Dear Prime Minister,

The world’s iconic species and megafauna are disappearing in our lifetimes. Elephants, lions, rhinos, giraffes, leopards and tigers are all threatened with extinction in the wild, their numbers a fraction of what they once were. Decimated by poaching, habitat loss, conflict with humans, and the vast trade in their body parts, these animals are also losing their lives to hunters who gratuitously kill them for ‘sport’.

We write today to ask the UK government to help bring an end to this practice and stop granting imports of hunting trophies to the UK, starting with urgent action on protected species.

The number of animals killed by trophy hunters is staggering: in total, 1.7 million trophies were legally traded worldwide between 2004 and 2014, around 200,000 of them from threatened species. Of these, 2,500 were brought home by British hunters, including hundreds of heads, feet, tails, hides, tusks and horns from some of the most endangered species like rhino and elephant. In this period, elephants were being poached in their tens of thousands each year to cater to the global demand for ivory, yet they were still deemed fair game for trophy hunters.

Lions fared the worst, hit with the biggest increase in trophy hunting among the Big Five since 2004: around 13,800 lion trophies were traded over the subsequent decade. Lion numbers plunged 43% between 1993 and 2014. Cecil’s death in 2015 prompted the UK government to conduct a study on the impact of trophy hunting, but no further action was taken and lion trophies continued to be imported in the following years.

In South Africa, a huge captive industry breeds lions to be killed by trophy hunters and for trade in their bones and other body parts, mainly to Asia. More than 8,000 lions are caged in these death facilities while only 1,300-1,700 adults survive in the wild. In Africa as a whole, as few as 20,000 wild lions remain, and in some areas have been persecuted and hunted beyond recovery.¹

Giraffe populations have crashed by 40% in the past 30 years. In 2018 two subspecies were listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN list. In the U.S., hunters brought back trophies from 3,563 giraffes between 2006 and 2015.

While the numbers are shocking, the true impact of trophy hunting goes far wider. Besides the loss of an individual animal, its removal can set off a cascade of destructive consequences for its family and social group, its gene pool and the survival of future generations. Trophy hunters fail to grasp these consequences when they talk about ‘helping conservation’ by removing old and weak individuals. In any event, hunters like to kill the largest and strongest animals to impress their fellow hunters. If a mature male lion is killed, his young cubs will likely be killed by the new pride male, which not only adds to the steady decline in numbers but may remove the strongest and fittest genes. Infanticide, changes in offspring sex ratio, uncontrolled

¹ ‘Dereck Joubert sets the record straight about trophy hunting impact on lions and refutes claims of so-called benefits’, Africa Geographic Feb 2019. https://africageographic.com/blog/dereck-joubert-sets-record-straight-about-trophy-hunting-impact-lions-refutes-claims-so-called-benefits/?fbclid=IwAR0Li7Jv7Xb2Li9NjJhCnEnfnjDJKMDtxLBaTU6T8YN43neq-JmN4e0
aggression in juvenile males are just some of the consequences that have been observed.\(^2\) Killing an elephant matriarch or mature bull will eliminate huge stores of knowledge and experience that would otherwise be passed on and are vital to elephants’ survival and social cohesion. On an invisible level, the trauma and loss can leave an impact for generations.

Hunting practices such as shooting animals in breeding herds or killing a collared animal further deplete numbers – worse, they take out key individuals and undermine conservation measures by disrupting vital research. In two incidents last year, a giant collared bull elephant in Zimbabwe and another collared tusker in South Africa were killed. With only a few super tuskers left, the loss of these repositories of knowledge and genes is nothing short of catastrophic.

**Does hunting help conservation or communities?**

Hunting proponents argue that trophy hunting is a key part of conservation strategies and that it benefits local communities. However, there is little evidence to support either claim. Only a fraction of hunting fees and associated revenue ever reach local communities or wildlife protection agencies, with the vast majority disappearing into the pockets of foreign hunting outfitters or corrupt officials. Local communities may receive meat from a kill, or find seasonal employment on game farms – piecemeal, transient benefits that reflect a paternalistic and inequitable status quo. However, trophy hunting has done little to address or alleviate endemic problems of poverty, change the distribution of wealth between landowners and workers, or, crucially, engage, train and equip African nationals in the stewardship of their wildlife.

**Does hunting contribute to a country’s economy?**

On a wider scale, trophy hunting’s economic contribution is virtually nil, providing only 0.06% of GDP in the countries where it’s practised. When viewed in the context of Africa’s overall tourism sector, trophy hunting revenues of 1.8% pale in comparison to non-consumptive wildlife tourism, which accounts for 80% of total tourism (UNTOWO). Big-game hunting uses vast areas of land without generating corresponding returns; to secure these areas, the land could be better used for non-consumptive wildlife tourism, where practicable.

**Ways forward**

By every measure, trophy hunting has only detrimental impacts on the already threatened animal populations it targets, is unsustainable and brings little or no meaningful benefits to communities. It is time to end trophy hunting altogether and focus on lasting, sustainable solutions that work for conservation and for communities. Conservancies provide a working model for the joint management of lands by private partnerships and communities, and aim to protect wildlife and generate sustainable income for the community. In Kenya, networks of conservancies based on collaborative strategies for land use are expanding, increasing tourism revenue and bringing economic benefits to communities.\(^3\)

This is an opportunity for the UK to support such initiatives with international development aid. As MPs noted during the Ivory Bill readings in 2018, there is a clear link between poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability, and the work of the DFID must reflect this. Such aid programmes can work with communities toward solutions that lift people out of poverty and offer them a future where the protection of their natural heritage brings tangible and lasting benefits.

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When it comes to saving the last of Earth’s megafauna, it is not only a question of conservation but a moral imperative. Animals that once teemed in their millions have been largely wiped out, part of an anthropocentric extinction event that has claimed 60% of the Earth’s fauna in the past 50 years. Today, the last of these animals continue to be relentlessly killed for their body parts to feed the demand for trinkets, bushmeat and fake medicinal cures. But even at this late hour it’s not too late to save them and put in place the protections they need to recover and thrive in the wild. Banning the import of hunting trophies will send a clear message to the international community that there is no place for trophy hunting in this day and age.

We hope the British government will act quickly to implement such a ban and will lead the way in urging other countries to do the same. As with the Ivory Bill, the government can expect full and enthusiastic support from the British public for this move.

We look forward to your reply and hope to hear good news from your government soon.

Sincerely,

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Note: The figures cited come from CITES Trade Database, UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre, Cambridge, UK, and from IUCN.

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Hilary Benn (Lab)
Leeds Central

Clive Betts (Lab)
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Baroness Young of Old Scone