

Opinionista • Derek Carstens • 13 July 2018

Bridging the great conservation divide

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Conservationists can differ on ideas and methodology but we can all come together to carry out our stewardship of the earth and its creatures in a more effective, sustainable manner.

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It is a truism that in the absence of facts, opinion prevails. Typically opinion that, over time, becomes increasingly emotional, strident and irrational. And it never ceases to amaze me how, while we think we know so much, we actually understand very little.

Whether it be to do with economics, the stock market, health, diet, exercise – you name it. The old knowledge versus wisdom conundrum. And typically the factless vacuum is quickly filled with unproven fads and shallow opinions. Here today, gone tomorrow.

And so it is in the case of conservation, by which I mean everything to do with the “sustainability of habitat and the wildlife that lives therein”. A space which has become increasingly noisy and acrimonious of late. Yet what makes it more than a little baffling to me is that in the case of conservation (as defined earlier) there are proven models for success. In other words, plenty of facts. Proven, tangible facts there for people to witness and experience first-hand.

Consider for example the fact of the Agtersneeuberg Private Nature Conservancy in the Eastern Cape.

In 1986 it comprised a single farmer who took the brave step of converting his farm from livestock to game. Today it has expanded to some 40,000 ha in size straddling the iconic Great Fish River. Riverine, plains, koppies and imposing mountains.



Previously land that was overgrazed and underutilised, now home to some 8,000 head of game. Some 27 species where before there might have been six or seven. Where a herd of some 500 eland roam free, where more than 2,000 springbok proudly *pronk* and some 350 previously endangered Cape Mountain Zebra grace the veld. ◉

Where Sable bulls scythe the air and Black wildebeest run in their ever diminishing circles. Where the Kudu gene pool has been refreshed and Bontebok gleam their distinctive gleam. Where Vaal rhebuck effortlessly abound with their distinctive rocking-horse gait and where Martial eagles reign supreme in the vast blueness of the infinite Karoo sky. Where people have worked and where the habitat has been restored, erosion countered and dams built.

This all the result of one farmer and two *stadsjapies* in whose youth the Karoo played a defining role. Today sustained and maintained by five like-minded conservationists.

Conservationists who are also hunters. Yes. Hunters. Ethical hunters. As are many of their families and friends who come often to visit.

People who have no difficulty in reconciling a deep appreciation of nature and the challenge of a proper fair chase hunt. People who take pride in the health of the veld and the game. Who actively manage both, recognising that no matter how big the land in question, there will always be a need to manage it to ensure the sustainability and well-being of both.

Part of that process is hunting, as is game capture and culling. Game capture to help propagate the species elsewhere and culling to provide valuable, healthy, high protein meat in the food chain of the area. And, yes, all help deliver valuable revenue, all of which is ploughed back into the ecosystem.

So in the light of this and many other examples, where hunting goes hand in glove with conservation, it surprised me to read in a recent article by Ian Michler, the renowned conservation journalist/ photographer, that when it comes to a solution as regards conservation that he freely admits that “we have just not put our minds to it”... and that “it is time to search for more effective and sustainable alternatives”.

With all due respect, Ian, what exactly have you been doing? Just open your mind and you will see the solution. Come visit Agtersneeuberg and I will show you, if you don't believe me. We are between Cradock and Graaff-Reinet on the R61. All 40,000 ha and 8,000 animals. It would be a pleasure to host you.

However, having said that, let me hasten to add that the sole objective of citing this case is not to put Ian on the spot. Far from it. It is simply to say that it is time for us to come together. For conservationists across the spectrum to find a way to come together in good faith and in a spirit of reasonableness, bound by our common cause – sustainability of the wildlife habitat and the game.

We must not let extremists at either end of the current divide bedevil our common cause and kick up dust to blur our vision. Militant, vegan animal rightists on the one hand physically attacking meat-related businesses. Ego-driven bait shooters of iconic animals such as Trump's two sons, or shooters of canned lions, on the other. 📍

These people are in the minority, yet I fear we are allowing them to damn the constituency to which they supposedly belong, as we bicker with one another.

So let us not get side-tracked into defending the indefensible. Let us rather come together and defend that which we purport to hold dear and learn from one another. In this regard I am sure that hunter/ conservationists have much to learn from non-hunting conservationists.

But surely it must also be the case that those who claim the so-called moral high ground, when it comes to conservation, have equally as much to learn from us.

In so doing we will strengthen the centre and marginalise the extremists. Failing that their actions will increasingly pollute and contaminate.

So when Don Pinnock, another well-known conservation author/ journalist, says in a recent article:

“Personally I could not pull the trigger on a beautiful wild animal. But if ethical hunting is to continue this is not the way to go about it. Secretive hit and run hunting by foreigners searching for iconic trophies, is the best way to give the business a very bad name,” I agree with him.

I also respect his personal decision not to pull the trigger and don't judge him any the less as a person concerned with conservation.

Having said that, however, what I then ask/expect of him is not to judge me either personally, or as a conservationist, because I consciously choose to pull the trigger – actually to squeeze it. And do so in the fact- based belief that if ethically practised hunting is integral to a comprehensive approach to conservation.

So in conclusion, let us come together and exchange views and share experiences and facts. Let's have fewer opinions and more proven plans.

The models are there. As are enlightened entities such as the recently formed Custodians of Professional Hunting and Conservation South Africa and long established operators such as Robin Hurt Safaris. Not only does he successfully offer both hunting and photographic safaris, he also has proven anti-poaching and community upliftment programmes. 🌱

So let's engage – come visit the reserve any time – Ian, Don, Morne from WWF. And come soon. Because the longer we dither and bicker the more our mutual ground will become eroded at the expense of the wildlife and the habitat that sustains it. 🌱

Goodness knows, there are enough challenges to be faced out there. Why hamstring ourselves when we could be striving for gold together. Why not try give truth to Isaiah's famous prophecy that the "wolf and lion can in fact lie down together" – here on earth, in our lifetime. Now wouldn't that be something?

After all, how can we live in harmony with nature if we, as supposed nature lovers, can't live in harmony with one another? The animals are waiting, the poachers are watching. **DM** 🌱

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Derek Carstens was Brand Director of FirstRand and Marketing Head of the 2010 Fifa World Cup LOC following which he became a game farmer in the Eastern Cape.



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By Marianne Thamm

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