



Misguided Melanie Verwoerd Does Not Speak for Africa: Communities Defend Conservation Rights

30 October 2024

The Community Leaders Network of Southern Africa (CLN), representing over 20 million individuals across twelve Southern African nations, stands as the authentic voice of the communities engaged in and affected by sustainable conservation practices. CLN operates with the vision that wildlife resources should directly benefit the rural populations who share their land with and steward these resources. Trophy hunting, when ethically managed, is integral to this vision, as it provides essential socio-economic benefits and finances local conservation efforts.

It is, therefore, with firm resolve that CLN addresses Melanie Verwoerd's recent statements in the British media, where she presumes to speak on behalf of Southern African communities. Verwoerd's appeal for the UK Government to ban trophy hunting imports not only undermines African conservation sovereignty but threatens the livelihoods and sustainable conservation practices that our communities have worked to secure. CLN wishes to clarify that Verwoerd does not represent Southern African communities or their conservation needs.

1. Misrepresentation of African Communities

Ms Verwoerd's stance against trophy hunting imports implies a unified African opposition to this practice, which is far from reality. CLN, as the legitimate representative of Southern African communities, fundamentally opposes her claims. We believe that her perspective is not only unsupported by those living alongside wildlife but also disregards the collective input of our communities, who rely on the economic benefits generated through sustainable trophy hunting. As such, we disassociate ourselves entirely from her statements and ask that the public and policymakers do not regard her as a spokesperson for African hunting communities.

2. The Importance of Trophy Hunting for Conservation and Socio-economic Stability

For many rural Southern African communities, trophy hunting is a necessary revenue stream that supports both local economies and conservation initiatives. Income from hunting directly funds essential projects in these regions, including anti-poaching initiatives, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, and rural development. Without this income, communities are at risk of turning to unsustainable practices to make a living, ultimately threatening both wildlife populations and

biodiversity. In fact, regulated trophy hunting has enabled African communities to reverse severe colonial-era wildlife losses; today, wildlife populations have grown from less than 500,000 to between 10 and 20 million animals under community-based conservation. Policies banning trophy imports could dismantle these achievements, increasing economic hardship and indirectly leading to higher rates of poaching.

Additionally, trophy hunting complements non-consumptive tourism by conserving vast areas that tourism alone cannot sustain. In fact, hunting maintains around 70% of conservation land in Southern Africa, while tourism's contributions cover only a fraction of this area. Without the economic incentives provided by hunting, these areas risk being lost to other land uses. Both tourism and trophy hunting are essential to a balanced, sustainable conservation approach.

3. Sovereignty and the Role of Southern African Communities in Conservation

CLN has long maintained that African communities should have full authority over their natural resources, an essential right recognised in international conservation agreements. Our approach to conservation has, in fact, led to the recovery of wildlife populations and created stable wildlife economies. It is important to recall that colonial exploitation initially depleted Africa's wildlife, creating the tragedy of the commons that our communities have since worked to reverse. External pressures, especially from Western nations, have historically imposed restrictions that deprive communities of this right. We urge the UK and other international stakeholders to respect Southern African sovereignty in conservation decision-making. Our communities have extensive experience in managing wildlife sustainably, and we continue to advocate for policies that preserve both wildlife and livelihoods.

4. Clarification to the British Government and Public

The British Government must be cautious in responding to calls from individuals who do not represent the consensus of African communities. It is vital that the UK understands the devastating impact a ban on trophy imports could have on Southern African economies and biodiversity. We are grateful for the support of UK-based academics and conservationists who, understanding our realities, have spoken in defence of regulated trophy hunting as a crucial tool for conservation in Southern Africa. CLN firmly advises the UK Government to collaborate with legitimate African conservation stakeholders, such as our network, which prioritises sustainable use and community benefits. This approach, rather than top-down bans, would promote a balanced and culturally informed conservation model that is most likely to yield long-term results.

5. Invitation to Witness Positive Impacts of Sustainable Trophy Hunting

To counteract the misinformation surrounding this issue, CLN extends an open invitation to Ms Verwoerd and other international stakeholders to visit Southern African communities engaged in sustainable hunting. Witnessing first-hand how these practices support conservation and community well-being would provide valuable context that is often missing in debates around trophy hunting. We welcome the opportunity to showcase how community-based natural

resource management (CBNRM) ensures that African people benefit directly from their conservation efforts.

Conclusion

CLN reiterates that Ms Verwoerd does not represent the views or interests of Southern African communities. Her statements are misaligned with the on-the-ground realities faced by millions who rely on ethical, regulated trophy hunting for socio-economic resilience and biodiversity preservation. We urge the UK and its citizens to listen to the genuine voices of African community leaders and support policies that enable these communities to flourish alongside their natural heritage.

For further engagement or clarification, please contact the Community Leaders Network of Southern Africa. We stand ready to collaborate with all stakeholders who respect and understand the role of African communities in global conservation efforts.



Dr Rodgers Lubilo

Chairperson

rodgers@communityln.org

For and on behalf of Community Leaders Network of Southern Africa