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Hunting industry key to economic growth and transformation

Cyril Ramaphosa

In November 2020 the activist group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) released what it claimed was an expose detailing the involvement of Phala Phala Wildlife in the trophy hunting industry.

By virtue of my ownership of Phala Phala Wildlife, PETA sought to generate negative publicity for and cause embarrassment to the office of the President and to the country. A number of unsubstantiated allegations were made against Phala Phala and me personally. PETA subsequently attempted to garner greater international coverage for its alleged expose in a number of newspapers. PETA's claims are without basis or substance.

Phala Phala is a privately-owned wildlife farm that is run in accordance with conservation and wildlife management principles. Contrary to PETA's assertions, neither Phala Phala nor I have a stake in the trophy hunting industry. It is furthermore also patently false that Phala Phala breeds game for the purpose of being sold to trophy hunters; a claim they later made in a UK-based newspaper.

Phala Phala is well known and recognised for its wildlife breeding and management practices that comply with the best ethical and lawful practice in the sector; as well as for its contribution to the racial transformation of the sector.

This includes providing educational bursaries for black students and donating game to disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, Phala Phala's breeding programme focuses on enhancing the genetic material of some of South Africa's most iconic species that once faced extinction as a result of disease, habitat loss and excessive hunting.

In testament to this sterling reputation, a number of industry organizations have expressed support for Phala Phala in the wake of the PETA story; including the Professional Hunters' Association of South Africa (PHASA), Wildlife Ranching SA, the umbrella body Hunting and Wildlife Associations of South Africa (HAWASA) and others.

Lobby groups like PETA and other anti-hunting organizations either conflate unscrupulous hunting practices by a select few with the legal, well-regulated hunting industry, or they seek to impose their views on animal welfare on communities and societies in which hunting plays an

important part. In this regard, they single out African countries whose economies benefit from the income generated by the wildlife management sector.

Hunting is one of the legal and well-regulated activities pursued by private sector entities as well as communities that have regained their land back to generate income that also covers the costs of conservation and contributes to the development and the well-being of communities. It forms part of our country's policy on the sustainable utilization of natural resources.

Like other countries on the continent and globally, our natural resource management practices are guided by international environmental agreements such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Hunting tourism is a major contributor to the economy and is valued at over R6bn per annum. The hunting industry creates jobs and supports small business and enterprise development. It provides economic opportunities for communities who have benefited from land restitution, and facilitates the entry of previously disadvantaged communities into the wildlife economy; thereby supporting government's wider economic transformation objectives.

The transformation of the wildlife sector is a national priority of the South African government, in line with its commitment to land ownership transformation and the development of rural communities. The private sector in South Africa has a long history of contributing to conservation. The successful recovery of a number of animal species from the brink of extinction are a direct result of private sector contribution to conservation.

Today, South Africa's private sector manages approximately 50% of the national rhino population without any government subsidy. The success of these contributions has been driven by options to generate income from non-consumptive and consumptive use of wildlife and wildlife products.

The multi-dimensional nature of hunting is recognized by a number of international conservation agencies. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that affirms that well-regulated and well-managed hunting can play an important role in sustainable wildlife management

for communities in many parts of the world.

The World-Wide Fund (WWF) notes that excluding instances where threatened species are involved, hunting programmes that are scientifically-based, properly managed and enforced can be beneficial for sustainable resource management.

Given the sector's economic contribution and transformative potential, it is regrettable that African countries, including South Africa are facing an onslaught from anti-hunting organizations based abroad, including PETA. Hunting is not only legal in African countries but in a number of places around the world including Europe, North America, South America, Asia and Australia. But it is African countries that are being singled out for criticism.

This speaks to a growing tendency of foreign-based pressure groups such as PETA and more recently, the Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting, and others who are trying to impose their views on African countries.

Unfortunately, some local non-governmental organizations lend a helping hand to some of these international NGO's; most likely without fully appreciating their agendas. In their attempts to impute illegality to what is a legal and regulated economic activity, they undermine the wildlife management practices that form part of South Africa's and Africa's diverse economy and national culture.

Within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, the sustainable utilization of wildlife supports local communities in the provision of food and clothing. SADC's recognition of the importance of conservation and sustainable use of wildlife resources in the region is set out in the region's Protocol on Wildlife Conservation and Law Enforcement. The Protocol, that was developed through a democratic process, emphasises the need for regionally-agreed approaches to conservation, management and the enforcement of law to stop illegal uses. The Protocol also promotes national and regional capacity building and the facilitation of community-based wildlife management initiatives.

As noted in a recent article titled 'The Battle inside CITES', the SADC region supports significant populations of Africa's iconic wildlife species, and represents more

than 345 million people. All decisions around wildlife management must be the prerogative of these sovereign states, taking into account their significant conservation experience.

As noted in the same article, a number of African states who are party to CITES are increasingly raising concerns about the Western-influenced approach to CITES trade proposals, amongst others. It is African states, and not pressure groups based abroad, who must take decisions around natural resource management options that serve their sovereign interests, while giving due recognition to international conservation laws.

African states must also take pride in that Africa is the only continent on earth with a relatively intact assemblage of mega-herbivores. All other continents have either completely decimated theirs or driven them to extinction.

Africa still boasts one of the highest diversity of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and plants.

International special interest groups should seek to collaborate with, rather than to antagonize African states in the management of wildlife and biodiversity in general. South Africa remains committed to growing the protected area estate and continues to broaden the participation of communities and the private sector in conservation efforts. The legal, well-regulated hunting industry forms an important part of this. We further remain committed to advancing the principle of sustainable utilization of natural resources.

The conservation and environmental chauvinism displayed by pressure groups are a threat to global conservation efforts, including on multilateral platforms. This can ultimately undermine, rather than promote, conservation. It seeks to impose rules and standards partially on particular countries, whilst leaving others out. It undermines the efforts of African governments to do what is in their national interest and in the interests of their citizens.

It is a form of cultural imperialism.



Cyril Ramaphosa is the President of South Africa. - Editor



Mr Ramaphosa is a respected game breeder and buffalo from his stud regularly reaches record prices on game auctions.



JACQUES STRAUSS

Okavango River Chronicles: A hippo to remember

The Dangerous Seven: elephant, Black rhino, Cape buffalo, lion, leopard, crocodile, and hippopotamus. Why? Simply because they are the most dangerous animals in Africa. All of the Dangerous Seven are dangerous. There are more than enough weathering headstones across the African continent to vouch for that.

The last member of the list, namely the hippo, is the most underestimated...

Most people, who have never had a difference of opinion, tend to consider hippos as some sort of pathetic, overweight travesties of nature. Cartoonists and Disney films usually portray them in short ballet skirts with little, round, flat-topped teeth, with cute and cuddly faces. This mouth-foaming Disneyism further reinforces that the only way they could be classified as "dangerous" is if they happen to fall out of a two-story building window and landed on you. Most cartoonists and film-writers have never been to Africa, creating a fatal underestimation.

Facts show that hippos kill over 500 people per year in Africa, which equates to 1.3 people losing their lives to these over-sized herbivores daily. The most significant cause of hippo attacks is their territorial instinct, protective temperament, and their insecurities. An insecure hippo can be as dangerous as cancer, and hippos spend most of their day in the depths of insecurity. Although most deaths by hippo result from intrusion by canoe, mokoro (native dugout wooden canoe) or motorized craft, a lot of souls have taken wing after meeting up with hippos on dry land as well.

My friend, Dr Francois Jacobs, Chief Fisheries Biologist at the Kamutjonga Inland Fisheries Institute (KIFI) from the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources of Namibia (MFMR), can testify to the fact that a hippo is a singularly bad way to receive an overdose of Africa.

Apart from me having the best job in the world, Dr Francois has the second-best job. Most of his days are spent on the Okavango River in Namibia with his motorized boat, packed with GPS, live tracking and tagging equipment, plus fishing gear. He does long term behavioural monitoring on Tigerfish and various bream species on the Okavango River, to better understand the eco-system to ensure sustainable utilization and conservation of the aquatic systems. In the last year, he travelled more than 10,000 km by boat on the Okavango River. He is kind enough to invite me to collect data on his daily fishing trips in my off-time and between safaris. Our friendship has



grown with the hours we spent on the water. The stimulating conversations with an intelligent person like him is never taken for granted – pure soul food!

He had numerous run-ins with hippos, resulting in awfully close calls, but luckily neither ever got hurt. On one particular day, this changed...

There was a special trip planned by the Ministry of Environment, Forestry & Tourism (MEFT) on the Okavango River in the Bwabwata National Park to determine whether they could consider allowing boat-trips into the park by lodges in the area. They invited all the stakeholders in the area along for the trip. Early that morning, we set out on the river after we launched two boats into the water. Three officials from MEFT and an official from a local lodge set out in a boat ahead of us, travelling somewhat faster than us upstream. Our group consisted of the trophy hunting outfitter's wife from the west side of Bwabwata, myself and my wife, Dr Francois and his senior, Dr Renier Botha, who was kind enough to allow us to use his boat for this excursion.

We travelled upstream, following the first boat at a much slower pace. Both Dr Francois and Dr Renier knew that driving at higher speeds with a motor boat in the Bwabwata National Park's sensitive eco-system disturbs the fish in, and birdlife on the shores where they nest.

Dr Renier's boat was a seventeen-foot Navarone Wake Pro with two 40hp Suzuki motors. The boat ahead of us was a smaller, eleven-foot aluminium boat with a single 60hp Mercury motor. The only vessel that had a firearm on board was the boat ahead of us.

The Okavango River is not a wide river, by any means. Most places are about 200 meters across, and some places around 300 meters across. The river at that time of the year was shallow, which created a risky scenario. Certain sides of the river had deeper water channels, and the rest was made up of lots of sandbanks, about waist to knee-deep. To make things worse, halfway into the trip, at around 10 am, a dreadful wind started to blow upstream, creating half a meter-sized waves on the river.

Dr Renier captained the boat expertly and steered away from the many hippos we encountered on the river, always keeping to one side of the river, as close to the bank as

possible. Maneuvering around sandbanks was not easy.

My wife, Elleni and the other outfitter's wife sat between myself and Dr Francois on a comfortable bench in the middle of the boat. Dr Francois and I were positioned on opposite sides of the boat, holding on to the side rail while chatting away, like we usually do.

Suddenly, we were hit by a steam train from the bottom. You could hear the boat squeak from the impact. Automatically my one hand tightened my grip on the rail, and the other reached for my wife, with my eyes still fixed on Dr Francois in conversation. I could see him losing grip on the rail from the impact, as if in slow motion, and he tumbled backwards into the water.

I screamed at both women on board to sit on their bums, flat in the boat. I manoeuvred as fast as I could to the back of the boat, closer to Dr Francois, but the current and waves pulled him 30 meters behind the boat in split seconds. At that very moment, a hippo bull popped up next to the boat. He had a huge black head with a mouth big enough to accommodate a dining-room table. His razor-sharp tusks were as thick as my wrist.

The bull charged the boat again and gave us another brutal bump on the side. Then he turned his attention to Dr Francois who was in the water, paddling back frantically with his arms whilst yelling; "Help! Help! Help!"

I turned cold. Fearing the worst. Glancing down to the boat deck, I grabbed a spear that Dr Renier had in the vessel. He confiscated it from a poacher earlier that month. As I looked up, Dr Francois was thrown out of the water, two meters into the air, by the agitated hippo. As he landed back in the water, the hippo bull was on top of him again. I stood at the back of the boat, spear in hand, looking back towards the hippo going full force at Dr Francois.

A million things went through my mind! I was split-seconds away from jumping into the water to help, when Dr Renier turned the boat towards Dr Francois to get him out of the water. The hippo bull was between our boat and Dr Francois. When the bull saw the boat, he charged, hit the side of the boat with his massive head and then turned towards the boat's motors, clamping down on one of the propellers.



African Outfitter wishes to welcome Jacques Strauss on our team as co-editor. Jacques, a young Namibian, grew up on a farm, bordering the central highlands of the Kalahari. He has been in the conservation and hunting environment his entire life. As an accomplished dangerous game professional hunter and CEO of Kowas Adventure Safaris, he spends around 280 days per annum on safari. Jacques holds a B. Comm degree in Marketing and Tourism and is also a keen wildlife photographer and published outdoor writer. His favourite saying is a quote by Botswana PH, Jeff Rann: "The best professional hunter is thirty years old, with fifty years of experience."

Our readers can look forward to some captivating stories from his pen during 2021, kicking off with this, the first of four Okavango River Chronicles.

I drew back as far as I could and stuck the spear as hard as I could into the beast's neck area. I pulled the spear out and with everything in me, threw the spear at the hippo's side, just as he made his way past the boat. There were split seconds left to grab Dr Francois by the arms and pull him to safety before the hippo got to him again. I mentally got myself ready for the worst, as I pulled my friend out of the water, expecting to see both his legs ripped off, blood gushing everywhere. Thank goodness, that was not the case. Dr Francois' body, limbs and fingers were all intact. Shocked, but okay.

We sped off to the boat ahead of us, which had stopped on the river bank. When we pulled up next to them, they wanted to know why Dr Francois was wet. They did not even see what had happened! We checked to ensure that our boat did not have any holes and that Dr Francois was really okay. The rest of the trip was cancelled. We had enough action for one day. The ride home on the boat was emotional, to say the least.

Dr Francois had a three-month-old son and a beautiful wife back home. Just thinking about what could have happened, makes me shiver up to this day...

That image of the hippo bull's big black head speeding towards Dr Francois, while paddling back frantically, yelling; "Help! Help! Help!", will forever stay with me. My wife and I still get nightmares about the incident.

Despite what you may have heard, the greatest skill a good professional hunter can have is not to have a part in the Hollywood-like business of nerving out charges and placing bullets with pin-point accuracy into a charging beast at the last second. No, it is about staying calm under life-threatening circumstances and to steer the group that you are responsible for, away from danger. It is not easy, and many prayers mixed with lots of luck gets you out of most situations – provided you stay calm.

I have always believed that you learn more on a "bad" day in the bush, than on a good day. But the fact remains: you learn every day!

We made a fundamental mistake that day. The first fast boat that passed the hippo bull and his womenfolk, agitated him. The water was shallow, and they could not move to the security of deeper water, so they felt trapped. The wind and the waves made them even more nervous, since they probably could not hear or see the boat approaching them.

In all fairness, we intruded his domain, and he interpreted our craft as an interloper with amorous intentions on his turf and womenfolk. He had no option but to show his worth, and boy, did he do that!

Finding closure

Dr Francois booked a hippo bull hunt with me the following year, and although time has passed since that day, our animosity towards hippos have not improved. The idea behind the hunt was to find closure and to set things straight with these mean, oversized herbivores that causes so much hardship in Africa.

We spent countless hours patrolling floodplains, riverbanks, various channels in and around the Okavango River, searching for a lone hippo bull to hunt on land, outside the safety of the water. There are very few places you can



Dr Renier Botha's boat that was attacked.



Damage done by the hippo to the boat's propeller.

successfully hunt hippo on land, and the area we have hunting rights on along the Okavango River, inside the Bwabwata National Park, is one of the best places to do just that.

Mr. Murphy brought his A-game on that safari and won Lady Luck over numerous times...

Wherever we went, we just could not locate a shootable hippo bull on land. It just did not work out, no matter how hard we tried during those first days. On the way back to camp one evening, I turned to Dr Francois and said; "If there is one thing I have learned in my life, is that everything happens for a reason." He smiled, and I could see that he felt the same.

We knew that we had to change tactics on the last day of the hunt. We had to use my boat, head downriver in the direction where our run-in with the hippo bull took place the previous year and patrol the banks for a hippo bull that might be on a sandbank or grazing on the short grass.

We idled slowly downriver, glassing ahead. We saw herds of red lechwe, Cape buffalo and the odd herd of impala, but no hippo on land. We continued about two kilometres from the camp. As we rounded a corner in the river, we saw a pod of hippo bathing in the sun on an island. They were in the same vicinity where the near fatal



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incident happened.

It was now or never. We made our way to the edge of the island, moored the boat, and stalked the pod as silently as possible.

Could we find the hippo bull that was so close to killing Dr Francois the year before amongst the rest of the clan?

We sneaked in with high hopes of finding the bull we were looking for... edging closer and closer. We were about 70 meters from them. We sat down and glassed at them one by one, trying to locate "our" bull. Most of the hippo were half asleep. Some cows walked closer to us and started grazing. As far as the eye could see downriver it was just hippo everywhere.

A cow in the river began her all-so-familiar wheeze-honk hippo call. A bull close to us replied. By the sound of it, he had that deep-chested voice that the hippo ladies die for. Now we knew where he was!

We had to get into position for a shot. Whilst calling Dr Francois closer to try and find a suitable place to shoot from, the wind suddenly swirled and started blowing on our necks. All hell broke loose! Every hippo on the island stomped off and crashed into the safety of the water.

We waited...

The pod moved in a horse-shoe shape around the island and came closer to us on a half-submerged sand-bank. There was a single mound of reeds and clay between the hippo and us. We belly-crawled silently into position.

The hippo bull stood out like a sore thumb, 50 meters away. Dr Francois pushed the 300gr Barnes TSX round silently into the chamber of his .375 H&H and crept closer to the mound ahead of me. His rest was rock solid. The

bull pushed himself up into a standing position. The shot cracked and hit the hippo perfectly in the brain. A frantic scramble erupted as the rest of the pod made for deeper water. Our bull was motionless. It was the most perfect shot on a hippo I have ever seen in my career as a professional hunter!

We cleared our rifles and a lot of back-slapping and wild feverish chatting ensued. I was pretty sure that it was the same bull that gave us a run for our money that day. It's head was equally black and it's body gigantic.

We went closer to have a good look. The bull laid less than 50 meters away from where it had thrown Dr Francois off the boat. I was flabbergasted. I have never in my life seen such a massive hippo. His tusks were huge and razor-sharp, but they seemed dwarfed in its huge head. He had scars all over his body. We looked for spear marks, but it would be impossible to identify the scar from all the others on his body.

Motoring back to camp, a soft light began haemorrhaging from the horizon, across the river, painting an imagery of the battle of Blood River. Doves sang their last song for the day. A flock of Egyptian geese glided along the river as smooth as the single malt whiskey that we were going to pour ourselves soon.

Hunting in Bwabwata National Park is always a highlight. It is the real Africa our hunter-hearts seek; pure balm for the soul! Yet, my heart was a sea of emotions. There will always be those moments where you wonder; "What would have happened..."

Life and death go hand in hand... Today, we were dealt the better hand!



Dr Francois Jacobs with the hippo he shot a year after it attacked him.

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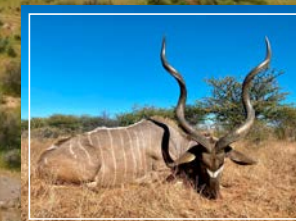


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