

Famous lion's killing has the world angry about big-cat hunts

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In this undated photo provided by the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Cecil the lion rests in Hwange National Park in Hwange, Zimbabwe. Photo: Andy Loveridge/Wildlife Conservation Research Unit via AP

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — For some wealthy foreign tourists, it is the most exciting African experience of all: hunting a lion, the mighty king of the jungle. But lions are an endangered species. Their numbers are shrinking rapidly and they are facing extinction.

An American dentist's killing of a popular lion that lived in a Zimbabwe national park has triggered global anger at trophy hunting. Critics say the practice threatens endangered species across sub-Saharan Africa.

Many African countries allow hunting, including South Africa, Namibia and Tanzania. They argue that the high-priced fees from hunters bring in badly needed cash and help support conservation efforts. Opponents, however, warn that regulations intended to protect animals by limiting hunting are often poorly enforced. The operators who organize hunts often intentionally break the law, they say.

Many suspect that may have happened in Zimbabwe. Last week, a professional hunter, Theo Bronkhorst, was charged with failing to "prevent an unlawful hunt."

Wounded Cecil Was Tracked, Shot

Bronkhorst was working for Walter James Palmer, a dentist from Minnesota who had come to Africa to go lion hunting. In early July, Palmer killed Cecil, a well-known lion with a distinctive black mane.

Conservationists believe Cecil was lured out of the national park where he lived, protected by law. They say a dead animal was tied to a car to draw the lion out of the park.

Palmer first wounded Cecil with a bow. He then fatally shot him with a gun after 40 hours of tracking.

Palmer has been heavily criticized around the world, both online and on talk shows.

Palmer claims he did not know the hunt was against the law. He says he relied on his professional guides to ensure it was legal.

Both Sides Of Big-Hunt Debate

South African conservationist Ian Michler says what happened with Cecil is common throughout Africa.

"Cecil is not the first lion that has been lured," he said. "It goes on all the time. "

Earlier this year Michler released a documentary film on the trophy hunting of lions, called "Blood Lions." He said that in South Africa lions are raised in confinement solely for the purpose of being hunted. Around 1,000 are fatally shot every year by trophy seekers who pay an average of about \$20,000, and sometimes up to \$50,000. The kills take place in conditions that can hardly be described as sporting, he said.

South Africa says its legal hunting industry conforms to international agreements. It says the industry actually contributes to the welfare of species, including lion, elephant and rhino.

Hunting creates jobs and leads to community development, said Edna Molewa, South Africa's Environment Minister.

Molewa said hunting in South Africa generates around \$490 million annually. Some conservationists, however, believe the figure is inflated to support the argument that tourist hunting is good for South Africans. A 2013 report claims the figure is closer to \$200 million. It added that money from hunting is only a small part the money brought into the country by tourism.

International "Red List" Of Threatened Species

Prince Mupazviriho, of Zimbabwe's ministry of the environment, said the killing of Cecil was an isolated incident. Controlled, legal hunting, he said, is a useful way to keep animal populations in a healthy balance.

Legal hunting is better than "just shooting animals willy-nilly in order to reduce numbers," he said.

Lions are listed on an international "red list" of species facing threats. By one estimate, fewer than 20,000 lions exist in the wild, a drop of about 40 percent in the past 20 years. Another estimate puts the number at closer to 30,000. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has taken note of successful lion conservation in southern Africa. However, it said West African lions are critically endangered and that rapid population declines were also recorded in East Africa.

Zambia Lifts Big-Cat, Lion-Hunting Ban

Cecil, the Zimbabwean lion that was killed, was wearing a satellite collar. The collar had been installed by the University of Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit to keep track of his movements.

"Our goal is to understand the threats that lions face, and to use cutting-edge science to develop solutions to those threats," Director David Macdonald said. He said the unit has tracked the movements of more than 100 lions by satellite.

In the meantime, lion hunting is still common throughout Africa. This year, Zambia announced the lifting of a 2-year-old ban on hunting lions and other big cats.

On its website, a group called Central African Wildlife Adventures offers lion hunts in the Central African Republic. The website romanticizes the experience and pictures the hunter and the hunted as equals.

"The last and final contact is usually done at close range, with the lion appearing from nowhere in the green foliage. Without a warning or a sound, the King of Beasts is suddenly there," the website writes. "The time has come for two of the most powerful predators on earth to meet."