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PERSPECTIVE

Hunting trophy import bans proposed by the UK may be ineffective and inequitable as conservation policies in multiple social-ecological contexts

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Abstract

The UK government is considering legislation to prohibit the importation of hunting trophies. We examine documented social, ecological, and political outcomes of two previous such bans. We find that the UK government's proposal shares the shortcomings of existing bans that have (1) failed to address, or have even amplified, key threats to hunted species, (2) imposed costs on citizens of other countries, and (3) delegitimized the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Trophy import bans are blunt policy instruments that can cause more problems than they solve.

KEYWORDS

bans, CBNRM, CITES, legislation, sustainable use, trophy hunting

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The UK government has a long-standing commitment to ban the importation of some hunting trophies in response to mounting public pressure. The species that would be restricted, and the means by which this would be achieved, remain unclear, and a number of Parliamentary Bills have been associated with the proposal over the past few years. At the point of writing, it is the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill that is progressing through the UK Parliament. The Bill states that it is “to make provision prohibiting the import of hunting trophies into Great Britain,” although the Bill is still being drafted and no further details are currently available. Domestic trophy hunting in the UK, which includes client hunting and exportation of trophies from six species of deer (red *Cervus elaphus*, fallow *Dama dama*, roe *Capreolus capreolus*, sika *Cervus nippon*, Reeves muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi*, and Chinese water deer *Hydropotes inermis*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), and various game birds, is not included in any of the proposed bans either as an activity or in terms of proposed export bans.

Similar import bans have occurred elsewhere: for example, the US 2008 *Endangered Species Act* listing of polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) led to a ban on importation of polar bear trophies, while some trophy import bans have recently been enacted in France, Australia, and the Netherlands. Here, we examine the documented outcomes of previous such bans to assess the likely effect of the UK Government's effort. To clarify our standpoint as authors, we believe in seeking effective conservation solutions that also deliver tangible benefits to, and bolster self-determination of, affected local inhabitants. We are a group of conservation scientists, scholars, and practitioners, with experience working in conservation in North American and African contexts. Our shared interest is in discovering ways to achieve justifiable conservation objectives without depriving affected people of their due measures of human dignity (Mattson & Clark, 2011).

2 | OUTCOMES OF TROPHY IMPORT BANS

Here, we argue that trophy import bans are blunt policy instruments that can cause myriad negative social and ecological impacts (Dickman et al. 2019). Their consequences for rural and Indigenous people can functionally manifest as neo-colonial injustices (e.g., Clark et al., 2013). The effects of such imposed approaches to conservation have been well documented, but care must be taken to both recognize the nuances that differentiate such situations and to

respect the legitimate agency that affected local communities can exercise in ways that do not necessarily align with external conservation interests (Peluso, 1993; Taylor, 2012; Witter & Satterfield, 2019).

For example, the US 2008 polar bear import ban made no numerical difference to polar bear harvest in Canada, where most polar bear trophy imports had originated (Weber et al., 2015). However, that ban economically harmed Canadian Inuit communities that had previously benefited from regulated polar bear trophy hunting, undermining the legitimacy and efficacy of the Indigenous-State co-management system responsible for two-thirds of the world's polar bears (Lokken et al., 2019; Meek, 2018). This case illustrates how international trophy bans can even work to the detriment of domestic conservation policy processes themselves. Such perverse effects are not unique to this case either: 't Sas-rolfes et al. (2022) found such international campaigns to have similar adverse effects on rhino conservation.

Bans can have adverse effects on ecosystems as well, creating cascades of ecological and social changes that can make conservation harder. Import restrictions of lion trophies to the United States has apparently already contributed to the abandonment of hunting blocks, resulting in increased habitat loss often through conversion to agriculture: a far greater threat to species like lions than trophy hunting (Bauer et al. 2022; Johnson et al., 2017; Strampelli et al., 2022). Domestic hunting bans can have similar effects. For example, negative livelihood and conservation impacts were documented in Botswana when a hunting ban led to reduced local income, food insecurity, worsened attitudes toward wildlife conservation, and increased poaching (Mbaiwa, 2018).

3 | POLITICAL CONTEXT OF TROPHY IMPORT BANS

Both the UK's current proposal and the US 2008 *Endangered Species Act* listing of polar bears (which led to a ban on importation of polar bear trophies) were initiated and promoted by domestically based environmental organizations, involved governments with relatively few political vulnerabilities at those times (George W. Bush at the end of his second term as US President, Republican party, and Boris Johnson as the then UK Prime Minister with a large Conservative party parliamentary majority), and enabled governments to claim environmental respectability with bipartisan support, celebrity endorsement, and minimal risk of domestic political costs (Roe et al., 2020; Tyrrell & Clark, 2014). Each of these bans imposed costs on citizens of other countries rather than banning

trophy hunting domestically (Chaukura, 2020; Clark et al., 2013). In this important way trophy import bans differ from hunting bans enacted within a country where the species in question is found, though those can have similar local effects on conservation efforts and peoples' livelihoods. Trophy bans are not a politically partisan tactic: the previous Democratic party regime in the United States banned lion (*Panthera leo*) trophy imports (Bauer et al. 2017). Furthermore, animal welfare and environmental organizations can, and have, manipulated wildlife trade data to bolster public support for trophy import bans (Tyrrell & Clark, 2014), while misinformation on the topic is rife in the media (Hart et al., 2020).

4 | DISCUSSION

The commitments underpinning the proposed UK ban mean that this legislation seems likely to have many of the attributes of previous trophy bans. It is therefore likely to produce similar negative effects for conservation and human livelihoods outside the UK. To be clear, this does not mean that trophy import bans cannot achieve conservation gains while (at least) not creating or exacerbating local injustices. Rather, we are simply saying that their empirical track record in different contexts means that positive outcomes cannot be assumed either in the current UK case or more generally. Attention to specific context, history, and sufficiently diverse voices—as well as determining who legitimately has standing in specific situations (and who decides that)—are all necessary to reduce the likelihood of the sorts of destructive outcomes documented above (Adhikari et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2020; Madzwamuse et al., 2020;). None of that was done for the UK proposal, which solicited input in ways that encouraged acontextual, generalized, and selective assessments of both science and policy options (e.g., DEFRA, 2021). The recent joint position statement on trophy hunting by multiple nongovernmental organizations further exemplifies those tendencies (Born Free Foundation, 2022).

The cases we examine here differ in specific ways. First, the 2018 ESA listing of polar bears triggered a *Marine Mammal Protection Act* clause preventing trophy imports to the United States, whereas the 2013 listing of lions under the same act did not make such a blanket prohibition. Second, polar bears are only legally sport-hunted in Canada, whereas multiple species and multiple African countries would be affected by the pending UK legislation. Third, different hunting management approaches across Africa make accurate generalizations difficult (Lindsey et al., 2007). Even taken together these contextual details do not give grounds to expect materially different outcomes from the current UK proposal.

Trophy import bans are inherently political and the weight of conservation evidence has so far failed to penetrate dominant societal narratives, stop misinformation, or substantially influence policy in either African cases or the polar bear case (Hart et al., 2020). While trophy species have long been politically symbolic, trophy bans now appear to reinforce pre-existing identity politics: support or opposition to the ban becomes a way for an individual to signal and maintain membership in a specific societal group (Fukuyama, 2017). Those affected by such bans are often recast as “others” and dehumanized, their interests delegitimized (Hiller & McMillan, 2021). Such factionalization encourages divisive, winner-take-all political strategies at the expense of inclusion, dialogue, and human dignity (Mounck, 2018).

Reducing such political contests between nation-states is clearly in the global common interest and can also help advance conservation and human dignity at local levels. In the absence of demonstrable conservation gains, the key beneficiaries from such bans appear to be domestic political regimes and the organizations who lobbied for them. Viewed in the context of the Bush and Johnson governments' platforms and actions, it is hard to interpret these bans as anything other than greenwashing: placating citizens' genuine concerns about wildlife at the expense of economic and cultural effects on people, and adverse effects on wildlife conservation in other countries. Many Africans have strongly expressed their wish to manage their own wildlife: in a recent debate in Dickman et al. (2019), representatives of over 100,000 community members from four countries said that ignoring their views was tantamount to human rights abuse (Chaukura, 2020). Perhaps, the curated responses to Dickman et al. (2019) were largely written by western academics while Chaukura's (2020) response was relegated to an e-letter.


Rather than repeat previous—and ineffective—calls for evidence-based decisions about such charged conservation issues, we recommend emphasizing greater transparency about standpoints and values in what must be recognized as essentially political decisions, not scientific ones. Decisions by national governments are themselves also subject to an international regulatory regime, and international trade in polar bears and African trophy species has long been regulated under the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species* (CITES). While there are compelling calls for CITES' decision-making to be improved (e.g., Cooney et al., 2021), it nevertheless remains the authoritative multilateral instrument for allocating and exercising control over cross-border trade in listed species. Indeed, a renewed commitment to international deliberation through CITES would be a constructive step toward democratizing global conservation efforts.

Legitimate questions remain about whether nation-states ought to be the sole locus of authority for conservation decisions. There are abundant arguments, for example, for recognition of Indigenous peoples' inherent authority and conservation achievements worldwide (e.g., Artelle et al., 2019; Corrigan et al., 2018). Regardless of how these larger issues evolve, unilateral and acontextual decisions by individual countries are unlikely to advance conservation on an interconnected planet. We may well see more "fig leaf" environmental policies like trophy import bans that can externalize costs onto other countries and peoples, may well exacerbate social injustices with no environmental gain (or even harm), and could undermine international institutions. To prevent further undesirable outcomes, conservationists must confront such heavy-handed initiatives, even domestically popular ones. We must question and debate the human costs of conservation policies as well as their biological effects: an enduring but necessary tension within our field. Finally, we must support multilateral conservation institutions and ensure national governments uphold their commitments to those institutions and the rights of local and Indigenous communities under international law.

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