

## Do Hunters Actually Help Conserve Wildlife?

Months after the killing of Cecil the Lion, let's have a civilized debate over the role of trophy hunting in preserving animals.

05/04/2016 04:33 pm ET

Alexander C. Kaufman, Senior Business Editor

Big game hunting does not enjoy the same reputation it had back when President Theodore Roosevelt killed [512 animals](#) during a 1909 safari through eastern Africa.

Last year, the killing of Cecil the Lion — the beloved Zimbabwean big cat slain by a Minnesota hunter — ignited an international firestorm over the role of hunters in conserving wildlife. Walter Palmer, the then-57-year-old dentist who paid about \$55,000 to shoot the lion, became the Internet's persona non grata. The [Yelp page](#) for his dentistry practice still draws angry comments from animal lovers. His countrymen even called for his extradition to Zimbabwe, a country with [notoriously grotesque](#) prison conditions.

At the other end of the spectrum, Roosevelt — whose hunting bona fides arguably trounce even his wartime prestige — bears the legacy as the United States' great conservationist, underscoring a longstanding tradition of hunters serving as the stewards of nature and all its creatures.

Does that still hold up today? Can hunters still be considered wildlife conservationists?

That will be the subject of a discussion hosted Wednesday by [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#) and moderated by John Donvan.

That evening, at the Kaufman Music Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side, two teams of two will argue whether "[hunters conserve wildlife](#)." The Oxford-style debate allows the audience to vote before the session and after; the team who sways the biggest percentage to their side wins. An online poll held ahead of the debate showed the team arguing for the motion winning in a landslide, with about 70 percent of the vote.

As of Wednesday afternoon, the majority of online voters cast their ballots in favor of the team arguing for the motion.

"The thing to really keep in mind is there's a scientific consensus around the fact that hunting supports

**ONLINE VOTING RESULTS**  
**70% FOR** | **30% AGAINST**  
37687 votes | 16281 votes



conservation, particularly in developing economies,” debater Catherine Semcer, chief operating officer of Humanitarian Operations Protecting Elephants, told The Huffington Post ahead of the debate. (She, if it’s not obvious, is on the side arguing for the motion). “This is an economic model that supports conservation. We can ignore that if we want to, but then we really need to think about to what extent we are serving wildlife or are we serving our own egos.”

Hunters who pay to shoot rare, big game in the least hospitable parts of Mozambique, for example, fund a local anti-poaching task force that keeps the number of animals at sustainable levels, she said.

“This is a malaria-infested swamp filled with crocodiles and poison snakes,” she said. “The average photo-tourist won’t go in there, but hunters will, they’ll accept those risks.”

Not so, said one of her opponents, Adam M. Roberts, chief executive of the nonprofit Born Free USA & Born Free Foundation.

“They may be putting money into that one remote area that otherwise would not be put into that remote area, but that doesn’t mean anything else has been tried and failed,” Roberts told HuffPost. “If there are areas that need protection, I think what we need to do is look holistically at a national level.”

“What we find in the conservation movement is politically, economically and biologically there’s no good argument to made that hunters conserve wildlife,” he added.

Politically, he said governments set quotas that either are too high or aren’t enforced. Were it not for Cecil the Lion’s celebrity in one of Zimbabwe’s national parks, his death, for instance, may have been overlooked.

Economically, Roberts said, “very little money actually flows into local communities or conservation practices.” That money often goes to hunting outfitters, such as the company run by the Zimbabwean man who helped arrange the hunt for Cecil, a hunt which [turned out to be illegal](#).

Biologically, the numbers seems to speak for themselves. Even with conservation funding from legal hunting, the population of lions in Africa — never mind more endangered species such as rhinos and elephants — [continues to plummet](#).

“We see the pressure that hunting puts on wild populations, especially on a species like the lion, which has been subjected to a precipitous decline across Africa over the last 30 years,” Roberts said.

Still, anti-hunting conservationists may need more ways to put money behind their ideals.

“It’s absolutely critical that there be financial incentives for local people to continue living with these animals,” Semcer said. “When the hunting goes away, the poaching dramatically increases. These are animals that kill and in many cases eat people. Asking people to live with them just because is not a realistic option. Unless you’re putting cash and other incentives into people’s pockets, they’re very reluctant to continue cohabitating with these animals.”

We'll be streaming the debate live here, starting at 6:45 p.m. EST. I'll be in the audience watching, so please share your thoughts in the comments below or tweet at me at [@AlexCKaufman](#). Would love your thoughts.