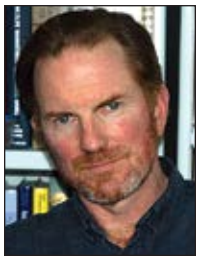
WHAT IS MEANT BY TROPHY HUNTING?



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I recently hired a friend to do some land management for me using a piece of heavy equipment known as a Brontosaurus. This heavy machine looks like a large excavator, but instead of a shovel on the end of the arm, it has a rotating drum with teeth a great white shark would envy. It is used often in wildlife habitat management to create brushland and early successional forest habitat types that are less common in the mature forest-dominated northeastern United States. The Brontosaurus is also excellent at controlling invasive vegetation such as multiflora rose, glossy buckthorn, oriental bittersweet, and others. My friend, a former logger who owns and operates this prehistoric-looking machine, also runs a dairy farm. He is 70 years old now and fit. I have known his family for some time; his nephew was a wildlife biologist I worked with until his untimely death in 2007 from pneumonic plague, contracted from a mountain lion he handled as part of a research project at the Grand Canyon.

My friend and his extended family are all hunters—good hunters! We were sharing stories about last fall's whitetail season—he hunts on his farm in western Massachusetts and from his camp in northern Maine and I hunt almost exclusively on my land in the town next to his. When he told me about passing up a mature buck while bowhunting on his farm, holding out for an even older animal, it harkened to what I consider to be the essence of a true trophy hunter—one whose skill level, focus, and commitment to the hunt are elevated beyond the average hunter to the extent they will not shoot any legal deer. They hold out for the challenge of getting the most difficult animal, and the personal satisfaction (and yes, bragging rights) that come with it. My friend did not mount the big buck he eventually took, nor does he have a trophy room. The meat fed his family.

So, while he fits my ideal of a trophy hunter, I doubt many in contemporary society who do not hunt—including many wildlife scientists—would consider him a trophy hunter. The concept of a trophy hunter for many might be akin to the dentist who shot Cecil the lion. The dentist was then skewered on social media. The image of a trophy hunter for many is of a wealthy white male westerner who hires someone with skill to enhance their opportunity to harvest an animal, that typically has exceptional secondary-sexual characteristics (e.g., horns, antlers). Many assume the primary motivation of the hunter is dominance, and this view has been fostered in part by social media "hipshots" as well as the age-old depictions of the Great White Hunter.

I have described two contrasting extremes—my friend and one version of a public perception. The same term, trophy hunter, is used, as well to describe other manifestations. When I use the term, I am visualizing it as a positive ideal, while others use it with derogation. This reflects the overall misuse and lack of understanding of hunting and hunters, and it is a problem.

"The concept of trophy hunting seems deceptively simple, but it is not." This is the opening sentence of a paper published recently in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, whose authors include B&C professional members Vern Bleich, Terry Bowyer, and Jim Heffelfinger (Mitchell et al. 2021). The issue at hand—conflicting and often inappropriate uses of the term "trophy hunting" as I described—is one that has bothered me for a long time. The authors focus their analysis on the misuse of the term in scientific publications, citing an absence of balanced objective approaches—the hallmark of good science. They argue that discussions about trophy hunting are almost always centered on deeply held, contrasting viewpoints often rooted in the normative (beliefs), rather than the scientific realm. This leads to contradictory claims.

The authors point out that the science of wildlife management entails providing data-based conclusions that assist decision-makers toward policies and actions that lead to desirable conservation outcomes. Broad generalizations and selective focus on one aspect about trophy hunting do not measure up to the standard of sound science.

The authors identify three topics that must be addressed if publications are to truly assist in an understanding of the effects of trophy hunting: a precise definition of the term trophy, an explanation of why particular metrics are used to measure effects, and clarification of the time-frame and geographic scales those metrics are examined.

WHAT IS A TROPHY?

A trophy can be many things to many people. A colleague who is a retired member of

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the Club told me his trophies are the photos from hunts that show family and friends together. I often tell people my trophies are the meals of wild game I prepare for family and friends—introducing a non-hunter to their first meal of venison loin gives me great pleasure, and I hope it will instill an appreciation of the hunt, the hunter, and the animal. Typically, a trophy is defined as a large male animal, but it can also be defined as an animal a hunter paid a fee to hunt, and subsequently retained part of the animal as a trophy. But it could also be the first animal ever harvested by the hunter. The point the authors make is that a clear definition of how the term is used is essential.

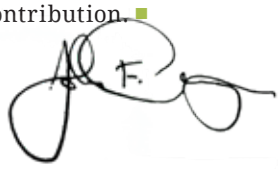
WHAT METRICS ARE USED?

The authors note that studies and opinion papers related to trophy hunting usually rely on a single metric, which often is not explicitly stated. Effective policy and management must consider multiple factors, including culture, social norms, ethics, economics, politics, and biological science. Inclusion of these various metrics, and clearly defining them, adds complexity to studies of hunting, but it is essential. What are the cultural norms where the study occurred? How is the local society characterized? What are the economic implications? How are regulations and other policies formalized? What is known about the demographic characteristics of the wildlife population? Are there ethical arguments associated with the issue, and are they focused on the morality of the actions (deontologism), or on the moral worth of the results of the actions (consequentialism)? Addressing these metrics is essential for objective, fact-based inferences about the effects of trophy hunting.

WHAT SCALES ARE CONSIDERED?

Space, time, community structure, and function are important in understanding ecological processes. Researchers must explicitly state the time-frame and geographical scale relevant to their work. Extrapolating conclusions from a study in one area during a discrete time frame to an entire species must be approached with extreme caution. Understanding the effects of trophy hunting as described in a given study needs to be time-sensitive. Were the results observed during a portion of a given year, or were they more long-lasting?

Trophy hunting is a complex issue, one that has become a lightning rod in recent years. Informed public policy, as it relates to trophy hunting, must be fact-based and clear about what hunting activity is actually referenced. The three components described above will help greatly in providing clarity and common sense, as well as scientific integrity to the public's understanding. My hat is off to Drs. Bleich, Bowyer, and Heffelfinger and their colleagues for their contribution. ■



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