

Researchers question conservation community's acceptance of trophy hunting

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Researchers at Oregon State University are challenging the premise that trophy hunting is an acceptable and effective tool for wildlife conservation and community development.

They argue that charging hunters to kill animals and claim body parts should be a last resort rather than a fallback plan.

In a paper published today in *Conservation Letters*, the researchers label the practice as morally inappropriate and say alternative strategies such as ecotourism should be fully explored and ruled out before [trophy hunting](#) is broadly endorsed.

"Trophies are body parts," said lead author Chelsea Batavia, a Ph.D. student in OSU's College of Forestry. "But when I read the literature, I don't see researchers talking about them like that. Nobody's even flinching. And at this point it seems to have become so normalized, no one really stops to think about what trophy hunting actually entails."

Furthermore, the authors point out, the notion that trophy hunting is imperative to [conservation](#) seems to have taken hold largely without compelling empirical evidence. Such an assumption is not only unsubstantiated but can also serve to squelch the search for alternatives.

"Rejecting trophy hunting could open up space for innovation and creativity," they write.

Batavia worked with colleagues in Oregon State's Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society and collaborators from Canada and Australia. The idea for the paper occurred to them over the course of a review of scholarly literature on trophy hunting.

"Conservation scientists commonly recognize strong public opposition to the practice, and at times even point to some sort of ethical tension, but they don't really define or address it," Batavia said.

She and her co-authors decided it was time to break the silence and highlight an issue they suspect may underpin the public discomfort around trophy hunting—that it involves a hunter paying a fee to kill an animal and subsequently retaining some or all of the animal's body as a trophy.

Part of the ongoing problem, the researchers write, is the word "trophy," a sanitized expression for the tusks, ears, feet, heads, etc. that hunters remove from the animals' bodies.

"It's almost like an ethical distraction, calling it by some other name," said co-author Michael Paul Nelson, a professor and the Ruth H. Spaniol Chair of Renewable Resources at OSU. "We have these metaphors that we hide behind. It's like we recognize it's an ethically loaded topic but we don't know what to do about it. And we've tied conservation to the practice of trophy hunting—how do we get off that train?"

Proponents argue that trophy hunting supports conservation goals by generating money and reducing poaching and also that it bolsters local economies.

Nelson, Batavia and their co-authors recognize these benefits, but they counter that "collecting bodies or [body parts](#) as trophies is an ethically inappropriate way to interact with individual animals, regardless of the beneficial outcomes that do or do not follow."

"We owe these animals some basic modicum of respect," the researchers suggest. "To transform them into trophies of human conquest is a violation of common decency, and to accept trophy hunting as the international conservation community seems to have done is to aid and abet an immoral practice."

If it's determined that saving wildlife is inexorably linked to trophy hunting, conservationists should

then "accept the practice only with a due appreciation of tragedy, and proper remorse," the researchers write. They do acknowledge the possibility that future scientific research may suggest trophy hunting is in fact critical to the conservation mission in certain contexts.

"In that case trophy hunting should be used reluctantly," they write. "The enthusiasm with which trophy hunting has already been championed as a potential conservation success story is misplaced. Trophy [hunting](#) violates the dignity of individual nonhuman animals, and is beneath our dignity as human beings. Continuing complicity by conservationists without fully exhausting other options is not now appropriate nor has it ever been."

Provided by Oregon State University

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