



MARK CARWARDINE

GLOBAL CONDEMNATION OF THE KILLING OF CECIL THE LION PROVES THAT THE TIDE HAS TURNED AGAINST TROPHY HUNTING.

OPINION

Though it might be hard to believe, it took an elderly lion to put Zimbabwe back on the world map. Forget its shockingly high unemployment figures, food shortages, lack of medicines and appalling human-rights record – the fact that its most famous feline was killed by an American big-game hunter is what made the headlines.

Thirteen-year-old Cecil was the star attraction of Hwange National Park and part of a study into lion conservation (he was wearing a radio-collar). But Walter Palmer, a dentist from Minnesota, arranged for two local guides to lure him out of the protected area, using a dead animal as bait, and then fired at him with a crossbow.

But it was a ham-fisted shot and the three men had to spend 40 hours tracking the injured lion before they could dispatch him with a gun. They left Cecil where he fell, skinned and headless.

Now the hunter has himself become the hunted. Palmer's defence is ignorance (even though he already has form for

illegally killing a black bear in his own country). But that doesn't placate the quarter-of-a-million people who have signed a petition for him to be extradited to face charges in Zimbabwe, or calm the furious criticism on social media. The pictures he posted of himself online don't help: grinning shamelessly next to a rhino, a leopard, a mountain lion, and many more of his gratuitous kills.

It's hard to sympathise with someone who pays an insane amount of money (Palmer reputedly paid about £35,000 to hunt Cecil), has everything prepared for him in advance, shoots (incompetently) at close range, then awaits delivery of the animal's severed head to brag about back home. Trophy hunting requires no field skills, no wildlife knowledge and no hunting ability. All that's needed is a large disposable income together with a total lack of morals.

But it's the reprehensible policy of selling permits to lion trophy hunters that really ought to be on trial. At least Cecil's unlucky demise has shoved this so-called sport kicking and screaming back into the spotlight. Hunting lions in Zimbabwe (and, indeed, many other countries in Africa) is allowed with permits that authorise certain animals to

be killed in specific places. So had Cecil lived a few miles away, and the paperwork been in order, it would have been perfectly legal for an American tourist to kill him. It happens several times every day – legally and illegally – but, this time, the lion was too famous to be ignored.

We are told by politically correct

conservation groups and proponents of trophy hunting that we 'Western armchair animal lovers' shouldn't be so sentimental, and don't understand. They blithely claim that hunting revenues help conservation and filter back into desperately poor communities. So how come the steepest declines in lion populations occur in

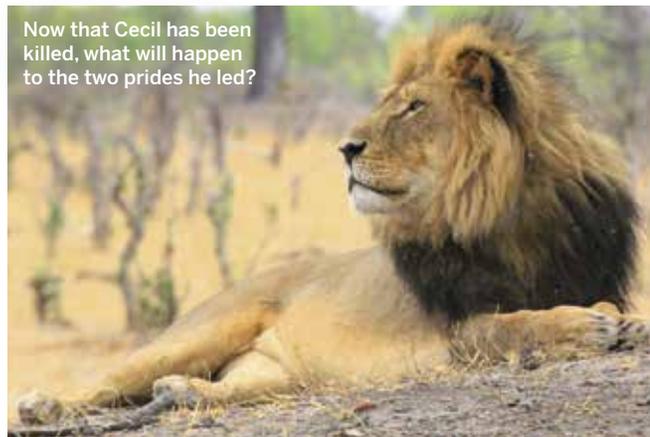
countries with the highest hunting intensity?

Admittedly lion trophy hunters do fork out large sums of money. But most of this is siphoned off by the hunting elite and corrupt government officials: no more than 3 per cent ever finds its way to local people. Besides, these are one-off payments – you can't kill the same animal twice – whereas a lion such as Cecil can earn money from traditional tourism for many years.

And what about the mixed messages we send locals: they can't hunt lions, but rich Westerners can? Or the insult to thousands of rangers who risk their lives every day trying to protect lions (which are in serious trouble)?

Lion trophy hunting is a complete and utter sham. It should be banned – now. 🐾

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Now that Cecil has been killed, what will happen to the two prides he led?

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