

# Trophy Hunting in Southern Africa. Elephant Poaching

Confronting the voices in favour of Botswana's decision to lift the trophy hunting moratorium

By [Ross Harvey](#)

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*A recent [slew of articles](#) have hit international media in the wake of Botswana's decision to lift its moratorium on trophy hunting.*

*Typically, the argument is that Botswana now has too many elephants, which have exceeded the country's carrying capacity. Local communities that depended on hunting revenue and bushmeat now go without, reducing tolerance for conflict with crop-raiding elephants and other wildlife.*

Moreover, trophy hunting only targets 'surplus bulls', so there's nothing to worry about, and only a maximum of 400 will be killed in any given year. Oh, and don't tell us what to do, you western armchair critics.

The truth does not support any of these premises.

Elephant poaching

Botswana, as is now [clearly documented in the peer-reviewed literature](#), has an elephant poaching problem, not an overpopulation problem.

Between 2014 and 2018, the population has remained roughly stable at around 130,000 elephants. According to the latest [continent-wide survey](#), the African savannah elephant population is estimated at 374,982 elephants, excluding South Sudan and Central African Republic.

Rowan Martin, veteran wildlife manager, [quotes](#) a figure of 541,684 elephants from the 2016 [African Elephant Status Report](#) (AESR). Of the remaining elephants, Botswana is home to the vast majority.

Martin is one of the many voices in favour of Botswana's decision to lift the trophy hunting moratorium. He [asserts](#) that the suspicions that the Botswana government is doing so primarily to secure the rural vote in the upcoming October elections are vacuous.

However, [it is clear](#) that elephants are being reduced to a political football, caught between the views of its current president and his predecessor. It is a [vote-catcher](#) that could go horribly wrong. Martin has chosen to label arguments against elephant trophy hunting as 'mud-slinging' that insinuates that 'native Africans' can't manage their own natural

resources. This is a pity, as it detracts from the substance of the debate.

There are at least [five myths](#) that inform the rationale for reintroducing hunting. Rowan Martin and his followers believe that these are no myths. A brief response to each of [Martin's objections](#), in light of [new research](#) about elephant behaviour, follows:

## Population

*Myth: Botswana's elephant population is exploding*

Botswana's elephant population numbered roughly [62,998 in 1995](#). Martin argues that the most accurate figure for a decade prior to that is between 30,000 and 40,000 elephants. The African Elephant Status Report (AESR) to which he refers puts the figure at 50,000 in 1990.

Martin is also of the view that the current figure of 160,000 [quoted](#) at the KAZA conference is accurate. But the AESR to which Martin himself referred puts the 2006 figure at 154,658, [notes that it's disputed](#), and estimates the 2015 figure at 131,626.

Martin takes issue with the widely accepted view that the Botswana population has been roughly stable between 2014 and 2018. It has clearly fallen since 2006, so it remains unclear why he thinks that Botswana's 'elephant populations are growing, not stable'.

It is also not clear what Martin means by the phrase that the 'Botswana population is pumping out emigrants.' Elephants are migrating *into* Botswana from elsewhere to escape hunting and poaching, hardly expelling them. The latest survey by Schlossberg, Chase and Landen (2018) [has been lauded](#) as one of the most rigorous scientific undertakings in this field, and it shows stable numbers at best alongside [a growing poaching crisis](#).

The growing populations are humans and cattle, not elephants. Outside protected areas, [desertification](#) caused by cattle over-grazing is a problem that too often gets ignored in this conversation. The cattle industry is ecologically and economically costly but [politically powerful](#). Water is also increasingly scarce, which will exacerbate human and elephant conflict. Hunting will not solve this problem; appropriate land use planning will.

## Carrying capacity

*Myth: Botswana's elephants have exceeded the 'carrying capacity' of the landscape*

Martin agrees with the [oft-quoted figure](#) of a carrying capacity of [54,000 elephants](#) in Botswana. That equates to about one elephant for every three kilometres squared. This concept remains [arbitrary](#) and lacks relevance for large, unfenced wilderness landscapes.

But Martin continues to insist that these landscapes are akin to farms that must be managed to ensure as little variation as possible. Him and Ron Thomson have both [lamented](#) the loss of large canopy trees as a result of elephant 'over-population'. But they haven't responded to [the science](#) that shows the importance of inter-seasonal variation; elephants' roles as ecosystem engineers; and the fact that there is no benchmark as to what a landscape *should* look like.

Martin dismisses the 24 authors of the above-linked *Ambio* article as 'pseudo-scientists'. His criteria for determining what constitutes 'pseudo-science' is anything that contradicts his

own experience or cited literature.

He similarly betrays himself when he argues that man 'does not need "scientific criteria" in his aesthetic quest as long as he is practising adaptive management.' The literature he [cites](#) in support of this is work produced by himself and Marshall Murphree.

Trophy standard

*Myth: Hunting will solve the elephant population 'explosion'*

Martin argues that this myth is redundant because we know that trophy hunting only eliminates a small number of bull elephants each year.

But this misses the fact that the myth is one of the pretexts on which the re-introduction of trophy hunting has been rationalised. It also misses the deeper point that trophy hunting is likely to lead to population collapse, especially if it annihilates older bulls.

A [report](#) by Martin, Craig and Peake shows a high and consistent 'trophy standard' in the 15 years leading up to 2010, but Martin's appeal to it amounts to special pleading as there is no guarantee that such a standard will be maintained from 2019 onwards, especially given the [notoriety of corruption](#) in the industry. Nor does it mean that a high 'trophy standard' reflects good ecological management.

The quota numbers for some areas were a thumb-suck based on no science at all. But the primary reason why hunting will fail is that there are very few 'trophy' tuskers remaining - [genetic depletion](#) is real and [scientifically documented](#). Martin ignores [the figures](#) about how few trophy bulls over the age of 35 are left in Botswana.

Furthermore, the [evidence is now unequivocal](#) that: 'Male elephants increased their energetic allocation into reproduction with age as the probability of reproductive success increases. Given that older male elephants tend to be both the target of legal trophy hunting and illegal poaching, man-made interference could drive fundamental changes in elephant reproductive tactics.'

The reproductive success of a male elephant increases with age - there is no such thing as a 'surplus' bull that can be extracted as a 'trophy'. Therefore, a combination of poaching and trophy hunting may well lead to population collapse or at least to undesirable lasting population changes.

Devolution of rights

*Myth: Hunting will solve human and elephant conflict*

Conservationists should generally be [fully in favour](#) of devolution of rights to local communities that are on the frontlines of conservation. Martin is right that status conferred is more important than benefits derived.

He contradicts this point by arguing that trophy hunting is an essential component of the system because of the added value it brings to communities. Many communities do not want to return to hunting, and no credible NGO working *in* Botswana thinks that a return to trophy hunting is wise.

Martin also asserts that the Botswana government called for tenders in previous hunting concessions (mostly in the Central Conservation Areas) but that no one wanted them. Had those concessions been granted, poaching would have been less likely to take root – presence counts for a lot in counter-poaching.

Martin fails to mention, however, that a large part of the reason no investor wanted those concessions is that the Botswana Tourism Organisation insisted that the land use be exclusively photographic and demanded substantial signature bonuses. But blindly insisting on photographic lodges in geographically unamenable areas lacks wisdom.

Self-drive tourism and mobile camps, brilliant options, were precluded as a use option even though it was frequently promoted in those concessions' management plans. To argue that the hunters were right, after all, does not follow.

## Poaching

### *Myth: Hunting moratorium led to more poaching*

Botswana's poaching problem only started to escalate just before 2017, three years after the hunting ban was imposed. Martin argues that the AESR puts 'the inception of severe illegal hunting at around 2006.'

It's not clear whether he means for Botswana or for the whole African population. But either way, that would clearly destroy the argument that hunting presence is necessary to ameliorate poaching. Hunting was at its peak in 2006.

Moreover, hunting presence in places [like the Selous](#) hardly countered poaching. To argue that hunters could do nothing about politically protected poaching gangs is an all-too-easy get-out-of-jail-free card.

Where Martin is right is that communities should be far more involved in land-use planning and rights devolution needs to be a priority. None of this means, however, that western trophy hunting is a sensible policy choice, especially given that the practice is [morally abominable](#) and ecologically unsustainable.

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*Ross Harvey studied a [B.Com](#) in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where he also completed an M.Phil in Public Policy. At the end of 2018, he submitted his PhD in Economics, also at UCT. Ross is currently a freelance independent economist who works with The Conservation Action Trust.*

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