

Toxic Twitter abuse could skew UK wildlife law

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Wildlife conservation efforts could suffer because toxic online rows

about trophy hunting are becoming increasingly abusive, ecologists have warned.

Scientists have analyzed hundreds of tweets about [trophy hunting](#) and found that 7% were abusive. This is a similar proportion to content on partisan topics on [social media platforms](#) known to highlight extreme viewpoints.

The findings, by [conservation](#) scientists at the University of Reading and the University of Sheffield, are published today (March 9) in the journal *Conservation Biology*.

Graphic images posted on Twitter of tigers, crocodiles, giraffes and elephants shot by hunters often provoke angry responses from Twitter users. For example, in two tweets examined by the researchers, one user says a trophy hunter "deserved to die" and another said trophy hunters should "shoot yourselves."

As a result of this hostile atmosphere, arguments from some conservationists, who suggest trophy hunting might be positive overall for protecting species and habitats, are often shouted down by the opponents of hunting. This means different conservation viewpoints are not heard and policymakers are less aware of them.

Celebrity 'pile-ons'

Dr. Luke Evans, from the University of Reading's School of Biological Sciences, was the lead author of the study. He said, "Controversial cases involving trophy hunting, such as the killing of Cecil the Lion in Zimbabwe in 2015, have caused an explosion in angry tweets.

"These comments become more hostile and angry as celebrities, activists and some politicians risk creating 'pile-ons' in opposition to any mention

of trophy hunting, or those who suggest pro-hunting viewpoints. For example, one prominent ecologist who regularly advocates for the conservation benefits of trophy hunting on Twitter has been called a murderer and a psychopath.

"This strong anti-trophy hunting sentiment is now moving into UK law, with the UK government proposing a ban on trophy hunting imports. Such a law needs to be properly discussed and debated by experts and the public, but it is almost impossible to have this discussion online without seeing extreme anti-hunting viewpoints, often combined with abuse.

"A new British law banning hunting trophy imports could have a big impact on conservation worldwide, with both negative and positive influences in different locations. This needs to be scrutinized, but it's possible that Twitter's toxicity could skew the debate away from the evidence."

Needless suffering or 'necessary evil?'

The research team examined 500 tweets to identify themes and tones in trophy-hunting debates on Twitter. They found that 350 tweets opposed trophy hunting, with Twitter users often conveying sadness, anger or disgust at the suffering caused to the hunted animals.

Of these anti-hunting tweets, 7% contained [abusive content](#), such as insults or threats of violence. This is a similar rate to the proportion of abusive posts found on extreme messaging sites such as Gab or 4Chan.

Less than 5 percent of tweets expressed views in favor of trophy hunting, often expressed with a "reluctant" tone, or acknowledging that the practice was a "necessary evil." Some Twitter users disliked the shooting of animals, but suggested [trophy hunting](#) provides funding and aids

wider conservation efforts, helping other species to thrive in habitats maintained as hunting grounds.

All the tweets analyzed by the researchers were anonymized, to protect the identities of the tweeters. However public searches of [tweets](#) quickly show the levels of abuse and hyperbole displayed in hunting debates on Twitter—including those stoked by celebrities. In one tweet, comedian Ricky Gervais (who has previously supported proposed legislation banning the import of trophy-hunted animals which is set for a vote by UK lawmakers later on Friday, March 17), uses a profanity for a trophy hunter holding a dead leopard. In another post, actor Peter Egan says trophy hunters are "serial killers."

Death threats

Co-author Dr. Vicky Boulton, from the University of Reading, said, "As scientists, we wanted to investigate the tone of this online debate in a neutral fashion.

"What we found was quite shocking, with some people who expressed views deemed to be pro-hunting facing death threats and extreme abuse. We saw that such abuse could sometimes be traced back to the activities of celebrities with large online followings.

"While some people may dislike the activities of hunters, it's important that we don't create laws that actually damage conservation efforts by shutting down genuine debate and replacing it with abuse."

More information: Characterizing the trophy hunting debate on Twitter, *Conservation Biology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/cobi.14070](https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14070)

Provided by University of Reading

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