

The New York Times
March 17, 2013

Saving Lions by Killing Them

By ALEXANDER N. SONGORWA in DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania

ODD as it may sound, American trophy hunters play a critical role in protecting wildlife in Tanzania. The millions of dollars that hunters spend to go on safari here each year help finance the game reserves, wildlife management areas and conservation efforts in our rapidly growing country.

This is why we are alarmed that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is considering listing the African lion as endangered. Doing so would make it illegal for American hunters to bring their trophies home. Those hunters constitute 60 percent of our trophy-hunting market, and losing them would be disastrous to our conservation efforts.

In 2011, five animal-rights and conservation groups petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to list the African lion as endangered, arguing that the population had fallen dangerously low because of habitat loss, poaching, commercial hunting and new diseases associated with human encroachment. “The U.S.,” their petition said, “is by far the largest importer of hunting trophies from Tanzania.”

While that is true, the lion population in Tanzania is not endangered. We have an estimated 16,800 lions, perhaps 40 percent of all lions on the continent, the biggest population in the world. Their numbers are stable here, and while our hunting system is not perfect, we have taken aggressive efforts to protect our lions.

Tanzania has regulated hunting for decades; female and younger lions are completely protected, and the hunting of males is limited by quotas set for each hunting area in the country. We recently made it illegal to hunt male lions younger than 6 years old to ensure that reproductively active animals remained with their prides. And proposed amendments to our wildlife law would further crack down on the export of lions taken illegally, penalize hunting companies that violated our rules and reward those that complied.

Africa, of course, is endowed with a tremendous wealth of wildlife, and Tanzania has been particularly blessed. We have roughly 130,000 elephants, two of Africa’s three largest populations of wild dogs, and spectacular landscapes like the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater and Mount Kilimanjaro. We have placed nearly a third of our land in national parks, game reserves and wildlife management areas.

Of all the species found here, lions are particularly important because they draw visitors from throughout the world — visitors who support our tourism industry and economy. Many of these visitors only take pictures. But others pay thousands of dollars to pursue lions with rifles and take home trophies from what is often a once-in-a-lifetime hunt. Those hunters spend 10 to 25 times more than regular tourists and travel to (and spend money in) remote areas rarely visited by photographic tourists.

In Tanzania, lions are hunted under a 21-day safari package. Hunters pay \$9,800 in government fees for the opportunity. An average of about 200 lions are shot a year, generating about \$1,960,000 in revenue. Money is also spent on camp fees, wages, local goods and transportation. And hunters almost always come to hunt more than one species, though the lion is often the most coveted trophy sought. All told, trophy hunting generated roughly \$75 million for Tanzania’s economy from 2008 to 2011.

The money helps support 26 game reserves and a growing number of wildlife management areas owned and operated by local communities as well as the building of roads, schools, hospitals and other

infrastructure — all of which are important as Tanzania continues to develop as a peaceful and thriving democracy.

If lions are listed by the United States as an endangered species, American hunters may choose to hunt other prized species outside of Africa or simply not hunt at all. This would add further strain to our already limited budgets, undo the progress we've made, and undermine our ability to conserve not only our lions but all of our wildlife.

As Tanzania's highest-ranking wildlife official, I ask on behalf of my country and all of our wildlife: do not list the African lion as endangered. Instead, help us make the most from the revenues we generate. Help us make trophy hunting more sustainable and more valuable. In short, please work with us to conserve wildlife, rather than against us, which only diminishes our capacity to protect Tanzania's global treasures.

Alexander N. Songorwa is director of wildlife for the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism.