NATSHOOT CONSERVATION HUB

IF WILDLIFE HAD NO VALUE, WOULD YOU KEEP IT?



As hunters, we know what it costs to hunt an animal. Yet far fewer of us have had to calculate what it actually costs to keep that animal on the landscape throughout its life.

We often experience conservation at the end of a very long chain. We arrive in a conserved landscape, see healthy wildlife populations and perhaps assume that what stands before us is simply nature. But these landscapes do not exist outside economics.

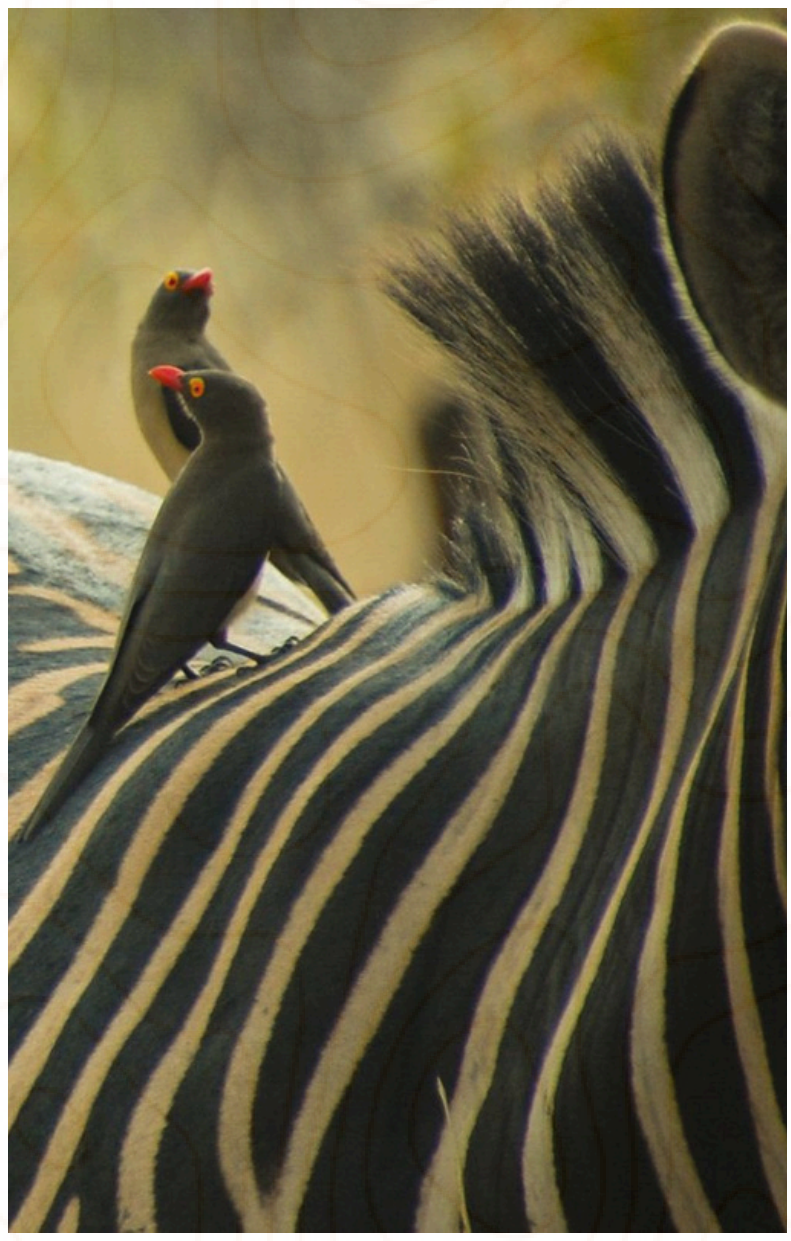
The same land supporting wildlife could be used for many other purposes. Retaining natural habitat is therefore not only a conservation decision; it is also an economic one. This is where the real significance of sustainable utilisation lies.

Behind the scenes

Before we arrive, the landowner has already made a decision: to retain that land for wildlife rather than convert it to livestock, crops, housing, mining, infrastructure or another form of development. This is a decision to provide water, maintain fences, manage the veld and protect the wildlife living there. And it is a decision (and commitment) that must be made again next year, and in the years after that.

This raises an uncomfortable but important question:

"IF WILDLIFE PROVIDES NO BENEFIT TO THOSE CARRYING THE COST OF CONSERVING IT ON THE LAND, WILL IT STILL BE THERE IN TWENTY YEARS?"



THE CONSERVATION VALUE OF HUNTING EXTENDS FAR BEYOND THE PRICE PAID FOR AN ANIMAL.

IT LIES IN HELPING TO MAKE THE LANDSCAPE THAT PRODUCED THAT ANIMAL WORTH RETAINING.

Giving wildlife value does not mean that every animal must be hunted or otherwise utilised. Nor does earning an income from wildlife automatically make an activity conservation. For utilisation to contribute meaningfully to conservation, it must protect the resource on which it depends. Wildlife populations must remain healthy, habitats must remain functional, and how we use wildlife today must never compromise what remains for tomorrow.

That is why the most important word in conservation through sustainable utilisation is '*sustainable*'.

Use cannot continually exceed the rate at which wildlife populations reproduce and recover. Populations must remain viable, offtake must be appropriate, laws must be respected, and management must adapt when circumstances change.

The objective is not simply to produce another animal to hunt. It is to maintain a functioning system capable of sustaining wildlife indefinitely. Perhaps this is where we, as hunters, should examine our own role more critically.

We speak frequently about calibre, shot placement, trophies, meat, prices and hunting methods. These things matter. But the conservation question extends far beyond the few seconds between deciding to shoot and pulling the trigger.



What are hunters actually helping to preserve?

Is it merely access to an animal?

Or are we helping to maintain the water, veld, space, management and economic incentive that allowed that animal to be there in the first place?

A kudu does not understand economics. Neither does a buffalo, impala or wildebeest. But the people deciding whether thousands of hectares remain wildlife habitat certainly must.

If wildlife is to compete for space in a changing Southern Africa, keeping land under wildlife must remain a rational and sustainable choice for those carrying its costs.

WHAT CAN WE DO?



Our responsibility as hunters extends beyond taking an animal responsibly.

We can choose hunting destinations and wildlife operations that manage their land and animals responsibly. We can respect seasons, quotas and the law; avoid waste; support responsible hunting and sound habitat management; and ask whether the money we spend contributes to keeping wildlife and wild spaces in our country.

The future of hunting will depend not only on the wildlife that remains, but also on the values, knowledge and conduct of those who follow us. So we should also pass these values on to our children, younger hunters and those entering the hunting community for the first time.

The way we hunt, the choices we make and the conservation economy we support should continue to give people a reason to choose wildlife and retain natural habitat.

Because perhaps the most important question facing hunting is not: “Will there still be animals to hunt?” But rather: “Will there still be enough people willing to keep the land wild?”

EVERY RESPONSIBLE CHOICE HELPS SUSTAIN A MUCH BIGGER SYSTEM: THE LAND, THE WILDLIFE, THE LIVELIHOODS CONNECTED TO IT AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN OUTDOOR HERITAGE WE VALUE SO DEEPLY.

