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Is 'Trophy' Now a Lethal Word for Hunting?

But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.
— George Orwell, 1984

I have always believed in the power of words. They have the capacity to inspire us, to lead us to powerful achievements and to great sacrifice. They can carry us to war, encourage us to peace. Weightless and without physical dimension, words remain agile weapons in our search for good and evil – and for truth. Words carriage our thoughts. They transport our ideas. They give color, tone and emphasis to our impressions. We should be careful when we use them, thoughtful when we hear them. We should remember that Adolph Hitler visited untold misery on the world through his rhetorical power. Nelson Mandela did the opposite. His rhetoric dispatched frontiers of gratuitous violence to the cradles of justice and reconciliation. So perhaps we can all agree: words really do matter.

None of us who care about hunting and the conservation of wildlife can any longer ignore the influence the word trophy now exerts on public attitudes and activism against hunting. The evidence is everywhere, from public opinion surveys to newspaper and television exposés, to the cackling of social media and the slightly more refined discussions in our halls of political power. Indeed, while many of us have tried to explain how the word is misinterpreted and how, in a real sense, we are all trophy



CONSERVATION

hunters, seeking to acquire mementos or remembrances of our hunting experiences – whether photos, horns, antlers or capes – it just doesn't seem to matter. Nor does it seem to matter that many of the world's most respected conservation organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature support legal, sustainable hunting in many parts of the world because they see the proof of its value in conserving wildlife and supporting human livelihoods.

Sadly, no matter how we try and argue the case, the public worldwide has taken a clear and likely unchangeable position that is negative to trophy hunting. Furthermore, this has now largely become a values-based debate, not a scientific one. No matter how much hunters wish that animal conservation could be the basis of the discussion, it is the behaviour of the human beings involved and the very nature of the activity that are under scrutiny. This is the negative power of the word *trophy*. It has driven citizens to oppose a significant conservation mechanism.

Lost to the public's understanding is the idea that classic trophy hunters would pursue only

mature animals that have already contributed to the genetic pool of the species, animals that are of an age where death is a pressing reality and likelihood, and animals that because of their physical size and attributes will uniquely attract international hunters and thus provide badly needed income to support local human communities and wider conservation campaigns. Rather, the broad public impression of the trophy hunter is of a wealthy, white male who seeks thrills and self-aggrandizement through the willful killing of magnificent animals and who cares nothing for wildlife, except that they exist for him to shoot. From this perspective, any benefit to conservation or humanity that may derive from trophy hunting is accidental and not an acceptable reason or rationale.

But the situation is even more complicated. Meat hunting, for example, is widely supported. Thus a motivational line is drawn between the word meat and the word *trophy*, even though the vast bulk of all meat from all hunted animals is utilized, including from most animals harvested by so-called trophy hunters. Frustrating, isn't it? From this vantage point, we begin to see the convoluted world of words in which hunting is now immersed, and we can begin to forecast how difficult it will be to disentangle it. It is now undeniable that communications on hunting must enter a maze of misinterpretation, confusion and, sometimes, deliberate distortion that can squander much of our time, money and talent if we are not cautious in how we approach it. Many great intentions as well as great armies have been lost in swamps of exactly this kind. The point is this: the hunting community now, more than ever, needs to choose its words carefully.

Yet communication on this issue is desperately required! Eliminate trophy hunting from areas such as parts of Africa and wildlife will suffer and suffer greatly – especially the big, dangerous and destructive species,

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the very ones that often plague local communities but which are the darlings of the western conservation conscience. Funny isn't it that we in our high-rise condominiums in Brussels or New York want lions and elephants everywhere in Africa but cannot stand so much as a mosquito, cockroach or mouse in our own domiciles. It is marvelous what wealth and distance can afford. But local people will not accept wildlife-caused human fatality and crop destruction. In the absence of incentives, such as income from guiding hunters and the wild meat provided to them as a result, local people will kill the wildlife around them using whatever means they can.

Regardless of this likely prospect, the fact remains that trophy hunting is unpalatable to a broad section of our *modern* public. That is the reality we face and must address. This is true in much of Europe and it is true in much of North America as well. What are we to do? How are we to address this hall of mirrors? In this context, the word modern is also highly relevant and highly problematic. It too is a word the hunting world needs to closely examine. Is there such a thing as a modern public and, if so, how should we approach it? Differently, I suggest. Yet it seems pretty obvious that many hunters think the world is the same one we grew up in or believe it can somehow be transformed back to that time, a time when our classic arguments favouring trophy hunting would be an easy sell to the public. Thus, we promote the word "trophy" and believe that more statistics and better information will be our silver bullet. Once we present the public with

our evidence, they will see the light of day and accept trophy hunting as a reputable undertaking of benefit to both wildlife and people, or so the expectation goes. Unfortunately, none of the foregoing assumptions are necessarily correct.

First, the world really has changed; and second, for as long as we have been conducting public attitude surveys in the North America – 40 years or so – a significant majority of the public has perceived trophy hunting as unacceptable. Thus presenting our arguments on trophy hunting's benefits to conservation has obviously been of little impact for a very long time, probably because the public reaction is more against trophy hunting than for wildlife. So why do we think more of the same will work now? This long-standing opposition to trophy hunting also directly challenges the belief of those who see Facebook or other modern electronic communication vehicles as the fundamental cause of the public's reaction to this activity. Even before Facebook inventor Mark Zuckerberg was born (imagine that!), the American public was decidedly against trophy hunting. Who should we blame for this?

Is it possible hunters were part of the problem? Could it be that our messaging, our photos, our magazines, our conventions, our websites, our advertisements, our terminology, our rhetoric, our modern heroes have all been a significant part of the problem, major influences shaping the public aversion to trophy hunting? I am afraid blaming the internet medium is a childlike fallacy and a conclusion that will lead us down paths of false hope and useless effort. We

can analyze the reasons to death, hold town hall meetings, focus groups and phone surveys of public attitudes, but the angst over trophy hunting is now a virus in the public conscience, reproducing itself and presenting unlimited variants to us who wish to challenge it. Like a lot of problems in life, it would be nice if the public reaction to trophy hunting could be blamed on one single cause or instrument. Unfortunately, it cannot. The reasons are many and their collective influence is highly interwoven and complex – we cannot unravel this with a simple key. There is no painless, magic wand.

So, is the word trophy now lethal to hunting? I suspect it is and believe we should deal with this reality. We should consider a guerrilla tactic for the language war we are engaged in. Let us leave the landscape of the big battle to those who oppose trophy hunting. Let us quietly retire the term trophy, burn the treasured icon they seek and leave nothing for the marauders to take.

For many in the hunting community, surrendering the term will be difficult and a sign of capitulation. In reality, we give nothing over. We hunt for the reasons we do. No one can take this from us. What the public can take, however, is hunting itself. Let us not lead them there. I see no reason to sacrifice the cultural, economic and conservation benefits of hunting for an adjective. For as powerful as the term trophy may be for some, it is just a word, isn't it?

Indeed, while I think of it, why don't we drop all the hunting adjectives such as meat, trophy, and sport, and simply call it what it is – hunting! GT



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