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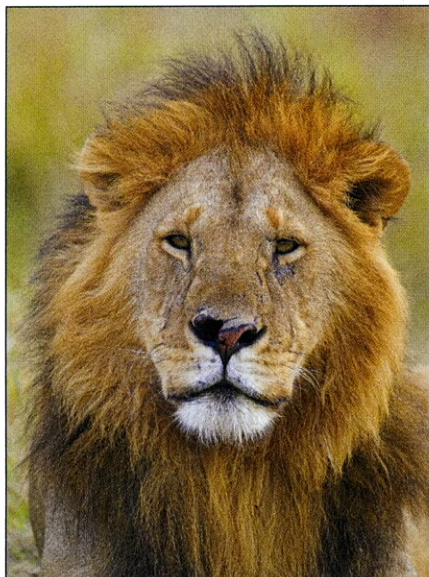


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THE ECHO OF CECIL'S ROAR

The Cecil affair opened the hunting world to intense scrutiny that is not going away.



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The public outcry over the killing of a park lion in Zimbabwe has died down, but the hunting world's tepid response does not bode well for the future.

The media storm that roared into the public conscious over Cecil the lion has receded and its swollen currents of discourse have subsided. Yet, like all storms, the hurricane that was Cecil leaves behind markers of its passing, most importantly a more sensitized public that will confront future controversies over hunting wherever they emerge. Regardless of how we might wish to dismiss the Cecil coverage or rail against the condemnation of hunting it unleashed, the fact remains it was a phenomenon. The hunting world will be making a grave error indeed if it fails to study and understand its significance.

Predictably, of course, we will do nothing of the kind. What we certainly will do is denigrate those who have spoken out against the killing of this lion and call them “crazies” or “antis.” We will also advance facts and figures that speak to hunting’s conservation benefits, including those that derive from lion and other forms of classic trophy hunting. And, of course, we will point out the enormous amounts of money hunting generates and the socio-economic benefits that accrue to local and regional economies and people. In other words, we will do what we have always done . . . and then await the next Cecil, and do it all over again.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these arguments. Hunting can be an effective conservation mechanism and it can bring benefits to wildlife and people both. Hunting has rescued wildlife in many instances—no question. The problem is, this is not the problem. We are preoccupied with what we perceive as issues of logic, when in reality they are issues of emotion. We stress that it is the good of the species that matters when the concern

is most often expressed for individual animals. We talk about killing animals as though it is a virtual necessity of conservation, yet the public sees real benefits from preservationist approaches in some areas of the world. National parks, we might remember, are often their only journeys to nature.

What we are facing today is a rising public empathy for animals. This is an ages-old attitude born at the same time as our hunting past but which is now coming to the fore in a modern, nature-distant society. Worldwide, people are deluged with warnings for the planet’s future and gruesome images of illegal wildlife killing and illicit trade in wildlife parts. Many people, fortunately, are affected by such images and wish to see these activities eliminated. Some who share this view are hunters, but many are not. They see all wildlife killing as the same. Thus, to confront this rising global concern for nature with explanations of how conservation is served by wounding, and then, hours later, killing a radio-collared lion just outside a protected wildlife reserve seems rather problematic, doesn’t it? If we want to influence and win this argument we had best start by putting ourselves, however briefly, in the shoes of our critics.

But what is most problematic is the fact that hardly any response from the hunting world so much as hints at empathy for wild creatures. Why is this? Many hunters have such empathy, of course, but when do we demonstrate it? In its absence, a growing citizen sector appears willing to accept that hunters are grotesquely interested only in killing things. To them, our conservation arguments are vacuous, transparent tapestries designed to assuage our conscience, mislead the public, and silence

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our critics. If we allow this societal impression to grow and embed itself in the institutions of politics and wider conservation circles we will watch all hunting slowly strangled out of existence.

It is critical that the hunting world understand that Cecil drew from a much wider consciousness than merely the bona fide anti-hunting movement—those who are ideologically opposed to all forms of hunting and often include advocates for animal rights. The enormous scale and range of commentary on the death of this wild animal included viewpoints from individuals who, while not hunters themselves, support or are at least willing to accept some forms of animal harvest.

Thus Cecil's greatest impact on hunting will derive from the inroads the coverage of his death makes on the "sacred seventy"—that large majority (70 percent) of people who appear,

in North America at least, to support some forms of legal, fair chase hunting. The hunting world has correctly viewed this constituency as critical to hunting's future. Well, it is not secure. We will convince this constituency of hunting's relevance through our determined action, or see it rise against hunting, through our neglect. No one else will speak for us.

We should remember that in addition to eliciting outrage and condemnation from the general public, a wide circle of journalists, media personalities, and informed conservation professionals were also highly critical of this specific hunt, and trophy hunting in general. For a majority of these, the logic of trophy hunting's conservation benefits could not overcome their moral opposition to its practice. It was impossible not to sense that a wave of condemnation was circling hunting's

perimeter. Nor could one escape the feeling that suddenly the world was confronted with, for them, a previously unknown and shocking reality; namely, that a massive industry exists which involves foreign hunters killing all manner of beasts, including iconic species such as elephants and lions and even endangered beasts such as rhinos.

We need to recognize that most members of the public know little or nothing of what we term, with perhaps too little thought, the hunting "industry." Clearly, upon learning of its existence, many were in shock. Hunting deer and waterfowl for food is one thing; hunting baboons and leopards something else again. Now that the genie is out of the bottle, however, there is no going back. The hunting world has been opened to a wide audience and more intense scrutiny will follow. And, for hunters who feel their particular form of hunting is doing just fine and think it is only lion hunting or trophy hunting that is in the cross hairs, well, my suggestion is to think again. A rising tide will gradually encircle the wider beach and so it is for the rising world of empathy for animals and the issue of hunting. It is critical that we position ourselves to argue both for hunting's modern relevance and demonstrate our personal concern for animals. Nothing less will safeguard hunting's future.

For years wildlife scientists have struggled, with limited success, to communicate the relationship between hunting, wildlife conservation, and land management. We know that trophy hunting can be linked to the successful recovery and conservation of wild species, from the markhor in Pakistan to the black rhino in Namibia. We know also that hunting contributes over \$200 million to African economies every year and helps support national parks and wildlife conservation in those countries. What we don't seem to know is how to adapt to a changing social circumstance where these very statistics appear ir- continued on page 42

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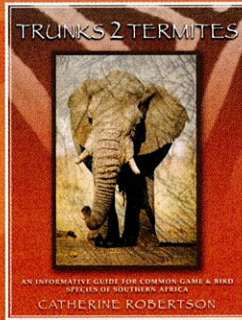
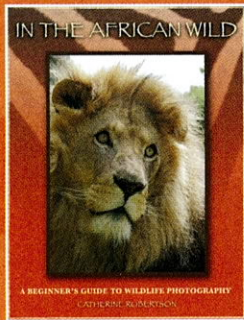
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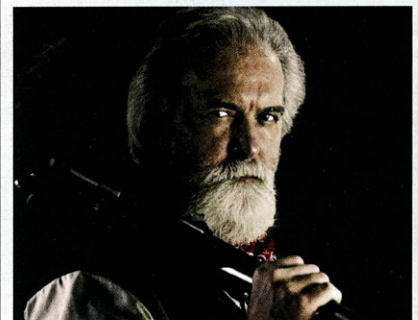


Conservation Corner/continued from page 40

relevant to a growing number of people and where our motivations for hunting become the most critical metric of all. We must accept that we cannot fight a modern war with medieval weaponry. We need something more.

While many in the hunting world are calling for more money for social media and slick communication and promotional efforts for hunting, I say be careful what you wish for. We already have a massive promotional campaign for hunting taking the form of hundreds of television shows, magazines, web sites, meetings, and conventions. The vast majority of these multimillion-dollar communication efforts emphasize animal death and hunter achievement—the very things the modern public is rising against. With respect to the Cecil affair, where has it gotten us? Secondly, setting conservation and hunting policy via social media can be a very tricky affair, one that we are, presently, ill-equipped to engage. Before we launch anything new I suggest we closely examine what effects our current promotional effort is already having and make the changes needed there.

Finally, we need to think very clearly about what we are going to say concerning two critical issues. Why is hunting relevant in our modern world, and do hunters really care about the wildlife we pursue? Either we will answer these questions, or someone else will—an echo, surely, of Cecil's roar.



Shane Mahoney

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.