

NAMIBIA COMMUNAL AREA CONSERVANCIES

L. Chris Weaver¹ and Theunis Petersen²

¹*World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Chief of LIFE Project, Namibia*

²*LIFE Project Wildlife Utilization Specialist, Namibia*



Abstract. Namibia has put in place one of the most innovative conservation management programmes in Africa. Through the years, Namibia has developed and instituted a number of incentive-based laws which have successfully inspired recovery of wildlife populations on private lands, and more recently, on communal state lands. Consequently, both private land owners and rural communities (who form communal conservancies) are now integrating the management and sustainable utilization of wildlife into their production strategies. A fundamental factor in this conservation movement has been the contributions of the trophy hunting industry. This paper describes the visionary legislation for hunting and conservation as well as the practical terms of community based hunting, and how this success became real. The contributions of the hunting industry bring benefit on many levels of society and nature but the article also shows the future challenges of this approach.

Key words: Namibia, conservancies, sustainable use, trophy hunting

1. Background

Since independence in 1990, Namibia, a large country with less than two million people located in southwestern Africa has put in place one of the most innovative conservation management programmes in Africa, if not the world. In contrast to previous governmental policies, the 1996 communal area conservancy legislation has provided incentives and motivation for communal area residents across Namibia to conserve their wildlife resources. As a consequence, communities who form conservancies (Conservancies are legally-recognized, geographically-defined areas that have been formed by communities who have united to manage and benefit from wildlife and other natural resources.) are now managing and sustainably utilizing their wildlife through trophy hunting, meat harvesting, live game sales, and other forms of non-consumptive tourism. Conservancies are legally-recognized, geographically-defined areas that have been formed by communities who have united to manage and benefit from wildlife and other natural resources. These cash and in-kind benefits have fostered a greater appreciation of the value of wildlife and stimulated communities to incorporate wildlife conservation practices into daily livelihood strategies. Concomitantly, poaching of wildlife has decreased and unparalleled recoveries of wildlife across Namibia's communal areas are occurring. By mid-2007, a total of 50 communal conservancies had formed, covering approximately 11.8 million hectares and engaging close to 230,000 community members. This represents over 14.42% of the country's landmass and 12.21% of its population.

A fundamental factor in this conservation movement has been the contributions of the trophy hunting industry, and the speed at which trophy hunting proceeds have been returned to conservancies to underwrite conservation costs and support rural development activities. Shortly after registration of the first four conservancies in 1998, hunting concessions were awarded and much-needed cash almost immediately began to flow to conservancies. By the end of June 2007, there were a total of 22 hunting concessions in 29 out of 50 communal conservancies.

2. National hunting and wildlife management policies and legislation:

Namibia is fortunate in that it has benefited from visionary legislation that gives recognition to the merits of devolving rights over wildlife to private citizens. It defines wildlife into three different categories:

1. *specialty-protected game* – globally significant species such as elephant and rhino;
2. *protected game* – less common, but valuable species such as roan antelope, sable, eland red hartebeest, etc.; and
3. *hunting game* – common plains game such as kudu, springbok, oryx, and warthog, and common game birds.

This legislation also prescribes the circumstances when wildlife and by whom wildlife may be utilized. *Specialty-protected* and *protected game* may only be hunted under the virtue of a permit issued by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), with permit allocations being based upon sustainable offtake quotas. In contrast, conditional rights of ownership to *hunting game* have been given to private farm owners and conservancies, who in turn, may decide how to utilize their *hunting game*. Use options may entail: shoot-for-sell, shoot for own-use, biltong/meat hunting, culling (mostly restricted to springbok), game capture, and/or trophy hunting.

Namibia has a long history of ground-breaking conservation legislation, with its first visionary Act being passed in 1967 when the government of the day allocated use-rights to certain species of wildlife to Namibian landowners. The conservation results of giving these rights to private citizens have been dramatic, and it is estimated that wildlife numbers on Namibia's freehold land (some 44% of the country) have increased by almost 80% since the late 1960s. The passage of the communal area conservancy legislation in 1996 gives recognition to the success of the 1967 legislation and grants similar conditional ownership rights to communal area residents who form conservancies.

3. Hunting in practical terms

The trophy hunting season starts on February 1 and ends the last day of November, with the prime hunting period being during the cooler months of May – October. Trophy hunting must take place under the supervision of Namibian registered hunting guides, who must be certified by the MET. There are a number of categories for hunting guides. The entry level is a Hunting Guide, who is an individual that having passed his/her hunting examination, may guide clients on his/her farm. Following two years of successful hunting operations and 12 hunting safaris, a Hunting Guide may apply for registration as a Master Hunter, which will then allow him/her to hunt on a number of properties. After an additional two years and a further 12 hunting safaris, a Master Hunter can take theoretical and practical examination to become a Professional Hunter. The final and highest category is a registered Big Game Hunter. This level can only be achieved after two years of employment under a registered Big Game Hunter and a passing mark of 80% or more in the hunting guide examination. Additionally before such candidate is allowed to write the exams the candidate must also provide proof of experience with dealing with big or dangerous game.

Trophy hunting takes place through three different types of tenurial arrangements in Namibia. The vast majority of plains game hunting takes place on private land, where the land owner serves as the Hunting Guide or has a contractual arrangement with an MH or PH to provide rights to game found on the farm. Big Game (elephant, buffalo and lion) hunting takes place under contract to government (MET) or communal area conservancies. The State controlled concessions are periodically auctioned (to the highest bidder) to Big Game Operators (approximately every three years). The State's Big Game concessions are located in remote areas of national parks or game reserves, or on communal lands where a conservancy has yet to form. In contrast, the communal area conservancy hunting concessions are found within registered conservancies or encompass several conservancies, should they be small in size. There are presently (end of June 2007) twenty two hunting concessions operating in 29 communal conservancies. Communal conservancy

concessions are generally tendered by post to the registered Big Game Hunters in Namibia, with conservancies opting to interview the three best offers to assure compatibility between the PH and the conservancy management authorities. This approach promotes acquisition of competitive market values for concessions and empowers local communities to choose appropriate partners.

4. Contributions of the hunting industry

The latest MET statistics indicate that approximately 5,800 trophy hunters from different parts of the world visit Namibia annually, with the estimated economic contributions from trophy hunting being in excess of USD 70 million. The vast majority of this income is returned to operators and spin-off benefactors of the industry (i.e., airlines, hotels, tourism facilities, etc.). Yet, increasing portion of the industry's benefits are beginning to return to communal area conservancies, and in the process, precipitating major conservation benefits to local communities and Namibia as a country.

Since the commencement of communal conservancies in 1998, trophy hunting returns to conservancies have increased annually. The trophy hunting revenues continue to be the primary source of game utilization benefits to conservancies. However, the value-added from the meat distributed from trophy animals, employment income, and the above assorted other uses of wildlife are significant and increasing rapidly on an annual basis. During 2000, the total income and benefits to communal conservancies from all of the above forms of game utilization (including trophy hunting income) amounted to USD 165,000). By 2006, this had increased by almost tenfold to USD 1,330,000).

At surface value, this may not seem like much income. However, when one views the significance of this income and the changes in peoples' livelihoods and attitudes towards wildlife, one gains a deeper appreciation of the changes the trophy hunting industry is catalyzing in Namibia's communal areas. Following are some significant, related impacts:

- **Uses of the income** – The trophy hunting revenues are being returned as cash directly to conservancy committees, who in turn, use the income to pay salaries of community game guards and other conservancy staff members who carry-out conservancy wildlife management policies and plans. This income is allowing conservation activities to be conducted at the grassroots level, and facilitating involvement and ownership of conservation activities by the broader community;
- **Changes of attitude** – Prior to passage of the conservancy legislation, wildlife were considered pests and competition to subsistence agricultural livelihoods. The income generated by trophy hunting, combined with other forms of wildlife use (harvesting for own-use meat, sale of live game, and non-consumptive tourism), has altered this situation by demonstrating that wildlife can be a valuable community resource;
- **Changes in livelihood and land-use strategies** – The communal area conservancy movement has become an extremely popular conservation and development option in Namibia's communal areas. The 50 conservancies cover nearly 12,000,000 hectares of land and encompass more than 230,000 community residents. These figures represent 14% of Namibia's landmass and 13% of its population, respectively. Ultimately, this wave of communal conservancies will crest when conservancies cover more than 20% of the country and involve approximately 1 out of every 7 citizens.
- **Enhancement of national park system** – Namibia's national park system encompasses approximately 115,000 km² of land, or slightly less than 14% of Namibia's surface area. Significantly, 30 of the 50 registered conservancies are either adjacent to national parks or in key corridors between them. Cumulatively, these 30 conservancies provide more than 60,000 km² of wildlife compatible buffer areas

around the existing national park system. Given Namibia's patchy rainfall patterns and frequent periods of drought, this increased habitat is particularly meaningful; and

- **Recovery of wildlife populations** – Community recognition of the value of wildlife has led to a marked reduction in poaching, while the introduction of grassroots wildlife management practices (*i.e.* development & maintenance of wildlife water points, dedicated wildlife production zones, reintroduction of game to facilitate faster recovery rates, etc.) have precipitated massive recoveries of wildlife populations in large communal regions of Namibia. Such recoveries have been documented in Caprivi, Nyae Nyae, and the entire northwestern Namibia where annual game counts since 2000 have shown increasing population trends.

The conservation impacts of the conservancy program obviously cannot be fully attributed to the trophy hunting industry. However, it can be safely stated that trophy hunting has been a key catalyst. Trophy hunting income came on the heels of the first four communal conservancies' registration, and was and remains instrumental to demonstrating the value of wildlife to community residents. The resultant change in community attitudes towards wildlife has precipitated a reduction of poaching and introduction of proactive wildlife management practices. Concomitantly, the income received by conservancies empowers Namibian communities, for the first times in their lives, with the financial resources to invest in their community development needs. This is an upward, spiraling situation that is a "win-win" situation for hunting in Namibia, wildlife conservation, and community empowerment.



A trophy hunted buffalo being delivered to San community members for meat distribution in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. (Photo: Dhyani Berger, LIFE Project, 1998)

5. Challenges to the hunting industry

The trophy hunting is beginning to prosper in the communal area conservancies, but it is only in its infancy and massive upside potential has yet to be developed and tapped. In this regard, there are a number of challenges facing Namibia's communal area conservancies and their ability to harness the full potential of the trophy hunting industry, including:

- **Zoning in conservancies** – Conservancies are multi-use areas, supporting non-consumptive tourism, subsistence agriculture (i.e., livestock and crop production), settlements, and other forms of wildlife utilization such as meat harvesting for local use and live game sales for income. There is a need to spatially and temporally zone conservancies to minimize conflict between uses and to allow optimal utilization of conservancy wildlife resources. In particular, zoning between hunting (trophy and own-use) areas and non-consumptive tourism must be developed and the capacity developed in conservancy staff to manage and enforce these compatible use zones;
- **Development of industry** – There is extensive scope for expanding the number of hunting concessions offered by communal conservancies, particularly given the large number of registered and emerging conservancies that do not have hunting concessions. The average size of the 22 communal area hunting concessions is more than 200,000 hectares, with these concessions being found in some of the wildest and least developed areas of Namibia. There is potential to significantly expand this number, with future concessions also being found in vast, unspoilt, wild tracts of land. Similarly, given the large numbers of game found in many of these conservancies, their continued positive growth trends, and the outstanding trophies being harvested, there is room to substantially bolster the offtake quotas in the existing concessions. Lastly, given the abundance of plains game species (more than 140,000 springbok, 25,000 oryx, and 18,000 Hartmann’s zebra in the northwest conservancies alone, it is envisioned that sport hunting for non-trophy animals offers substantial opportunities for conservancies to increase their income from hunting;
- **Involvement of black sector** – Namibia, as with nearly all of Africa, has suffered from a lack of involvement and ownership by black Africans in the hunting industry. Unless this situation is addressed, it is doubtful there will be little long-term governmental support for this industry. Thus, there is a need to foster and promote more black Namibian professional hunters in the industry, and to build the skills and capacity of such individuals to become competitive professional hunters who can champion the industry with governmental policy makers;
- **Anti-hunting lobby** – As with the trophy hunting industry in the rest of the world, there is a need to continuously educate the public about the conservation and development merits of trophy hunting and to counter emotional and misleading propaganda against the industry by the anti-hunting lobby; and
- **Hunting Industry Regulation** – The Namibia trophy hunting industry strives to provide professional and ethical services. Nonetheless, there is a need to further strengthen the standards and ethics of the Namibia trophy hunting industry, and to put in place mechanisms through which the Namibia Professional Hunters Association (NAPHA) and conservancies can ensure professional hunters are guiding their clients in accordance with the highest hunting ethics and codes of conduct.