

IN PURSUIT OF THE TRUTH IN SOUTH AFRICA'S WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AFFAIRS

By Ron Thomson

In past and recent months, I (and many other people) have had to endure (in several so-called reputable media outlets) considerable personal abuse written by people who really have no credentials for expressing the comments that they have made. When I read that the Daily Maverick Newspaper (DM) was seeking *insiders* to tell the truth to the general public, therefore, I avidly joined the insider-team. I understand that everybody is entitled to have personal preference opinions. However, I don't think it is right that those opinions should be disseminated within the public domain when they are untrue or pernicious.

The public are undoubtedly aware that there is a world war raging in what is euphemistically called the *conservation arena* at this time. On the one side there are those who support and who practise the *sustainable-use* of both tame and wild living resources (plants and animals), in terms of our national constitution, which involves domestic livestock farming, game ranching, hunting (including trophy hunting), harvesting, and trade in live animals and/or legitimately acquired animal products.

On the other side of the battlefield are those who wish to abolish all animal uses by man. The opposition to the sustainable-use-of wild animals call themselves *animal rightists*.

The public are often dis-informed (purposefully confused) by the manner in which animal rightist NGOs refer to themselves as being *animal welfare* in orientation, when *animal rights* and *animal welfare* are two totally different things. So, let us put the record straight.

True animal welfare people are not opposed to man using animals for his own benefit provided:

- When the animal being *used* is alive (such as when a horse is used to pull a cart; or an ox is *used* to plough a field) no cruelty is involved in the utilisation process; and
- When an animal is killed to obtain benefits (such as when a sheep is slaughtered to provide man with meat to eat) no cruelty is involved in the killing process.

True animal welfare NGOs, therefore, oversee man's civilised standards when he utilises animals. Every person in society, therefore, should support genuine animal welfare organisations.

Animal rightists, on the other hand, claim that man has no right to use an animal, any animal, in any way, or to derive any kind of benefit from *animal use*. They demand that all animals be afforded the same *right-to-life* that man enjoys. They demand that man should not eat meat and that he should subsist on a vegetable diet alone. They say that killing an animal is inherently cruel. To achieve their objectives, however, animal rightists will have to deprive most people on the planet of their human rights. That means there is really no place in any civilised society for the animal rights doctrine.

Man, in his abattoirs all over the world, kills millions and millions of animals every day to obtain meat for people to eat. Are we to believe, then, that man is fundamentally a cruel and barbaric creature? Is a lion cruel when it kills a buffalo? Is man really cruel when he kills flies in his kitchen with an aerosol insecticide? No, he is not, because killing something is, in itself, NOT an act of *cruelty*. The killing act is only cruel when the perpetrator kills with the purposeful intent of making the victim endure great pain and suffering.

What is not generally known by the man-in-the-street is that, globally, the animal rights movement is a giant confidence industry that preys upon gullible members of the public; and that this industry earns hundreds of millions of US dollars annually consequent upon emotionally charged lies told in its propaganda apparatus. For example, in the three-year lead up to the 17th Conference of the Parties (in Johannesburg, 2016), the majority of animal rightist NGOs that are accredited to CITES told the world that the elephant was facing imminent extinction. On that lie they solicited massive donations from *the concerned members of the public* who were told that the money so earned would be used to get the fraudsters to attend the next CITES meeting; where, they said, they had planned a campaign to disallow the ivory trade; to stop all elephant culling; and to stop the hunting of elephants. And the premise of this operation was that *the elephant was facing extinction*. Yet Africa, or our elephants didn't see a penny of that money. It all went into the NGO's own bank accounts.

In fact, every elephant population south of the Zambesi River in southern Africa is *grossly* excessive in number. Most populations number between ten and twenty TIMES the sustainable carrying capacities of their habitats. All these populations urgently require, not protection, but massive *population reduction*. And, if southern African elephant herds are not reduced drastically in number they will cause the total destruction of the habitats in every single one of southern Africa's national park sanctuaries. Kruger National Park, for example, has already lost more than 95 percent of its deciduous woodlands due to chronically irresponsible elephant management practices since 1960.

The greater Botswana elephant population probably exceeds 200 000 when the habitat can (probably) only sustainably carry, at this time, 20 000 (or much less). Kruger National Park is said to be carrying over 30 000 elephants when the habitat carrying capacity (when the habitats were healthy, c. 1955) was only 3 500. Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe had an estimated elephant carrying capacity of only 2 500 in 1960 (when the habitats were still reasonably healthy). Today Hwange is carrying between 35 000 and 80 000 elephants (average c.50 000). The Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe is carrying 14 000 elephants when it's elephant carrying capacity is arguably just 1 000. The litany goes on and on. And the issue seems to be insurmountable because the more elephants that we say have to be 'taken off', the more do the animal rightists use those numbers to alarm the public and to defraud society. And all the while the precious habitats in our national parks are annually degrading to the point of no return.

If I have toothache, I go to a qualified dentist to have the problem investigated and resolved. Even a GP doctor would not try to solve my dental problem for me. Why then does society not understand that when you want the great intricacies of elephant management explained, you should look to specialist elephant managers to explain the issues involved? Indeed, go to several elephant management experts with different points of view, if you want the full spectrum information. From them you will gain a lot of sound advice from which you can draw your own conclusions. What you should NOT do is listen to the animal rightist *gurus* who have absolutely NO understanding of elephant management problems whatsoever. Remember, it is the animal rightists' purpose in life to abolish all animal *uses* by man; including all science-based elephant management programmes.

If you want to know about the captive-breeding of lions, go to the South African Predator Association and pick the officials' brains. If you want to know about game ranching, go to the game ranchers and/or to their association. If you want to know about hunting, and trophy hunting, go to the hunters and/or their associations; and perhaps also ask the game ranchers because it is *they* who offer the hunting opportunities. There are lots of people who can give you good information and good advice. Just don't go to the animal rightists! They know NOTHING about wildlife management, or about the sustainable *use* of wildlife, or about hunting.

Don Pinnock publishes many articles about wildlife management and anti-hunting in the Daily Maverick. So does a man called Ross Harvey – and there are others, all animal rightists. Ask them what experience they have to qualify the statements that they make. Even their research is faulty. Pinnock, for example, tried to hang me out to dry in public in his frantic opposition to trophy hunting, by stating that I am truly the worst example of a depraved trophy hunter. In actual fact, although I have done a vast amount of big game problem animal control hunting for the government that I worked for in the good old days, I have never shot an animal for its trophy. NOT EVER. So how can we rely on people like Pinnock when his research is so obviously flawed.

Exactly that same accusation, that I am the epitome of all that is bad in a trophy hunter was repeated by Eduardo Gonçalves on British television. So, there is considerable connivance within the ranks of the opposition. And in a recent book, *Trophy Hunters Exposed Inside the Big Game Industry*, Gonçalves had the gall to tell South Africa how it should conduct its wildlife affairs. And Lord Ashcroft, who ran a James Bond-style investigation into the Captive Lion Breeding Industry in South Africa, encouraged South Africans to allow themselves to be filmed breaking the law. He also lamented the fact that South African lion farmers were *making money* out of the lions they were breeding. What else does he expect a farmer to do, but to make money out of his honest labours?

And what do the Britishers - Gonçalves and Ashcroft - know about the science of wildlife management anywhere, let alone in this (to them) foreign land (South Africa)? Nothing at all. And they are both clearly animal rightists in orientation, which places them *beyond the pale*.

And so, the fight goes on to discredit South Africa's world leadership in wildlife management affairs. Since the Game Theft act of 1991, South Africa took a turn for the better. After centuries of bad game laws that saw South Africa's once hundreds of millions of wild animals decline to a mere 500 000, ownership of wild animals was conferred on the private landowners. And their management became the landowners' responsibility. This movement effectively made South Africa's wildlife culture *commercial*. And South African landowners, for the first time in history, were able to earn a good living by buying and selling and harvesting their own wildlife and their own wildlife products. This, however, was the antithesis of the American wildlife culture, which is strictly *anti-market hunting*. And thereby hangs the reason why American animal rightist NGOS feel so self-righteous about condemning South Africa's *way of doing things*. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Today there are 10 000 private game ranches in South Africa. Collectively there is now three times as much private land under wildlife than all the national parks and nature reserves in the country put together. And there are now more than 22 million wild animals on the private game ranches compared to just 6 million in all the government-controlled national parks and nature reserve estates. And hunting makes our game ranches economically viable.

These facts are all true and verifiable. And I hope that, over time, as we inject more and more such truths in the public domain, that we will create an informed public that understands and supports the principles and practices of science-based wildlife management; that understands the wisdom of the sustainable use of our living resources (both wild and domestic) for the benefit of mankind; that supports animal welfare; and that rejects animal rightism.

Ron Thomson began his wildlife career in Rhodesia's (now Zimbabwe's) National Parks and Wildlife Management Department in 1959. He is a greatly experienced national parks and big game wildlife manager – with a special interest in the management of elephants and black rhinos. He rose through the ranks to become the Provincial Game Warden-in-charge of Hwange National Park. He is a university-

trained field ecologist (cum laude). He was a Member of the London-based British Institute of Biology and a Chartered Biologist for the European Union ,for some 20 years before his enforced retirement, Zimbabwe in 1983. He has written several university-level text books on the subject of wildlife management. He is currently the CEO of a South African non-profit (and public benefit) NGO called The True Green Alliance (TGA). The TGA's vision is to create a Southern African society that understands the principles and practices of science-based wildlife management; that understands the wisdom of sustainably utilising the living resources of this country (both domestic and wild) for the benefit of all mankind – especially South Africans; that promotes support for TRUE animal welfare; and that rejects animal rights-ism. The TGA whole-heartedly supports the efforts of the Minister of the Department of the Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, in her honest endeavours to achieve the objectives of South Africa's National Conservation Strategy. Overall, his interest in promoting proper wildlife management practices in southern Africa covers the last 61 years - and he is still going strong.