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## **TEN YEARS AFTER CECIL. THE LION, THE LIES, AND THE EXPLOITATION OF WILDLIFE AND THE PUBLIC**

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It was with trepidation that I watched June 2025 fade away and July 2025 show herself. July 2025 marks ten years since the legal and controversial hunting of "Cecil," a lion from Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park whose death was used to ignite global outrage.

For a decade, animal rights activists, notably the UK-based Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting (CBTH), run by Eduardo Gonçalves, have ridden the emotional wave generated by Cecil's death to solicit donations and campaign for bans that ultimately harm African conservation efforts and rural livelihoods.

But ten years on, it's time to separate the fact from the fiction and to reclaim the narrative from those who have exploited both wildlife and compassion for their own ideological and financial ends.

Cecil's death in 2015 was neither poaching nor an illegal act. The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks), the statutory authority responsible for wildlife in Zimbabwe, has repeatedly confirmed that the hunt was conducted legally, under license, and in accordance with national hunting regulations.

Cecil was not "lured" from the sanctuary of Hwange National Park as claimed. At the time of his death, he had already been ousted from his pride and was roaming as a solitary, ageing nomad, as is natural for male lions in the wild.

Furthermore, while much has been made of the radio collar he wore, as he was part of a research project by the Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation

Research Unit (WildCRU), there was no attempt by the hunters to hide the collar. They would have been lucky to see the collar as a multitude of photographs of the lion and other collared lions show, often it's hidden by the mane. Even if the collar was visible, it was legal to hunt a collared lion at the time. In fact, the very reason Cecil was collared in the first place was because of the initiative of conservation-minded hunters to determine the cause of death of lions that left the Park.

Before the WildCRU lion study was initiated, any lion that wandered out of Hwange National Park into adjacent communal or private farmland, areas heavily stocked with cattle and goats, was systematically tracked down and killed by locals as a threat to their livestock. There was no restriction on age or sex, no protection, and no data gathered on what happened to these animals.

It was the trophy hunting community, including the conservation organization Conservation Force, that approached scientists and funded the collaring of lions to understand and better manage lion populations, especially those that roamed outside protected areas. This was a conservation initiative spurred by hunters, not animal rights activists.

It was hunters who instituted the policy of only targeting mature males, typically over six years old, to ensure minimal disruption to lion social structures and breeding dynamics. The underlying strategy was to permit them to mature to trophy age or to reach full trophy value instead of treating them as cattle-killing vermin. This increased their survival value as it encouraged private ranches and the communities to view and treat them as a valuable, sustainable resource. By implementing age-based hunting regulations, they offered more protection to lion populations than the emotional rhetoric of anti-hunting campaigns ever has. But for the science-based hunting strategy, Cecil could not have lived to the old age of 13. The program began the year of his birth, was considered successful because the lion population outside of the park had expanded by hundreds. Private farmland was part of Cecil's core habitat.

Among the many emotionally charged claims surrounding Cecil's death was the widely circulated allegation that the lion was left to suffer for 40 hours after being wounded because the hunter, Dr. Walter Palmer, supposedly wanted to claim a prize for a record-book trophy hunted with a bow. This narrative is not only false but deeply misleading.

It was nightfall soon after the arrow was fired, not only a dangerous and unsuitable time to track a wounded predator in the African bush, but ethically, the best bowhunting practice is to avoid pressuring a wounded animal. The logic is to let a wounded animal "bleed out" or "stove up" instead of chancing "bumping" him. If he is bumped, one is less likely to catch up with or ever find him, so he may suffer unnecessarily. The hunting team ethically resumed the pursuit at first light, not after 40 hours, and humanely dispatched the lion early that morning.

The idea that Palmer delayed the kill to preserve the condition of the lion's body for an award has no basis in fact and has been repeatedly refuted. Like many of the claims surrounding this hunt, it was manufactured to provoke outrage and dehumanize the hunters involved, regardless of the legality or ethics of their actions.

While the media frenzy painted hunters as villains, the real profiteers were animal rights organizations. The Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting, under the control of Eduardo Gonçalves, is not a charity but a dissolved (21 December 2021) private company (Company Number 12200178). It has used the emotionally charged image of Cecil to solicit how much in donations from the well-meaning but misinformed public, while vilifying sustainable use practices that are endorsed by scientific authorities and local governments across Africa.

Donors were never told that the very communities who live alongside lions and bear the cost of living with dangerous predators benefit from regulated hunting. In areas adjacent to Hwange and other wildlife reserves, hunting brings in crucial revenue that funds schools, clinics, anti-poaching patrols, and infrastructure.

When lions kill livestock or threaten villagers, it is not NGOs in London that show up to compensate them, it's hunting revenues that help mitigate these costs.

The demonization of trophy hunting following Cecil's death sparked legislative efforts across Europe and North America to ban the import of legally hunted wildlife. These bans, if enacted, would not save a single lion. Instead, they would bankrupt community-based conservation programs, increase human-wildlife conflict, and lead to more indiscriminate killings of wildlife as economic value vanishes.

Not only did my July disquietude start with the prospect of hunters the world over being vilified and maligned for practising what is as much ingrained in our DNA as what we look like, but also the daunting prospect of another round of campaigning by the CBTH and other wildlife exploiters with the Second Reading of the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill on the 11th July 2025.

This event, in various forms, has become an annual calendar event in the UK Parliament since the hunting of Cecil. The exploitation of Cecil and other wildlife has been a year-long call for donations by a plethora of animal rights organizations, which will be intensified over the coming days as the 11th July draws nearer. How much of these donations will ever reach or benefit Africa is anyone's guess, as the recipients plan their next onslaught in the comfort of their sprawling estates.

The caring, groomed public is not only be confronted with emotive calls for donation, but they are also offered an array of Cecil merchandise they can buy at inflated prices. Some of the goods on sale are even celebrity-designed and endorsed. Goncalves has even used Cecil's hunt and the Second Reading as a time to launch his latest three books. No doubt a rehashing of hunting myths and misinformation based on his own warped opinion and sources from animal rights newspaper and magazine articles.

This campaigning and marketing of animal rightism is not only an exploitation of wildlife and the public but also the UK Parliament, MPs and the British taxpayer, who once again will have to foot the bill while MPs debate the merits of "The Bill" while ignoring the voices of Africa. Maybe before threatening the successful, sustainable conservation model of many African countries, they should try to ban the export of trophies from the UK. Let's see how the British rural people embrace the threat to their livelihoods as stalking and shooting become a thing of the past.

The voices of African conservationists, communities, and governments have been consistently ignored in this debate, drowned out by celebrity endorsements and Western activists. The result: policies made in the name of African wildlife that actually undermine it.

It's way past time to reclaim conservation from campaigners. Ten years after Cecil's death, we must confront a hard truth: the greatest threat to Africa's lions is not legal hunting it is the erosion of the very systems that make co-existence possible. Those systems rely on science, sustainability, and sovereignty, not slogans.

Cecil was just another lion. He was also a symbol, one hijacked to mislead the world and make money off a false narrative. The true legacy of Cecil should not be the enrichment of Western animal rights activists, but the empowerment of African communities to manage and conserve their wildlife, on their terms.

One thing all of these anti-hunting activists have in common is the false belief that hunting is about this insatiable need to kill for fun.

The Spanish philosopher & politician Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883 - 1955) in *Meditations on Hunting* said it best:

"One does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted..."

A common thread among hunters is the respect and admiration they have for their quarry. As John Madson so eloquently put it:

"I do not hunt for the joy of killing but for the joy of living, and the inexpressible pleasure of mingling my life however briefly, with that of a wild creature that I respect, admire and value."

Man has trophy hunted since the day he first revered, admired, and respected his quarry. That day was when he became a hunter, an apex predator not a scavenger of other predator's scraps.

Regardless of whether or not we are hunters or not we must never forget, we as a species wouldn't be here if it weren't for the fact that our ancestors were successful hunters.

It's time to stop mourning Cecil with misinformation and start honouring his memory with truth.

For further information on sustainable use, contact the Sustainable Use Coalition of Southern Africa (SUCo-SA) and for lion conservation in Zimbabwe, contact the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority or Conservation Force.

Note: Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting links to a private company, Ban Trophy Hunting (Company Number 13604179), owned by Eduardo Goncalves. Goncalves has a further private company, Green Future Books Ltd (Company Number 12377377), which links back to CBTH.

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Trevor Oertel is a South African businessman with business interests in South Africa, Botswana and the UAE. But foremost, he is a conservationist and wildlife enthusiast. In his youth, he was a professional hunter and wildlife manager, hunting and working in the Eastern Cape and the Kalahari. Trevor's passion is falconry, a pursuit he has followed since childhood, specifically hunting ducks and partridges under Peregrine Falcons. Trevor has been very instrumental in legalising falconry in various provinces in South Africa and was instrumental in the formation of the South African Falconry Association (SAFA) in 1990.

Trevor has served under various Ministers of Environmental Affairs, on the "Minister's Wildlife Forum". As a former farmer in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, he finds some conservationists' naivety in understanding basic concepts such as "carrying capacity" and "sustainable use" hard to understand as they sit back watching biodiversity and habitat destroyed, while promoting failed bans that enrich poachers and animal right organisations at the expense of our wildlife, natural heritage and African people. Trevor is currently an Executive Committee Member of the "Sustainable Use Coalition of Southern Africa" (SUCo-SA) and has represented SUCo-SA at CITES meetings both in Panama and Geneva.