



# The Ethics of Trophy Hunting and Collecting

By Peter Flack

**A** long time ago, when Moses still played first team for our local rugby club, the editor of a hunting magazine asked me to write a regular column on hunting ethics. I was very hesitant and kicked for touch saying that it was an interesting suggestion and one I would like to think about. At the forefront of my mind was the one big question - who was I to write about ethics? At the end of the day, I was moved to write an article on the ethics of hunting game with dogs as a result of my anger at reading about an American hunter in Cameroon using dogs to corner that greatest of all African trophies - Bongo.

I dashed off an indignant article in no time at all, and the old adage - decided in haste, repent at leisure - proved to be only too true. I upset the wingshooters, one of whom waxed lyrical in quite a rude letter to

the editor, although I had expressly differentiated shooting birds over gun dogs from the Cameronian practices. My American friends, in turn, took me to task and explained how and why hunting bears and mountain lion over dogs had become part of their hunting heritage and that it was not considered unethical in the United States to bay such animals with dogs.

What I concluded from all of this was, firstly, that hunting ethics, like beauty, are often in the eye of the beholder. Secondly, that hunting ethics vary, not only from country to country, but often, within a country, from community to community. Thirdly, like other societal norms, they change over time and it is difficult to be dogmatic about such things.

In the second year of my law degree I studied jurisprudence, which encompassed the theory of law. I learnt that a society gets

the laws they deserve. That these laws are a reflection of the norms and morality of that society. If that is the case, and I am persuaded that it is, then I believe it applies in spades to unwritten laws or ethics. All I can say is that I subscribe to the hunting ethics put forward by the African Chapter of Safari Club International and I sincerely believe that, if other people were to adopt them, then all the stakeholders involved in hunting, as well as wildlife and wilderness areas, would benefit. Let me quote them verbatim :

**Code of Sport Hunting Conduct for Africa**  
*Adopted by the SCI Africa Advisory Board and the SCI Africa Chapter*

- Hunt only in accordance with the defined principles of fair chase.
- Abide by all relevant legislation and

*Opposite: One of the big and hairy, stamp and stick brigade. I won the tender put out by the Mpumalanga Parks Board for this old chap who was being persecuted by younger rivals. He is the current world record and an example of sustainable utilisation at its best. The rhino was killed quickly and cleanly instead of being horned to death. The Parks Board earned a significant sum to be ploughed back into conservation and I had the privilege of hunting and collecting the last member of the Big Five which I was looking for.*

recognised codes of conduct.

- Enhance by action the survival of wildlife populations, protection of biodiversity and promotion of sustainable utilisation.
- Ensure humane practices in all wildlife utilisation.
- Employ only proper hunting methods and appropriate equipment.
- At all times only engage in fair and honest practices.
- Educate others to the benefits of sustainable use, conservation, proper procedures and hunting ethics.
- Recognise the needs of indigenous rural communities relating to the utilisation of sustainable natural resources.

At any rate, in the thirteen years that I have been writing hunting stories, this is only the second time that I have written an article specifically on ethics and the reasons are again threefold. Firstly, to illustrate that ethics can and do change or, at least, some of mine have. Secondly, to illustrate that such changes may not all be bad and, thirdly, to apologise for views that I may have held and expressed too rigidly in the past, both verbally and in print.

The topic that I specifically want to address concerns the hunting for or the collection of trophies and their entry into record books of one kind or another. I confess that, for years, I have looked down my nose at people who entered animals into record books, took part in hunting competitions and made a fetish of collecting as many different species and sub-species as possible. I must apologise. I have discovered that I have, quite unwittingly, also become a collector and am about to enter my trophies into a record book.

Looking back, I can see how insidiously the collecting bug entered my blood stream. It really only began once I had graduated to hunting the Big Five and then only after a number of years of pursuing the big and hairy, stamp, stick and bite brigade. It so happened that I was reading a book by a famous East African professional hunter, I think it was J.A. Hunter, who had spent over 30 years trying to shoot a bongo in Kenya without success. I was deeply impressed that anyone could spend 30 years looking for one specific animal, particularly as I had just returned from my second elephant hunt

without an elephant. The thing, however, that really got to me, was that I had not the faintest idea what a bongo was. Nor for that matter, at that stage of my hunting career, did I know about the many different sub-species of buffalo, waterbuck, hartebeest and damaliscs, let alone all the various kinds of wildebeest, reedbuck, duiker, pigs and pygmy antelope.

Everything on my subsequent first hunt to the Central African Republic for bongo (Kenya was closed to hunting) was just that little bit different. I found it fascinating. It gave me a whole new hunting lease on life. There were buffalo but they were the smaller, red, matchbox buffaloes - *Syncerus caffer brachyceros*. There were waterbuck - not common but sing-sing. There were eland - not Cape but Lord Derby's. The bushbuck were harnessed, the duiker were red flanked and yellow backed. There were no impala, wildebeest, giraffe or zebra but there were Western kob and giant forest hog.

And the bushes, trees, grasses, birds, insects, orchids, flowers and people were a

revelation. The Central African Republic showed me a side of our continent that I had not imagined existed. On my return, I wondered to myself if there were other areas like it. I resolved, there and then, to try and find out. After all, there are so many disadvantages to living in Africa it seems silly not to take advantage of the good things our continent has to offer. And so I sought out the more remote wilderness areas and the unique game species and sub-species on offer there. Masailand, Serengeti, Lake Rukwa, the Danakil Desert, the Ethiopian highlands, the Omo Valley and so on.

As part of the intensive research and preparation for these trips, I computerized the over 40 000 entries in the Safari Club Record Book of Trophy Animals, on an interactive basis, and plotted them on a map of the African continent. For the first time I began to understand what an important conservation tool a detailed record book could be, something the Namibian Government has also cottoned onto. Clearly, where trophy standards consistently increase over a period of time, in a given area, you can conclude, all else being equal, that conservation practices in the region are sound.

The converse also applies. Although my head told me this and that it was, therefore, important for all hunters, to register all



*Tragelaphus euryceros euryceros or bongo is, in my opinion, the top trophy animal in Africa and no serious trophy collection is complete without one. This one is mine and resides in the office of my Karoo game farm.*



*I shot this wonderful 49 1/2 inch Lord Derby's eland on the fourteenth day of my hunt in the savannah of the Central African Republic. It is a truly spectacular and worthy member of the Fabulous Four.*

trophies to improve the data base and provide more reliable statistics in order to determine conservation trends, my heart and life long habits kicked against the change that this would require to "my" ethical standards.

However, my standpoint was founded on shifting sand. Moreover, the slope was slippery, and my slide gathered momentum when I started researching and writing articles on the various sub-species making up a particular genus. Articles such as "Gnu Gathering", "Waterbuck Wanderings" and "Reedbuck Ramblings" led the way. The final nail in the coffin was hammered in when I collected these stories plus many others I had written, into a new book which I have called, "Tales of an African Trophy Hunter" - due out in the United States early in 2002.

As part of my research for the new book I carefully examined both the Rowland Ward and SCI trophy record books. They identified 165 and 210 trophy species and sub-species, respectively, although both admitted that many were not distinct sub-species. Then, of course, many sub-species endemic to countries such as Angola, Somalia and Sudan cannot be hunted today because of conflict in the countries concerned. Still other sub-species are protected and some, I am sad to say, no longer exist.

Probably the best list - although by no

means a complete collection of available African game animals - is set out by SCI in the list of game animals which you need to collect in order to qualify for their Inner Circle of Trophy Animals of Africa. This consists of 156 animals of which 148 are still available and accessible in Africa today.

A hunter can qualify for this Inner Circle Award at different levels. For example, at the lowest or copper level, you require 17 of the 156 animals. At the highest or diamond level, you require 76 animals. In researching my book I discovered that I had, quite inadvertently, successfully hunted 115 of these animals. But this was not what mattered to me. What did matter and what focused my mind quite wonderfully, was the animals I had not hunted. For example, some of the small cats such as caracal and serval, certain of the forest animals such as giant forest hog and forest sitatunga, and then the mountain dwellers like aoudad (barbary sheep) and walia and so on.

Now I think this is a good thing. To focus attention on some of the lesser lights, on some of the less glamorous, less sought-after game animals. I believe that, in doing so, people may start hunting them and then others will start conserving these animals as they start to generate revenue and, instead of treating them as vermin, or unimportant competitors for the grazing of more lucrative

animals, game farmers will come to see their importance. The old axiom, if it pays it stays, is as relevant to an African wild cat as it is to a lion or as relevant to a blue duiker as it is to a blue wildebeest.

I found it most instructive to read P.C. du Plessis' doctoral thesis entitled: "Benuttingsvorme in die Wildbedryf, - Bestuursrekeningkundige Evaluering (Forms of Use in the Game Industry - a Management Accounting Evaluation)". He points out that in South Africa, by the 1950s, the numbers of various wildlife species such as bontebok, black wildebeest, Cape mountain zebra and white rhinoceros were dangerously low. Although there were notorious examples of uncontrolled killing by so-called sport hunters, the real reasons for the massive decline in the quantity and quality of game in South Africa were, primarily, drought, the depression, the two world wars, commercial killing for tusks, hides and meat and the mass culling of game in a mistaken attempt to eradicate the tsetse fly.

Conversely, it was the advent of sport or trophy hunting in the 1960s that kick started the resurgence of wildlife. Once farmers found they could earn money from their wildlife, the reversal of the trend of diminishing wildlife numbers began. It is an inescapable and empirically proven fact that, as a result of trophy hunting, South Africa



*Mountain Nyala in amongst eritreana arboritica in the Ethiopian highlands.*

has more game today than at any time since the turn of the century.

Professor Theuns Eloff of Potchefstroom University states that the amount of land under game, in whole or in part, is currently increasing at the rate of some 300 000 hectares per annum. The results are there for all to see – clearly and unequivocally. For example, 12 years ago I shot a Cape Eland which, at 39 inches, qualified as the new world record. Today, as a result of the conservation of this sought-after and expensive animal for trophy hunting purposes, that selfsame eland trophy no longer even makes the top 20 in the record books.

Trophy hunting also has the advantage that the largest male species are the most sought after. For the most part, this means that old, lone males are shot. These animals have already passed on their genetic traits, are often out of the breeding cycle, are mostly solitary (hence their hunting does not stress the herd) and, but for trophy hunting, would probably fall prey to starvation or a predator without any commercial benefit being received by anyone.

Trophy collecting, by extending the quest to less popular animals or those that are difficult to hunt, for whatever reason, extends the above advantages to a wider cross section of animals than would

ordinarily be the case. But for the desire to complete a collection, how many trophy hunters would bother or be interested to hunt all the bush duikers or all the different kudu sub-species, to mention but two examples?

This leads me to the logical and inevitable conclusion that the best way to ensure that an animal is effectively conserved is to stimulate trophy hunting and/or trophy collecting interest in that animal. Thereby an economic value is attributed to the animal and this will, equally inevitably, create the market forces that will lead to its active conservation.

Of course, trophy collecting is no different to trophy hunting or any other kind of hunting for that matter. It is, if anything, only a slightly more specialised form and, as such, exactly the same ethics apply. Some of these rules are, to hunters, as immutable as the Ten Commandments. They have stood the test of time and I was reminded of this when reading "Game Animals of the Sudan", published by Captain Brocklehurst, Game Warden of the Sudan, over 70 years ago. He wrote :

"Do not be too eager to shoot, and do not shoot at all unless you feel pretty sure of killing the animal you are firing at.

If, however, you only wound an animal, follow it as long as you can track it, no matter

what the expense in time and fatigue may be.

Some sportsmen, fortunately a small minority, seem to imagine that a large collection of heads, mostly of the commoner species, is a sign of a good hunter, but this is certainly not the case.

A collection of one or two fine representative heads of a large variety of species is proof of plenty of work, patience, judgement in selection and good sportsmanship.

Get as close as you possibly can to any animal before firing, and remember that the first shot is always the easiest.

Don't shoot the first animal of a species which you see; wait till you have seen more of them, and know what a good head looks like.

When hunting dangerous game like Elephant and Buffalo, it is safer to approach alone. Good shikaris are rare in this country, and even the best is liable to get nervous when his life depends on the skill of a man whom he does not know.

Read all you can about the animals you intend to hunt. Learn their habits and characteristics and, above all, where to aim in order to reach a vital spot. This is most important, as there is an erroneous idea among many sportsmen that, given a rifle of sufficiently large calibre, death must be



*This unusual animal is a wild Barbary Sheep and along with Wakia from Eritrea are the only members of the sheep and goat families, respectively, that are endemic to Africa.*

instantaneous wherever the animal is hit, but remember that "one hundred grains in the right place is worth a thousand in the wrong."

An animal, wounded in the body or with a broken leg, will go often a great distance, and eventually die a lingering death tortured by thirst or ants, unless it is mercifully killed by lions or hyaenas.

A good photograph of a wild animal in its natural surroundings is of more interest than all the heads, and is often a sign of great patience, courage and skill in bushcraft. Record heads mean nothing and are purely luck.

Above all, don't kill just for the sake of killing!"

This is not to say that all trophy collectors comply with these golden rules. We all know, or have heard of trophy collectors, who arrive on a hunt with a list of animals with the minimum trophy measurements set out opposite the animals' names. Often these so-called hunters have no regard or respect for wildlife or the hunt itself; they want to kill the maximum number of animals in the minimum amount of time no matter what it takes - by fair means or foul. They tick the animals off their lists like items bought in a supermarket and their "pleasure" is in direct proportion to that by which the length of the horns beats the minimum trophy standard.

As my old friend and taxidermist, Rodney Kretzschmar, can testify, the next trophy collector who asks him to artificially add fibre glass inches to a set of horns, will not be the first. Let alone those who bring in horns they have bought or picked up and try and pass off as those they have hunted, or those who try and pass off horns of one species as those of another, for example, small common reedbuck horns for those of mountain reedbuck. I have even heard of a person who, on seeing a female duiker,

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asked his professional hunter if he could shoot it. On seeing the look of bewilderment and shock on the pro's face he said, "Don't worry, my taxidermist can mount a set of horns on it!"

These sad cases should not be confused with genuine trophy hunters and trophy collectors who can, and do, provide additional and useful support to trophy hunting by focussing attention on the less popular game animals. This positive contribution is compounded if the trophies are entered in a record book as useful conservation data that can be gleaned from these books. Now all the record books need to do is to insist on additional information being provided with each new entry, such as precise date, geographic location, estimated age, weight of the animal and so on which will, in turn, make the record books even more useful conservation tools.

*Right: Hunting Bongo in the Equatorial rain forests with my tracker Martin Vungnessi Tto, who is not all beer and skittles.*

