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The price of a rhino's life? \$100,000

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[Watch](#) Louis Theroux feeding lions

Big game hunting hasn't died out with fears for endangered species, it's just moved to private game reserves. Louis Theroux went to South Africa to try to understand the thrill of paying to kill an animal.

Last year, having made documentaries on high-stakes gambling and extreme plastic surgery, I turned my journalistic sights on another controversial leisure industry: the world of big game hunting in South Africa. Hunting is, if anything, even more polarising than other subjects I've looked at.

Where the strangeness of gambling and plastic surgery lies in the element of self-sabotage - throwing your own money away, making yourself look weird - hunting gives another turn to the screw by putting another sentient creature in harm's way - specifically, that zebra or lion whose pelt would look so nice turned into a pouffe for the front room.

A lifelong city dweller, my ignorance about wildlife in general and hunting in particular was, at the outset, almost complete. For five or six years I was a vegetarian; I don't cook much meat at home and I still get a slightly weird "farmyard feeling" when I take sausages out of the packet and notice that they're all strung together.

As for big game hunting, my ideas - formed by old films and books - were basically that you'd spend weeks tramping through rough country for a glimpse of a kudu, unleash hell with your shotgun, then retire to the tent for six or seven gin-and-tonics. And I had a notion that nowadays most of the big animals were endangered and therefore off limits - no-one actually still went out bagging rhinos and lions, did they?

But almost any animal can be hunted - rhinos, lions, leopards, elephants, hippos, and many more - and far from being out in the "bundu", most of the hunting in South Africa takes place on privately owned game farms. The animals are behind fences.

Menu of game

They are wild in the sense that they may bite you; they are wild in the sense that they won't come when you whistle; but they are not wild in the "Born Free" sense. They all belong to someone.

You don't have to tramp around for a glimpse of a kudu because the farmer who owns all the kudu can drive you to the corner of his property where they're usually seen. Most safari outfitters offer a menu of game that clients can choose from. It's like shopping from a catalogue.



Looking down these lists is slightly surreal. Everything is on offer, including porcupine (\$250 - is it possible people really hunt these?), warthog (\$300), on through a multitude of indistinguishable deer-like species, up to the big ticket

Porcupine or rhino: The difference is almost \$100,000

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items: \$8,000 for a hippo, \$14,000 for a buffalo, between \$25,000 and \$35,000 for a male lion, and between \$50,000 and \$100,000 for a rhino.

It was all quite weird, but I became intrigued by the element of pretence in what was being offered - the outfitters were selling an old-fashioned idea of man-against-nature while secretly working the scenery in the wings. There was a whiff of theme park about the whole thing.

I also liked the paradoxical situation of the game farmers - that they keep their animals alive for years, leaving them feed in the dry season, piping in water - only to have tourists come in and whack their prize specimens from the back of a four-by-four. It was a bit like running a zoo where visitors could shoot the animals.

Discount packages

Not surprisingly, the industry has attracted its share of criticism, especially from the media. This made it tricky for us to get people to go on film. But after a lot of phone calls my team eventually won the trust of Riaan Vosloo, owner of Shingani Safaris, a company that operates in the north-west corner of the country, Limpopo Province.

Riaan is in many ways typical of South African professional hunters and outfitters. He grew up hunting wild game the old fashioned way - he told me in the old days he'd be pleased to shoot one or two animals in a four-month season. Now he offers discount packages where visiting tourists can bag four trophies in six days.



Louis Theroux with professional hunt organiser Riaan Vosloo

On one level, he probably regards the ersatz theme-park kind of hunting that he purveys to international clients as unchallenging and slightly pointless; at the same time he's proud of his ability to make sure every hunter, no matter his skill level, goes home with the trophies he's paid for. You might be morbidly obese and half-blind, you'll still get those record-breaking kudu horns - even if it means Riaan has to drive you up to the animal and point your gun in the right direction.

During our filming, Riaan had a large party of bow-hunters from Ohio staying at his lodge. These were a far cry from the colonial-era image I had of the great white hunter. They were regular middle-class and working-class folk, some of whom had never been outside America before. Used to hunting deer they could at times be a little ignorant about the more exotic game. A trucker called Anthony was asked by his South African guide if he wanted to take a shot at a "duiker" (a small horned antelope). "A tiger? I can't afford that!" he said. Another novice hunter told me, in a moment of confusion, that her husband had killed a "zudu".

Accidents happen

But the Ohioans were knowledgeable where it counted: they were accurate with their arrows and they took pains to make their kills clean.

Walking-and-stalking game with a bow and arrow is virtually impossible - you can't get close enough. So the bow hunters would sit in a blind most of the day, looking out on a watering hole, wait till their animal of choice came in for a drink, and then whack him.

“ It might take several days to pop that waterbuck or that oryx. But the outcome was never really in doubt ”

Nor was it as absurdly easy as one might think. All the game farms I saw were a minimum of a couple of thousand acres; they feel like wilderness, at least when you're in the middle of them, even if they are actually fenced in. Some days, because of wind carrying their scent towards the animals, nothing turned up at the watering holes. It

wasn't as though they were being led into the firing line on a leash - it might take several days to pop that waterbuck or that oryx. But the outcome was never really in doubt.

Naturally I'd been concerned about the nature of the deaths inflicted on the animals - how protracted and painful they might be. With a good shot through the heart or lungs, I was told, most animals will "bleed out" in a matter of seconds.

And because with bow-hunting there are no loud gun-shots, the experience is apparently less stressful - both for the unlucky prey and for the surrounding wildlife.

Natural predators

And yet, and yet. Accidents happen, shots go astray. Miss the vitals and you're looking at tracking an animal that might take hours or even days to catch up with and put out of its misery. Not a nice way to go.

Exactly why you might choose to take an animal's life for sport was a question I never completely got my head around - notwithstanding numerous approaches to the issue. Hunters talked about the challenge of pitting your wits against an animal in its natural habitat (well, kind of) and the rush of lining up a perfect shot.

It may be that we're natural predators, genetically programmed deep in our inherited neuro-circuits to dig killing things. Or perhaps it's a question of hunters being raised in a culture that desensitises them to the well-being of animals. Who knows? The thornier conundrum for a squeamish city-dweller like me is that the practice of keeping animals on game farms and allowing them to be hunted has helped to increase the stocks of exotic wildlife.

Simply put, hunters are paying for more and more exotic animals to be kept alive and healthy - which has to be a good thing. There are now more wild animals on private farms in South Africa than in the nature reserves.

In the end, for me, the most touching and revealing element in the story was the bond that grows between the game farmers and the animals they raise and allow to be killed.

Several of the game farmers seemed deeply ambivalent about the hunting that takes place on their properties and which pays their bills. Having got to know their animals, and grown fond of them, they actually don't like to see them get hurt. It's an axiom of the game farming world that farmers almost never hunt their own animals. On one or two occasions I was with game farmers whose animals had been injured but not killed, and they became visibly uneasy. It was oddly touching to see these grizzled South Africans grappling with their unease about the new incarnation of their sport and attempting, for the most part successfully, to stick to the script about giving clients the trophies they wanted.

In the end, there may be no satisfactory answer to the urge to hunt. But the more profound lesson may be one about the nature of empathy - that no-one wants to hurt a creature that he's got to know.



"Why you might choose to take an animal's life for sport..."

Add your comments on this story, using the form below.

It *is* awful, but it helps the species. It's like getting people to eat rare pig-breeds because then farmers will be able to afford to keep the breed going, if you know what I mean. Does anyone remember Roger Cooke doing this? I was haunted by the image of the lioness thrashing around in pain after the first shot, so I don't know if I'll actually be able to watch this. Glad it's been exposed to wider audience, though I worry that it might be taken as an advert by some.

Puddingandpi, Brighton

The thrill of the chase, keeping still up-wind, lining up the perfect shot... with a good quality camera. Then you have the perfect picture to treasure and look at over the years and the splendid subject can get on with living its life. Cheaper too.

Andrew Balfour, Woking, Surrey

I don't have a problem with hunting anything, provided that the quarry is put to good use. We hunt pheasant, rabbit, duck and partridge amongst other things, but we kill them to eat them. Equally, I know people who do not eat game and do shoot for fun, but they give their quarry away for others to eat and never shoot anything that they will not be able to offload. I have heard that some of the more prestigious estates in Britain charge up to £3,000 for a day's pheasant shooting - and guests are apparently only allowed to take a brace home each, regardless of how many birds shot. I can't help but think money outweighs sense with these people. Finally, it's a terrible pity that animals such as lions and rhinos are bred and kept to be shot by inept cash-flashers, but at least the gamekeepers make an effort to ensure that their animals are killed cleanly.

F, Nottingham

I think that this "sport" is disgusting, unfair and totally unacceptable. These animals need protecting and the people who pay to hunt them should be taken out and shot themselves. How would they like it if the tables were turned and they were the hunted. I have for a long time boycotted anything South African and will continue to do so and I urge others to take a similar stance until this barbaric practice is outlawed.

Jacqui Wilkinson, Morecambe, Lancashire, England

Having grown up in South African and being African myself, this is not something new or foreign to us. Unfortunately as long as there are people willing to put a price on anything there will always be a need for it, and this goes for animals too. Until people start taking a realistic approach to the welfare of life, these things will never stop. Hunting these types of animals should only be done as a necessity and not a sport, but as long as money is in the equation and people can make a living through it in the wrong hands, things could go terribly wrong. Why do you think so many tourists always get eaten by big cats or trampled on by elephants - maybe nature is trying to tell us something?

Michelle Bartsch, London, UK

This article almost makes fox hunting in Britain seem quite noble in comparison.

Cat_amongst_pigeons, Beckenham

Excellent article, although missing one very important fact. The majority of the hunting is done purely for the meat. Having taken part in a hunt, everything that was shot was eaten, and I mean everything right down to eyeballs and testicles. The "deer-like species" are hunted to order as shooting and butchering said animals is cheaper per kilo than walking into a butcher shop or supermarket. Plus all the thrill of the hunt.

Mark Fairbairn, Edinburgh

I don't think the hunting of endangered species, whether wild or farmed, has a place in today's society. Moneyed men hurting animals for fun leaves me thinking they were abused as kids or have impotence problems now.

Lauren, Edinburgh

Anyone who kills a living creature for fun is, in my view, sick and in need of therapy whether it be a fox, a stag, a lion or a zebra. The human race can never call itself civilised whilst wanton killing of any sort is considered acceptable.

Steve Kourik, Dorchester, England

Although I don't like the idea of people getting a thrill from shooting a lion, if all parts of the animal are used and there is no waste then that makes it more palatable. Hunters have a huge amount of respect for the animals that they kill whereas people in towns generally do not. They are all for animal welfare and think hunting is appalling but probably don't even consider the huge amount of meat that is thrown away because it has gone off. Supermarkets and convenience culture has a lot to answer for.

Richard, Wigan

These are not hunters but killers. I stalk deer in the uk. This is because man killed off all the natural predators of deer and so it is our responsibility to maintain healthy wild herds of deer. The shot animals are eaten and very little is wasted. The majority of stalkers in the UK are amateurs like myself - not paid gamekeepers. We do it because we love and respect the animals. The government don't manage or fund our work. We too often are slandered because of ignorance by the general public for our work despite its essential nature in conservation of the deer species. This is what hunting is. These guys are there for a trophy and don't have that respect for the animals, responsibility or bond between hunter and prey. They are killers.

V, north

First of all, the animals listed in the article are not endangered. I wouldn't participate in so called "canned" hunting, but I don't see why people should be demonised for doing it. Hunting is very important to people and it's not up to us to stop them. A lot of the money earned by this goes back into conservation. It may be difficult to relate to this in Britain, but zebras, rhinos, and lions do exist in renewable quantities in parts of Africa. I loath the day when people are no longer allowed to do anything their parents and grandparents did.

Andrew, salisbury

Hunting has gone on for centuries. Many people who comment on this are not country people and do not understand. The earlier comment on some estates charging £ 3,000.00 for a day's pheasant shooting is misinformed. It costs approx £27.00 per bird plus VAT and you can shoot easily 3-500. What is cruel is a sparrow hawk eating a blue tit off a bird table bit by bit but that is country life. Would these animals that are well fed, watered and looked after on game reserves live as lon and in what conditions in the wild. Is being shot more cruel than being killed by other animals.

Graeme , Perthshire Scotland

Whilst I don't necessarily agree with hunting for sport, or the methods employed by some of the game farms, I don't think that those who believe "animals need protecting and the people who pay to hunt them should be taken out and shot themselves" have the full picture. Much of the revenue from hunting game in Africa goes into its preservation. Hunters have quotas imposed on them that cannot be exceeded and most-often hunting prevents the necessity of culling.

Lynn Pacella, Guildford, Surrey

There are better ways to 'hunt'. For example, some communities in Africa protect their local animals, invite hunters (for a fee which the village uses) to shoot the animals, the hunter is happy, the villagers are happy. There are also groups of 'hunters' who dart their prey, take a mould of its horn (trophy), the animal lives. In regards to the term 'sport'. Telescopic lens, local trackers - seems somewhat lazy to me. I figure, if you can track it yourself, defeat it with your bare hands, you deserve it.

fab, France

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