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A Trophy Hunt That's Good for Rhinos

By RICHARD CONNIFF JAN. 20, 2014

Let's stipulate up front that there is no great sport in hunting a black rhinoceros, especially not in Namibia's open countryside. The first morning we went out tracking in the northern desert there, we nosed around in vehicles for several hours until our guides spotted a rhino a half mile off. Then we hiked quietly up into a high valley. There, a rhino mom with two huge horns stood calmly in front of us next to her calf, as if triceratops had come back to life, at a distance of 200 yards. We shot them, relentlessly, with our cameras.

Let's also accept, *nolo contendere*, that trophy hunters are "coldhearted, soulless zombies." That's how protesters put it following the recent \$350,000 winning bid for the right to trophy hunt a black rhino in Namibia. Let's acknowledge, finally, that we are in the middle of a horrific global war on rhinos, managed by criminal gangs and driven by a perverse consumer appetite for rhino horn in Southeast Asia.

Even so, auctioning the right to kill a black rhino in Namibia is an entirely sound idea, good for conservation and good for rhinos in particular.

Here's why: Namibia is just about the only place on earth to have gotten conservation right for rhinos and, incidentally, a lot of other wildlife. Over the past 20 years, it has methodically repopulated one area after another as its rhino population has steadily increased. As a result, it is now home to 1,750 of the roughly 5,000 black rhinos surviving in the wild. (The worldwide population of Africa's two rhino species, black and the more numerous white, plus three species in Asia, is about 28,000.) In neighboring South Africa, government officials stood by haplessly as poachers slaughtered almost a thousand rhinos last year alone. Namibia lost just two.

To be fair, Namibia has the advantage of being home to only 2.1 million

people in an area twice the size of California — about seven per square mile, versus about 100 in South Africa. But Namibia's success is also the product of a bold political decision in the 1990s to turn over ownership of the wildlife to communal conservancies — run not by white do-gooders, but by black ranchers and herders, some of whom had, until then, also been poachers.

The idea was to encourage villagers living side by side with wildlife to manage and profit from it by opening up their conservation lands to wealthy big-game hunters and tourists armed with cameras. The hunters come first, because the conservancies don't need to make any investment to attract them. Tourist lodges are costly, so they tend to come later, or prove impractical in some areas. The Ministry of Environment and Tourism sets limits on all hunting, and because rhino horn is such a precious commodity, rhinos remain under strict national control.

The theory behind the conservancy idea was that tolerance for wildlife would increase and poaching would dwindle, because community ownership made the illegal killing feel like stealing from the neighbors. And it has worked. Community conservancies now control almost 20 percent of Namibia — 44 percent of the country enjoys some form of conservation protection — and wildlife numbers have soared. The mountain zebra population, for instance, has increased to 27,000 from 1,000 in 1982. Elephants, gunned down elsewhere for their ivory, have gone to 20,000, up from 15,000 in 1995. Lions, on the brink of extinction from Senegal to Kenya, are increasing in Namibia.

Under an international agreement on trade in endangered species, Namibia can sell hunting rights for as many as five black rhinos per year, though it generally stops at three. The entire trophy fee, in this case \$350,000, goes into a trust fund that supports rhino conservation efforts. The fund pays, for instance, to capture rhinos and implant transmitters in their horns, as an anti-poaching measure. Trophy hunting one rhino may thus save many others from being butchered.

Many wildlife groups also support the program because Namibia manages it so carefully. It chooses which individual will be hunted, and wildlife officials go along to make sure the hunter gets the right one. (So much for the romance of the Great White Hunter.) The program targets older males past their breeding prime. They're typically belligerent individuals that have a territorial tendency to kill

females and calves.

So why the uproar this time? Namibia made the mistake of allowing the auction to take place in the United States rather than on its own turf. The outraged response started with a kind of Stephen Colbert bump in October. (“If you love something, set it free,” the comedian declared. “Then, when it has a bit of a head start, open fire.”) And it culminated last week in death threats, including one to the auction-sponsoring Dallas Safari Club promising, “For every rhino you kill, we will kill a member of the club.”

Protecting wildlife is a complicated, expensive and morally imperfect enterprise, often facing insuperable odds. The risk with trophy hunting is twofold: Commodifying an endangered species creates a gray zone in which bad behaviors can seem acceptable, and the public relations disaster this time could hurt Namibia’s entire conservation effort. But so far nothing else matches trophy hunting for paying the bills. For people outraged by this hunt, here’s a better way to deal with it: Go to Namibia. Visit the conservancies, spend your money and have one of the great wildlife experiences of your life. You will see that this country is doing grand, ambitious things for conservation. And you may come away wondering whether Americans, who struggle to live with species as treacherous as, say, the prairie dog, should really be telling Namibians how to run their wildlife.

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