

# Giraffes aren't dangerous – but they will soon be endangered

August 7 2015, by Matt Hayward

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No trophy hunters that way ... or that way. Credit: Luca Galuzzi, CC BY-SA

An American trophy hunter has kicked off another [social media furore](#) after defending a recent giraffe kill in South Africa by claiming they were "very dangerous animals". In one sense she is right – giraffes are

big and strong and you certainly wouldn't want one kicking you. But attacks on humans are very rare.

A more relevant question is whether hunting is a key threat to giraffes. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List [assessment](#) does not list legal hunting as a threatening process at all. However [illegal hunting](#) for meat and trophies is listed as threatening as it reduces the effective size of their protected areas and, if allowed to proceed unchecked, can cause the collapse of wildlife populations. Giraffes are popular among bushmeat poachers because of their size, high meat yield and the ease with which they can be hunted.

The giraffe is currently listed as "[least concern](#)" on the IUCN Red List, but this doesn't present the full picture. Back in 1999 wildlife expert Rod East estimated there were 140,000 in Africa – today the Giraffe Conservation Foundation estimates there are [only 80,000 left](#). Such a rapid decline suggests they may soon qualify as being [vulnerable to extinction](#).

But why does a 40% drop in giraffe numbers not resonate worldwide? After all, everyone knows African elephants are threatened yet there are still [500,000 left](#) in the world. So why is the giraffe being ignored?

Normally, it is the uncharismatic species that decline without much public sympathy, but that doesn't apply here. Giraffes are one of the megastars of the African savannah. Tourists [love them](#). Children who have never been to Africa know what a giraffe looks like. It is the world's tallest animal despite having the same number of bones in its neck as we do. It is almost comical in appearance with its orange dappled pyjama onesie – although when you feel it, giraffe skin is thick and tough.



Time to put giraffes in the limelight. Credit: Frank Vassen, CC BY

A drive through a well-managed protected area, such as Kruger National Park in South Africa, gives the impression that both elephants and giraffes are secure. You can sit at a waterhole and watch elephants cavorting in the water while a lone giraffe browses peacefully on the acacias nearby. In Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park I once saw 32 giraffes without even turning my head. It could be that this familiarity has blinded society to the decline of the species, in addition to a lack of [well-publicised trafficking busts](#) that occurs with elephant ivory or rhino horn.

But the rapid decline of giraffes isn't the only story – because in southern Africa, populations are increasing. A major reason for this increase has been the development of wildlife ranches and the reintroduction and protection of giraffes on those lands. There are significant numbers on wildlife ranches in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and a recent study estimated that 23,000 giraffes occupy such lands in [Namibia](#).

Ironically, many of those ranches only developed because there was potential for deriving income from trophy hunting, including giraffes. Elsewhere, though, other sub-species are faring far worse. The reticulated giraffe from Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia has been reduced to [just 5,000 individuals](#) through illegal poaching and war. The West African giraffe in Niger had only [50 animals in the mid-1990s](#), but robust environmental protection has resulted in an increase to [around 400](#) today.

The taxonomy of giraffes is currently being studied, and it may be that the dozen or so giraffe sub-species are elevated to distinct species, which would totally reform their conservation status assessments.

It seems clear that to protect [giraffes](#), we need to prevent both habitat loss and illegal hunting. These targets can be achieved through adequate management of protected area estates and through the creation of incentives for conservation on lands outside of protected areas. Trophy hunting contributes to both in some countries by generating income from and for wildlife.

The controversy over the killing of Cecil the lion highlights how much is needed to make sure legal hunting industries are adequately managed. However, until an alternative to the income from trophy hunting is found, the answer lies not in banning the practice or on clamping down on trophy imports, but in helping African countries manage the industry

better.

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