

More confusion over the fate of Botswana's elephants

By [Dr Louise de Waal](#)

17 May 2019

President Mokgweetsi Masisi of Botswana categorically denies that his government would ever cull elephants, contradicting the Parliamentary Report proposing culling. However, Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, Conservation and Tourism, Kitso Mokaila now proposes [elephant "cropping"](#).



Image source: www.pixabay.com

To cull or not to cull

[Masisi stated](#) to Bloomberg that “in the debate around elephants and our environmental stewardship, we have been misconstrued and misunderstood. To suggest that the irresponsible and reckless words like culling were ever used. We are never for culling. We will not cull.”

This statement flies in the face of the [report produced by his Cabinet Sub Committee](#) on Hunting Ban Social Dialogue that recommended among others lifting the hunting ban, culling of elephants, and the canning of elephant meat as pet food.

The Hunting Ban Social Dialogue report is based on consultation meetings with only some rural communities affected by the 2014 hunting ban, but strangely excludes the tourism industry and its beneficiary communities. Tourism is the second largest GDP earner in Botswana after diamonds, however the industry appears to have been cowed by threats, such as [“you must remember where your bread is buttered and support us”](#) made by Mokaila.

It also seems odd that President Masisi takes advice from the controversial hunter Ron Thomson, who applauded Masisi’s highly criticised elephant management proposals. Thomson claims to have personally slaughtered 5,000 elephants (and supervised the killing of many 1,000s more), 800 buffalo, 600 lions, and 50 hippos, but refuses to be part of a televised debate that includes an opposing voice. In a UK [interview with Piers Morgan](#), he admitted, shouting in a more and more enraged manner, that he “felt nothing” killing the animals, he was “highly efficient at it”, and his lack of emotion helped him “get the job done”.

A supposedly ethical hunter, who has previously boasted of killing 32 elephants in one go and stating that killing animals gave him a “thrill”, Thomson [made unsubstantiated claims in another interview](#) that Botswana’s elephants “now number between 10 and 20 times the sustainable carrying capacity of their habitats”.

According to the [African Elephant Status Report 2016](#), Botswana's population has shown a 14% decline since 2006 and the [latest Botswana elephant census](#) estimates the country's current population to be around 126,000 elephants, which is well within accepted norms.

Despite popular opinions, the Chobe elephant population is showing a [long-term downward trend](#) since 2010 and Botswana's bull elephant population is also decreasing, especially in the four poaching hotspots. The latter trend will be exacerbated by trophy hunting, as the more mature bulls are the main target for trophy hunters.

"Bulls only reach their prime between 40-50 years of age and these musth bulls sire about 90% of all offspring," says Audrey Delsink, wildlife director, HSI Africa. "Elephant societies are also dependent on these older members for social and ecological knowledge. The removal of just a few of these key individuals will have long-lasting negative consequences for future elephant generations."

"Ethical" trophy hunting

Proposals for lifting the trophy hunting ban are still on the table. Mokaila recently stated, when addressing Ngamiland community trusts in Maun, that should the government reinstate trophy hunting this will be conducted "ethically".

We have however witnessed too many examples of unethical and often illegal trophy hunts in Southern Africa, all clouded in a lack of accountability and transparency.

[Excessive hunting quotas, overhunting](#), and [unethical trophy hunting practices](#) in the 1980-90s in Botswana, led to a rapid decline in wildlife populations in many parts of the country, some of which have never fully recovered. The lion population was particularly badly affected with some areas reduced to a ratio of nearly six mature females for every mature male, leading to serious conservation threats such as inbreeding and kleptoparasitism (when lionesses and subadults are unable to defend and therefore regularly lose their kill to hyenas).

This situation led to the Botswana government putting a moratorium on lion hunting in 2001, which was reversed in 2004 under pressure from the US government. The former President George Bush Snr, a prominent member of the Safari Club International, [wrote to the Botswana authorities pleading to lift the ban](#), which eventually capitulated. The moratorium was reinstated in 2008 and remains in place to date.

More recently, Cecil the lion was illegally hunted in Zimbabwe. This 13-year old lion, wearing a GPS research collar, was lured with bait out of Hwange National Park, so that hunter Walter Palmer, who had previously been [convicted of illegal hunting in the States](#), could kill this protected lion without consequences for either him or the professional hunter, Theo Badenhorst, who was subsequently arrested for attempting to illegally export sable from Zimbabwe.

These are just a few from the many examples available in the public domain, clearly illustrating the hunting industry's inability to maintain ethical standards.

Furthermore, Botswana is considering reintroducing trophy hunting at a time when “facts and indicators reveal a very rapid decline in big game hunting in Africa”, according to Dr Bertrand Charadonnet, a protected areas and wildlife consultant, in his report [Reconfiguring the Protected Areas in Africa](#).

In Africa, [the Economists at Large](#) calculated that trophy hunting spending only makes up on average 1.9% of the overall tourism spending and a recent report from Namibia shows the [limitations of the economic benefits of trophy hunting](#).

The long-term sustainability of trophy hunting is highly debatable from an ethical, ecological and financial point of view.

Human-elephant conflict

“Harbouring the largest elephant population in Southern African has led to escalating human-elephant conflict (HEC)”, the government claims.

There is no doubt that HEC is a real problem in Botswana that needs addressing. A report on problem animal control data in the Chobe District recorded about 1,300 HEC incidences between 2006-17, i.e. about 100 per year, including crop and garden raiding, property damage, and personal threats to human lives. The report states that HEC is not increasing however 2016 shows an anomaly with 300 reports, dropping back to previous levels in 2017.

[Sensationalist reports](#) are serving to inflame an already tragic situation and seek to show trophy hunting as the solution for elephant population control and the key to solve HEC.

However, “trophy hunting, cannot, or rather should not have much effect on local elephant densities”, says Dr Keith Lindsay, conservation biologist, Amboseli Trust for Elephants. “Otherwise, the trophy-sized animals will not be there for the hunters to shoot. So, trophy hunting does not have any direct effect on reducing HEC”.

With HEC at the forefront of the elephant debate, surprisingly Mokaila announced recently that his [Ministry plans to stop HEC compensation](#), as “communities are capable of coming up with solutions for addressing HEC themselves”. Is this possibly a cynical ploy to force communities to support trophy hunting?

Elephant commoditisation

Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe submitted a [joint proposal to CITES](#) to amend the listing of the African elephant to allow for trade in live animals, registered raw ivory, hunting trophies for non-commercial purposes and elephant products.

This blatant commodification of elephants is what the Kavango-Zambezi Trans-Frontier Conservation Area bloc so elegantly call a “[scientific wildlife management system](#)”.

Amidst the many contradictions around the fate of Botswana’s elephants, its government hosted an Elephant Summit earlier this month and from Masisi’s opening address it is quite clear that the commoditisation of wildlife and elephants in particular are his main concern. This is “sold” to the people of Botswana as the solution to HEC and a sustainable way to secure the livelihoods of local people.

All the shenanigans of the past few months that should be leading to a future elephant management plan that is good for Botswana’s people and its wildlife, seems to be nothing more than an election campaign for Masisi to appeal to rural voters, as well as preparation for the forthcoming CITES COP18 meeting.

Meanwhile, the verdict on lifting the trophy hunting ban is still pending with no indication when a decision will be made.

Article published courtesy of www.conservationaction.co.za.

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