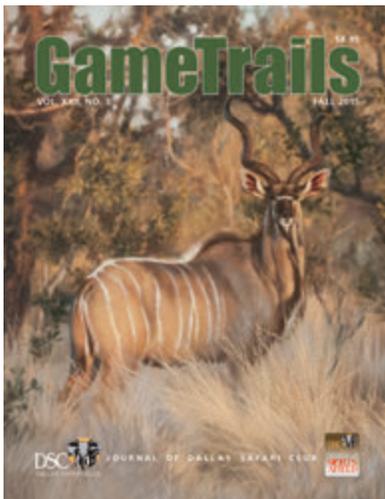




FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BY TERRY L. ANDERSON



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Who Owned the Lion?

As a hunter, it is hard to write about hunting without mentioning the Zimbabwe lion (note I avoid using the name to personify him), but I find that property rights are at the heart of the Zimbabwe lion fiasco – pure and simple. Or rather, the murkiness of property rights in this case, since what Zimbabwe landowners, Zimbabwe wildlife officials, and the rest of the world have vastly different concepts of who owned the lion.

The media frenzy occurred because someone used this lack of clarity to stir up the masses on social media.

What is true in Zimbabwe is that the lion was “owned” by the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, which manages Hwange National Park and all hunting permits and quotas in Zimbabwe, even on private land. The charges in this case are still being investigated (at press time) because it is unknown whether a crime was committed. The problem was that the wildlife authority did not or could not enforce its property rights. If it had, the guides and hunter would not have been able to shoot the lion without permission from Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife. It would have been the same as rustling cattle on Montana’s open range.

Contrast this with hunting in North America, where, following the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, most wildlife is effectively owned by the states. The states “contract” with hunters – sell them hunting licenses for the right to hunt specific species – deer, elk or turkeys, for example – during clearly specified seasons, with specific equipment – rifles, shotguns or bows. Revenue from the licensing goes to state fish and wildlife agencies, and those agencies effectively use the revenues to enforce the terms of the contracts.

A clearer example of the importance of property rights in game management is found in South Africa, where most of the wildlife is privately owned and fenced. Like a cattle owner, wildlife ranchers have an incentive to husband their resources, including protecting them from poaching, which is a form of theft. If wildlife is fenced, it is not as wild as free-roaming animals, but the fences strengthen the property rights and allow owners to contract with those willing to pay to hunt. Even privately owned white rhinos are more effectively protected than in other parts of the continent, which explains why populations are stable or increasing and poaching is less common in South Africa.



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By thinking about wildlife in property rights terms, we hunters can help create the institutions necessary to reduce the likelihood of more events like the one in Zimbabwe. Some might argue that such thinking takes the wild out of wildlife, but not defining and enforcing the property rights to wildlife takes the life out of it, as with the lion. Property rights clarify who has the authority and responsibility for protecting wildlife. With clearly defined and enforced property rights, the link is strengthened between those of us who value the hunting experience and those who provide the habitat that makes that experience possible.

Note the important difference between hunting for markets and hunting markets. The former is exemplified by 19th-century hunting in the United States when people were hunting to supply meat, hides and feathers for markets. This led to the decimation of wildlife populations because neither the wildlife nor its habitat was owned. In contrast, a hunting market, such as in South Africa, connects the demand and supply through contracts in the same way that markets connect the demand and supply for cars, food or other goods or services. Where there are hunting markets, wildlife thrives.

As effective as the North American model has been in preventing over-exploitation of wildlife resources by assigning property rights to state authorities, it has been relatively ineffective at linking the hunting demand with the habitat supply. State wildlife agencies have little or no control over habitat that is privately owned or publically managed, especially by the federal government. As the founder of a company specializing in private wildlife management put it, "I took lots of courses in college focusing on population management, but few on habitat management. When I took a job with a state agency, I realized why – we had no control of habitat. That is when I decided to start a company helping private landowners manage their land and wildlife."

In an era when wildlife is abundant and quality habitat is scarce, hunters need to find innovative ways for hunting demanders to contract with habitat suppliers. Examples of contracting between hunting demand and habitat supply illustrate how we might move forward. Block management programs, whereby states contract with private landowners for access, are a start, but access alone does not connect the hunter with land and water management. "Ranching-for-wildlife" programs, such as the one in Colorado, offer a better

example of facilitating a hunting market. This program rewards landowners who coordinate with Colorado Parks and Wildlife on habitat management plans by giving them permits that they can sell in the marketplace.

Texas game ranches have property rights that are akin to those in South Africa, and the results are clear. Wildlife ranching for the addax, Dama gazelle, and scimitar-horned oryx – the "three amigos" – illustrates the stewardship that comes with clearly defined and enforced property rights and the problems that arise when those property rights are attenuated. Following their importation by game ranchers in Texas, owners bred the antelope from a few to hundreds. At the same time, the three amigos declined in their home African range where the property rights were weak to nonexistent.

A lawsuit filed by wildlife groups in 2006 argued that the species were endangered in Africa and, therefore, should only be hunted in Texas if owners obtained a "take-permit" from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The result was not surprising.

Anticipating that the government would require take-permits with their accompanying red tape, owners sold cheap hunts before the permits were required. As a result, the Exotic Wildlife Association estimated that the "three amigos" numbers in Texas fell by one-half to one-third of their 2010 levels.

Fortunately, the "three amigos" received a reprieve in 2013 when Congress passed a bill exempting the antelope from ESA restrictions and reinstating full property rights to the owners of the antelope. As a result, ranchers are rebuilding their populations, and Conservation Force reports that 10 percent of the trophy fees from Texas hunts is directed to "Smart" projects preapproved by the FWS for the enhancement of the species in the wild in their native ecosystem.

Anti-hunters took the offensive with the killing of the Zimbabwe lion and used headlines to trump sound management. Hunters can recapture the high ground by emphasizing that outlawing hunting reduces the value of wildlife and, in turn, reduces the incentive to preserve wildlife and its habitat. We can go even farther by contracting with and paying habitat owners, private or public, who supply the habitat necessary to sustain wildlife resources.

Theft of wildlife cannot be tolerated if conservation is our goal. Hunting markets make conservation more profitable and should be embraced by both hunters and non-hunters as the best way of ensuring the future of our sport and the wildlife and wild places we all love. **GT**