

# Trophy Hunting: The Use and Abuse of Terminology

By Michael Sabbeth

“What's in a name?

That which we call rose by another other name would smell as sweet.”

Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II

The history of the phrases “trophy hunting” and “trophy hunter” is imprecise, but whatever their history, their meanings have suffered an evolution from a morally neutral denotation to a phrase freighted down by vile connotations. In this essay, I assert that the phrase ‘trophy hunting’ is vague and essentially without coherent meaning, yet, its vagueness is the source of its power for attacking hunters and hunting. I offer levels of analysis of the phrase and show how understanding its unethical architecture can help us refute the anti-trophy hunting attackers and, thereby advance hunting’s interests.

I met Volker Grellmann, esteemed Namibian author, teacher and professional hunter, after my first presentation at the 2016 NAPHA annual conference this past November. He shared, with some lament, that he may be partially responsible for infusing the phrase “trophy hunting” into the lexicon when he attempted to distinguish non-commercial from commercial meat hunting.

Whatever his influence, research by Jan Manning, my dear colleague and skilled hunter education instructor, informs of earlier uses of the phrases. In 1968 hunter and author Elgin Gates published a book titled, "A Trophy Hunter in Asia" and in 1971 a book titled "A Trophy Hunter in Africa." The term "Trophy Hunter" was in regular use at the time, and, in fact, carried a degree of social status. The Boone and Crockett Club, founded in 1887, was then and is now best known for its records of North American trophies. The British taxidermist Roland Ward started his "Records of Big Game" in 1897 to record the trophies taken primarily by British sportsmen around the world. Sir Samuel Baker, who died in 1893, was widely known as an explorer and big game trophy hunter.

**Trophy Hunting Is a Virtue**

In much of the organized hunting world, ‘trophy hunting’ denotes a virtue. The incisive science-based writings of Ron Thomson, for example, irrefutably illustrate the virtues of trophy hunting. This past September at the CITES Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, a resolution on trade in hunting trophies was adopted unanimously recognizing that:

“Well-managed and sustainable trophy hunting is consistent with and contributes to species conservation, as it provides both livelihood opportunities for rural communities and incentives for habitat conservation, and generates benefits which can be invested for conservation purposes.”

The April 2016 Briefing Paper of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) addressed bans on trophy hunting imports. The Paper stated, in part:

“However, legal well-regulated trophy hunting programs can—and do—play an important role in delivering benefits for both wildlife conservation and for the livelihoods and wellbeing of indigenous and local communities living with wildlife. Well-managed trophy hunting, which takes place in many parts of the world, can and does generate critically needed incentives and revenue for government, private and community landowners to maintain and restore wildlife as a land use and to carry out conservation actions, (including anti-poaching interventions). In many parts of the world indigenous and local communities have chosen to use trophy hunting as a strategy for conservation of their wildlife and to improve sustainable livelihoods.”

Trophy hunting would seem to be an unqualified good for animal conservation and enriching human communities. Why, then, is trophy hunting so feverishly attacked by anti-hunters?

## The Rhetoric of Trophy Hunting

Words have power. Words show biases. Words frame issues. Words shape arguments. George Orwell wrote, “Those who control the language control the argument, and those who control the argument win!” Anti-hunters have controlled the language. I offer strategies to regain its control.

I have written and lectured that a war of abusive words is being ferociously waged against hunters through the profligate use of the phrase “trophy hunter.” The phrase has become weaponized. For the anti-hunter, the phrase is the sordid equivalent of such thuggish accusatory phrases presently degrading our culture such as ‘racist’ or ‘fascist’ or ‘Nazi.’

As with all effective propaganda, the anti-hunter uses the power of imagery to besmirch the hunter. Negative false extreme stereotypes present the hunter as a beer-swilling tobacco-spitting knuckle-dragging murderer joyously slaughtering innocent beautiful animals out of blood lust and vanity. Not food nor game management nor the quest for a unique experience inspires the hunter, only bloody braggadocio.

Words and arguments and concepts have layers. The phrase 'trophy hunting' has layers. Research by Mark Duda of Responsive Management discloses that the vast majority of Americans, for example, support hunting. But if asked if they support ‘trophy hunting,’ public support for hunting drops like an anchor. Why?

To answer the question and to regain control of the language, we must understand the logical and ethical defects in this anti-hunting attack. I offer seven examples how the phrase ‘trophy hunter’ is abused. Only by understanding the moral defects of the attacks can we craft strategies to win the war of words.

**FIRST:** anti-hunters advance the misrepresentation, no doubt intentionally by many, that trophy or conservation hunters do not eat the meat. In fact, very little if any of the animal goes to waste. Almost all meat is consumed, either by the hunter, the outfitter and his employees, or is donated to schools, villages, orphanages or old-age homes.

In British Columbia, Canada I interviewed Dr. Valerius Geist, renowned scientist, author, biologist and hunter. He offered a biologist’s insight into consuming meat taken by hunting. The biological value of an animal is an inconsistent guide to a

meaningful definition of ‘trophy’ animal status, he told me. Geist explained that large ‘trophy animals’ in many species are *shikars*; defined as a lazy animal that does not reproduce. The animal’s biology prevents it from losing much body fat and, thus, although the animal and its horns get larger, it does not strengthen the herd. Many ‘trophy’ animals are too old to reproduce.

The value of a ‘trophy’ animal as a source of meat may be also misplaced. Geist noted that many “trophy animals” have terrible meat and thus would not be logically taken for consuming but could ethically be taken for other reasons. Also note, basing the morality of a hunt on the single criteria of eating the meat is deceitful and illogical. Other consequences are as much as or more relevant in determining the hunt’s morality.

**SECOND:** the phrase ‘trophy hunter’ and its variants are vague. In terms of rhetoric, this is an important characteristic. Paradoxically, the quality of vagueness is the source of the phrase’s power. It can mean whatever anyone wants it to mean—hunting an aged animal, hunting just for large horns, killing for joy, feeding your family, leaving the dead animal to rot. Whatever! Vagueness facilitates intimidating hunters because they don’t know the terms of the attack.

Vagueness shuts down discussions because the aggressor has control of the language and most hunters are not trained to respond under such an assault. Also, ambiguity enables the attacker to avoid responsibility for their beliefs while hiding their larger anti-hunting agenda.

Here’s the key to unlock the intent of the anti-trophy hunter’s words. In his 1946 Essay, *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell asserted that our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. ‘Trophy hunting’ is a slovenly phrase. It leads to foolish thoughts. Its vagueness has strategic value: it becomes easier to make foolish and inaccurate

accusations against a larger collection of hunting activities and it makes it more difficult for the hunter to defend him or herself. The slovenliness is employed not only to attack a certain kind of hunter but to attack all hunting.

**THIRD:** the phrase is morally flawed by two logical fallacies. The first is the strawman argument. The fallacy works like this. Since anything negative can be described as a trophy, all things negative become the strawman. It is easy to successfully attack a highly negative abstraction. Then the successful attack against the strawman—for example, attacking a hunter who kills an exotic animal for the mount and leaves the carcass to rot—is used as proof that the attacker has successfully attacked all hunters because in some manner they are all trophy hunters. An attack is made on one target and then the claim is made that a different target was persuasively attacked. This logical fallacy is effective because it challenges the hunter to exhibit considerable intellectual and rhetorical skills to fight back while being on the defensive.

The second logical fallacy is using the singular event to condemn all events. An anti-trophy hunter might select a specific practice—which can be rare—he finds objectionable. By condemning that practice with the vague ‘trophy hunting’ phrase the opponent indulges in the logical fallacy of besmirching all hunting.

The phrase ‘trophy hunting’ is valued by anti-hunters because it enables them to appear discriminating and intelligent and thereby mask their irrational anti-hunting bias. It’s like covering a ship’s rotting hull with a fresh coat of paint.

The phrase stifles debate. Someone attacks trophy hunting and the listener must either make an informed logical rebuttal (in terms of skill, this is difficult for many to do) or continue the discussion with nit picking at examples but—and this is the key point—letting the opponent define its terms.

**FOURTH:** hunters have allowed anti-hunters to frame trophy hunting in terms of INTENTIONS rather than of CONSEQUENCES. This framing gives anti-hunters control of the language. Why should the hunter's intentions determine the morality of trophy hunting if the consequences are virtuous—clean water, more food for villagers; reducing poaching, conservation of animals? An appropriate response to the accusation of killing an animal as a trophy is “So what?” It is immoral to assert that trophy hunting is wrong or unethical based on the hunter's intentions when the consequences are virtuous.

**FIFTH:** hunters and their advocates have allowed the anti-hunter to link an object—a trophy—with a process—hunting. They are unrelated. Either a hunting practice is justified by morality, sportsmanship and economics or it is not. The trophy aspect is irrelevant. We don't use phrases like trophy soccer or trophy rugby or trophy tennis. We do have a phrase ‘trophy wife,’ but that's a more complicated article.

**SIXTH:** there is a darker, more insidious aspect of anti-trophy hunting assault. Anti-hunters have conflated trophy hunting with poaching. The two activities have nothing in common. They are ethically opposite. The linkage is morally obscene. It cannot be accidental. But, it is effective for undermining hunting and for vilifying hunters.

**SEVENTH:** those who condemn trophy hunters; who call them murderers, have failed in their moral duty to learn the facts and master the truth about hunting and its relationship to animal conservation and community development. By this failure, the anti-hunters are no more than smug uninformed bullies. They are frauds. Their behavior and words are mere moral preening and virtue signaling in pursuit of morality on the cheap. They are immune to human suffering, to animal suffering, to truth, logic and consequences. They are shallow arrogant people consumed by a need to feel good despite their behavior leading to destructive consequences. I am

reminded of the statement by French philosopher Blaise Pascal: “Evil is never done so thoroughly or so well as when done with a good conscience.” I argue these people have a moral duty to transcend their ignorance. The duty is particularly acute when animals and native populations are threatened and even more exigent when the attackers are relatively wealthy far-removed people who will never pay a price for their ignorance.

## CONCLUSIONS

The anti-hunting attacks are Darwinian—they continue because they work. At the core of the anti-trophy hunting arguments, and the persons making the arguments, are the assumptions that the animals will always be there; that the infrastructure of government and legitimate conservation groups will always be there, and some force, unidentified, will save the animals from the policies the anti-trophy hunters want to implement. They want all the dynamics of hunting to change, yet they do not want the success of past policies to disappear.

The task of conservationists and hunters is to analyze the underlying logic and morality of the anti-trophy hunting attacks, identify their weaknesses in morality and logic and then use those deficiencies to craft strategies for fighting back. We can do so justifiably with confidence, logic and moral certainty. We have the better arguments. Truth is on our side. Our arguments appeal to the decency of humanity. They will resonate with the vast middle of humanity who are currently uninformed about hunting but who value human and animal life. The cost of failure is high, not so much for the hunters but for the animals. Once they are gone, after a generation they won't be missed at all, and all of humanity will be diminished from that loss.

Michael Sabbeth is the author of *The Good, The Bad & The Difference: How to Talk with Children About Values*. See Amazon.com <http://tinyurl.com/c5flmmu>. He is currently writing the book *Proud to Hunt: Tips for Being an Effective Instructor and Student*