this issue brings about an opportunity to further examine the trophy hunting strategy of species conservation and maintenance. For example, one can examine the ethical dilemma brought about by the simple, albeit critical, question: “What about the individual animal being hunted?” Specifically, can the death and suffering of an individual be justified by the possibility of a healthier future for its species as a whole?

Fundamental to any side of this issue is the determination of whether or not trophy hunting is an effective means of conservation. Statements from executives at the Dallas Safari Club, as well as from the media, sound well-informed and cast the hunt in a relatively positive light. At the same time, those conservationists who oppose the hunt also seem to have a valid argument when they talk of the detrimental effects of hunting. For instance, Ben Carter, the Dallas Safari Club Executive Director, states: “These bulls no longer contribute to the growth of the population... In many cases, they will kill younger, non-breeding bulls.”⁹ When you couple the possible prevention of such damages with the amount of money hunting auctions can raise, it may seem as though there is no downside to this method of conservation. As I will lay out later in this argument, though, there is, indeed, a strong basis for opposing trophy hunting; but first, I will examine if there is any empirical foundation for the claims made above.

In their paper, “Trophy Hunting of Black Rhino *Diceros bicornis*: Proposals to Ensure Its Future Sustainability,” N. Leader-Williams et al. describe the possible benefits of allowing a small number of

black rhinos to be hunted in Namibia and South Africa. According to their study, one of the reasons that the white rhinos of South Africa continue to increase in number is “limited and sustainable use, through trophy hunting and live sales.”⁸ They assert that controlled hunts, sanctioned by governments after rigorous evaluations, will assist in managing the surplus of male rhinoceroses and will aid in raising money for furthering conservation efforts. Furthermore, such events would act as incentives for landowners to manage wildlife on their property. The evidence reveals a positive correlation between trophy hunting and stable population growth. White and black rhino populations have both seen population growth in the past few decades, but white rhinos are no longer classified as a threatened species⁸, whereas black rhinos are still critically endangered.⁴

So far I have discussed the claims in favor of trophy hunting, and have examined the empirical foundations of those assertions. Examining the case in this manner is necessary to prevent the use of empirical data as a criticism of my argument. I thus make clear my recognition of the scientific foundation and possible consequences of hunting permit sales, and assert that they cannot justify the death of an individual animal; but why not? Surely, it would seem, if there is a method of conservation that is beneficial to a species, which does not sacrifice anything morally significant, it ought to be allowed in order to prevent the greater damage of species extinction. Even this basic argument, though, leads to another, more fundamental question: why should we, as humans, be concerned about conserving other species?

One answer to the question of why species conservation matters can be found in the argument provided by Greg Bognar, in his essay, “Respect for Nature.” Bognar’s analysis of human attitudes towards nature, albeit short, provides valuable insight as to why we should all care about the other living beings of our world. He writes: “We should respect other living beings, not for our own sake or their intrinsic worth but for that sake of our interconnectedness in ecological systems... living beings are part of ecosystems, and they have value... from the relations they have in those ecosystems.”² All living

things, including animals, have a specific place in their ecosystem, contributing to the overall success of other species. Eliminating any one species could have far reaching effects, possibly even affecting humans.¹³ Although Bognar rightfully points out the importance of all living beings, his essay still revolves around human interests. Additionally, focusing on the interconnectedness of animals and humans places a worth on animals only if they seem useful to their ecosystem. It may seem an unlikely scenario, but a consequence of worth based on productiveness in an ecosystem is that it is not particularly wrong to kill off animals that may, at the time, seem harmful to an ecosystem or area.

In order to truly determine why humans should care about animals and nature, one must be able to assign, to every individual of a species, some non-arbitrary characteristic that is universal to humans and animals. I include humans in my definition because if there is some characteristic that is general enough to apply to all of the various animals, as living beings, it follows that it should be able to be applied to humans, as well. Ethicist Peter Singer describes exactly such a principle in his book, "Animal Liberation," in which he argues against speciesism based on an individual's ability to suffer: "If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering- in so far as rough comparisons can be made- of any other being."¹⁰ Therefore, it is not a being's intelligence, species, or relative usefulness that make it worth caring about and protecting, as these are arbitrary and subjective qualifiers which could easily be shifted to anyone's liking; rather, a being's ability to suffer gives it equal standing, in regards to the interest to live and resist suffering, with humans and other animals. Every individual has an interest in living a good life, in which suffering is reduced, and that interest cannot be ignored by morally responsible beings.

We now have the tools to argue for the importance of species conservation, and as a result the issue of trophy hunting can be analyzed at a deeper level. If a being has some interest in resisting suffering, it is the duty of a morally responsible individual, viz. a human, to take that interest into

account when making decisions. Furthermore, all beings are interconnected in ecosystems, which themselves are interconnected, meaning that actions have far reaching consequences and that all beings play a significant role in nature. Since human activity, such as hunting, pollution, and deforestation, has had damaging effects on many animal populations, including the African rhinos¹⁵, resulting in suffering, it is our moral obligation, as humans, to work to alleviate that suffering. Returning to the earlier assertion that any conservation method, which does not sacrifice anything morally significant, ought to be pursued in order to prevent species extinction, one can see that it is a valid statement. One must recognize, though, the qualifying statement, borrowed in part from Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality,"¹¹ that nothing of moral significance can be sacrificed in the process of conservation. Singer takes great care to highlight the importance of fulfilling one's moral obligations with moral actions, so as to prevent others from taking his argument to the absurd conclusion that one may pursue any course of action, as long as it is beneficial to some person or group. Acknowledging that one ought not to use immoral means to achieve a goal builds a solid foundation for conservation arguments. As a result, we can eliminate generally unacceptable situations, such as killing factory owners and workers for polluting.

Keeping in mind that nothing of moral significance be sacrificed in the name of conservation, and that all beings have an interest to live and avoid suffering, it becomes clear that the basic argument suggested for supporting trophy hunting, that any conservation method be used if it can prevent species extinction, is actually an argument against hunting. If one wishes to help recover the rhino populations, as they ought to, due to the suffering inflicted by human activities, they by all means should pursue any methods that can help produce sustainable population growth, as long as they do not sacrifice anything morally significant in the process. While trophy hunting has been positively correlated with population recovery, it is not a viable conservation option as it does not take into account the suffering of the animal that is to be hunted. Indeed, if we are to accept that animals feel pain, suffer, and have some

interest in living, it would be ridiculous to disregard those items in the name of helping the species. One cannot claim to have the best interest of a species in mind if they cannot recognize the most basic interest in living and not suffering.

I foresee two major criticism of my assertions, both of which I will address at present. One criticism that may be posed is that the animal will be killed in such a way that will minimize its suffering, and that the targeted animal may be one which is harming other rhinos. In response to the assertion that the animal will be killed in a humane way, I argue that it can never be guaranteed that a shot will not miss its mark, or that a certain method, which we hold to be humane, will actually minimize the animals suffering. Even if such a claim could be made, and it was found that the animal would not suffer, one still cannot justify ending the life of a being who has some interest in not dying. That the rhino may be harming others is a more interesting criticism because it implies that a greater number of rhinos will suffer if the life of one is not taken. As a primarily utilitarian argument, though, it fails to take into account the many subtleties of the issue. If we take as fact that the selected rhino is a danger to other members of its species, and that it causes suffering beyond itself, we must step back and analyze why this behavior seems to occur in rhino populations. As a start, it obviously cannot be asserted that the rhino is evil or misguided, since animals do not have a moral capacity and follow an instinctual, natural lifestyle. It can therefore be safely said that violent male rhinos act either from instinct, or due to some disease. Although it is nearly impossible, without further scientific investigation, to determine which is to blame, it seems more likely, due to the frequency of violent behavior, that instinct drives certain male rhinos to harm others of their species. One may still wish to say that even if the behavior is instinctual, it is causing multiple individuals to suffer and must be stopped. If that were the case, then one also ought to kill all predatory animals and certain insects, which eat their mates and others of their kind. I think most people would agree that killing off all predatory species and insects would be a highly disturbing course of action, and so it does not make sense to kill on the basis of instinctual violence. It also does

not seem wise to challenge the systems of nature which have kept animal populations in proper balance since before humans existed, or at least had any significant impact.

The second criticism I will address is the defense of the rights of hunters and cultural values. Brought to the table in the debate over the rhino auction, and indeed in any dispute over hunting animals, are the interests of hunters worldwide. Even the Dallas Safari Club's mission statement, "to conserve wildlife and wilderness lands, to educate youth and the general public and to promote the rights and interests of hunters worldwide,"¹⁴ includes a clause about hunters. While a general assessment of hunter's rights is beyond the scope of this argument, I will examine the interests of hunters in regards to conservation trophy hunting, specifically of the black rhino. As rhinos are not a primary food source, and their conservation is largely funded by governments and organizations, it does not make sense to say that one can justify killing a rhino for food. There are a large number of food sources other than animals to begin with, as Singer points out¹⁰, but there are also many other animals which are commonly used for food. Although I do not agree with the point to which Singer carries his argument, as there are circumstances, which cannot be extirpated here for the sake of space and coherence, that warrant hunting for food, I do find that if one cannot justify killing an animal for sustenance, it would be even less reasonable to hunt it for sport or trophy. The so called right of a hunter to gain material satisfaction does not outweigh the suffering and death of the animal. Furthermore, many hunters, like the Dallas Safari Club, say that they have respect for animals and conservation efforts. If that is the case, which I do not doubt that it is, hunters need to recognize that in order to respect the animal, they ought to respect its interests in living and avoiding pain.

Cultural values are, in and of themselves, also an insufficient reason to end an animal's life. Negotiating the weight of religion and tradition is always difficult, since it carries with it the inability to disprove or discredit the intangibilities of spirituality, something which many modern philosophers choose to ignore in order to simplify their arguments. For this argument, though, it is not necessary to

directly contradict religion or culture. The main point of concern comes from Southeast Asia, where it is believed that rhino horns possess medicinal properties.³ Rhino horns also contain ivory, which is a large part of traditional Chinese art and culture.⁶ The reason I say that it is not necessary to contradict religion or culture is that, first of all, there exists a plethora of medicines and treatment methods other than rhino horn. Even if the horns contain some form of medicine, there are other ways to treat patients. In regards to Chinese culture, the recent expansion of the middle class has led to the creation of ivory factories, which are anything but traditional.⁶ Materialism, more than traditional values, drives the current market for ivory art. If there is still a demand for the traditional practice of ivory sculpting, there are ways to remove rhino horns and elephant tusks without killing the animals.

Now that it has been established that the death of an individual animal cannot be justified, based on the animal's interest in a life with limited suffering, by conservation efforts, hunter's rights, or cultural values, I will put at ease any doubts as to the financial survival of conservancies. Conservation organizations and government agencies provide most of the financial support needed for conservation programs. According to one study, "foreign donors such as USAID have played a major role in providing financial support for conservancy development since the early 1990s."⁷ While hunting programs, particularly in Namibia, provide a source of additional income for the country and its reserves⁷, removing them would not have as much of an impact as some may think. Tourist expenditures on park entrance fees, safaris, and conservancy funds also generate large amounts of revenue.¹ Barbara King, a professor at the College of William and Mary, suggests that instead of auctioning off a hunting permit, organizations should auction permits for wildlife photography safaris to prevent the hunting of endangered species.⁵ Although hypothetical, King's idea is evidence of the existence of creative fundraising solutions that take into consideration the interests of animals.

Overall, the recent auctioning of the rhino hunting permit must serve as a point of reflection for all of us as human beings. In order to successfully protect and conserve the species damaged by human

activity, we must revise our understanding of animals, hunting, and the purpose of conservancies. If the practice of trophy hunting as a conservation method continues unquestioned, I fear that people will not begin to recognize, at a conscious level, that animals, like humans, have an interest in living and avoiding suffering that we as moral beings cannot ignore. I cannot help but agree with Singer that it is a great challenge to overcome the preconceptions of one's time¹⁰, but it is a challenge that we ought to take on together in order provide a better future for non-human animals.

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