

who's causing the damage?

In any form of human-wildlife conflict it is, inevitably, the humans who have the upper hand. **Ian Michler** spotlights new draft legislation in South Africa that would make life even more precarious for so-called 'damage-causing animals'.



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HUMANS, FOR THE MOST PART, have a marvellous linguistic capability and it is one of the main characteristics that set *Homo sapiens* apart from other species. But it's not only the capacity to talk that is so human; it's also how we use words. This includes manipulating them in order to mislead. We can make half-truths – even untruths – seem palatable and pure nonsense appear sensible and logical.

One of the most misleading phrases in use among wildlife management and conservation communities in Africa today is 'damage-causing animals'. Say it out loud and you immediately look around for the culprit that needs to be eradicated. This play upon our sensibilities is integral to the deception, but it's the hypocrisy of the phrase that screams even more loudly. With three words, we – the undisputed No. 1 'damage-causing animal' – have switched culpability from ourselves to other species.

The term has come into use because of humankind's ever-increasing push into the wilderness in search of land for economic and leisure purposes. This has resulted in escalating competition with all other species, manifested in predator attacks on livestock and people and in raids on crops. In an attempt to address the situation in South Africa, the Department of Environmental Affairs has recently published Draft Norms and Standards for the Management of Damage-causing Animals.

The proposed measures may be specific to South Africa, but the general parameters on which they are based highlight the fundamental problems and differences of opinion surrounding 'damage-causing animals', no matter where they occur. There is no denying that wild animals kill and trample, or that a farmer or rural villager has

a right to defend his stock and crops; rather, it is the attitude to these animals and the approach taken to managing them that require analysis.

In South Africa's case, it is clear that the country is still stuck in the paradigm that sees animals as the problem and eradication as the solution. The legislation is one-dimensional: find a guilty animal, any animal, and kill it. And even worse, the indiscriminate use of poisons, gin traps and hunting is still sanctioned as a means of extermination. There is no onus on farmers to avoid predation by controlling or protecting their livestock, and nothing is said about non-lethal measures such as the use of herders or guard dogs. It is also clear that many

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of the proposed regulations are in conflict with existing ordinances, particularly the Animal Protection acts and those pertaining to threatened or protected species.

To understand the basis of this thinking, look no further than two other wonderfully misleading phrases: 'sustainable utilisation' and 'consumptive utilisation'. Favoured by governments and in business and some wildlife management sectors, these catch-all terms have been part of our lexicon for a number of decades, even though they are vague and largely meaningless. But because they are rubber-stamped by the IUCN and other major conservation agencies around the world, invoking them as principal guidelines immediately legitimises the

Poisoning black-backed jackals – a 'damage-causing animal' – and hanging their carcasses on fences is a common practice in some rural parts of South Africa.

'consumption' or 'usage' of wildlife, no matter what form it may take.

In fact, the sustainability referred to is *economic* sustainability for farmers and the business community; the thinking does not extend to the ecological sustainability of the wildlife and habitats that still exist.

That is why in the Eastern Cape, for example, local government deems it acceptable to allow leopards designated as 'damage-causing animals' to be poisoned, gin-trapped or shot by trophy hunters, despite research showing that the population is close to collapse. And with some hunters paying more than US\$30 000 for the thrill, any leopard wandering the region is likely to be tagged as 'damage-causing'.

This leads directly to another reason for the continued onslaught against these animals: South Africa is increasingly allowing its conservation and wildlife management agendas to be influenced – even hijacked – by the agricultural sector. This is an extremely disturbing development and does not bode well for the country's biodiversity. **AG**

To view the Draft Norms and Standards for the Management of Damage-causing Animals, go to www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=136160. You can follow Ian's blog at www.africageographic.com/blogs/?cat=5

