

Are the Texas Ranchers Right?

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On over five thousand ranches across the United States, about 125 exotic species of animals are being bred and hunted throughout the year.ⁱ Some of these species are endangered and nearing extinction in the wild, causing animal rights activist groups, such as Friends of Animalsⁱⁱ, to challenge the rights of these ranches to allow hunting. This raises the debate, “Are the Texas ranchers right?” In order to answer this question, I divided ‘right’ into two separate categories: legal and moral. I will outline the claims and challenges to the legality of hunting exotics on Texas ranches followed by a summary of my own personal debate over the morality of canned hunting with respect to larger societal animal rights standards in the United States.

A leading representative and advocate of exotic ranchers is The Exotic Wildlife Association (EWA). The EWA’s mission is “to encourage and expand the conservation of indigenous and non-indigenous hoofstock animals, and to help our Members develop and strengthen the markets for their animals.”ⁱⁱⁱ In 1973 the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was passed, prohibiting “unauthorized taking, possession, sale, and transport of endangered species”^{iv}. Yet, due to the primacy of animal conservation in the EWA’s mission, exotic ranches fall under a loophole in the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Captive-Bred Wildlife Registration program. “Under the program, activities that would otherwise be prohibited under the ESA can occur when the activities are shown to enhance propagation or survival of the affected species, provided that the principal purpose is to facilitate conservation breeding.”^v EWA Executive Director, Charly Seale, claimed on *60 Minutes* that, “Hunters [at exotic ranches] are the main conservationists in this whole equation”^{vi}, and that their actions have “brought back 3 varieties of antelope from the brink of extinction” while also supporting more than 14,000 jobs in Texas.^{vii} *60 Minutes* interviewer Lara Logan challenged Seale directly, asking, “Can you call yourselves conservationists when, you know, your purpose, your intent, that thing that is driving it is to hunt

the animals and to kill them?”^{viii} Although Seale’s response was a confident, “Absolutely”, there is another side to the debate that I find compelling.

From a quantitative perspective, populations of exotic and endangered animals are thriving on Texas ranches, such as the population increase of scimitar-horned oryx from less than three-dozen in 1979 to over 11,000 in 2010.^{ix} Yet, in my opinion, this does not necessarily constitute ‘conservation’. Priscilla Feral, President of Friends of Animals, stated, “While ranchers and hunters may think that’s [population increase] tantamount to conservation, we think that that’s a hoax.”^x The definition of ‘conserve’ is “to protect (something, especially an environmentally or culturally important place or thing) from harm or destruction”^{xi}. The ranches are not conserving or protecting the natural communities, populations or environments of their exotic species, they are only increasing the population out of the context of their natural habitat and ecosystem. In a complaint filed against the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), Friends of Animals draws attention to the fact that, “Private hunting ranches in the United States do not provide individual African antelope to assist in recovery actions in Africa”^{xii}. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals campaign specialist Ashley Byrne agrees with Feral, claiming, “The ranch owners are doing nothing to help with animals’ native populations or their proper ecosystems”^{xiii}.

Interestingly, since 1991, the EWA has been petitioning the FWS to remove three species, including the scimitar-horned oryx, from the endangered species list, claiming that ‘captive-bred antelope’ don’t belong.^{xiv} I believe it is contradictory to state that your mission as a ranch is to conserve populations of animals that are endangered in the wild while simultaneously claiming that captive-bred and wild species should be considered two different groups.

From a moral perspective, the answer to the question of whether or not the Texas ranchers are right is no less complex. I am disturbed by the idea of trophy hunting because I believe it is immoral to kill another creature for the sole purpose of exercising and demonstrating dominance,

but I do not think a moral judgment can be passed on the ranchers without comparing their actions to the larger socially accepted way that humans impact the quality of life of non-human species^{xv}. Only up to ten percent of any herd on the Texas ranches is hunted, and the remaining ninety percent are left to freely roam without the threat of natural predators. Many of the ranchers acquired their original stock from zoos and circuses^{xvi} where the animals were likely being overworked or living in cages.^{xvii} Life on a Texas exotic ranch could be, on average, of a higher quality than that of other captive or domestic animals. Personally, I have two cats that I chose to forcibly sterilize so that they can live confined in my apartment to play with me and bring me joy. Yes, I ensure that they are fed and receive medical care, but is engaging an animal for one's personal benefit any more or less moral with respect to the quality of life of the animal than running an exotic ranch? I'm not sure. To take it one step further, I am curious how the exotic ranches affect the wellbeing of the flora and fauna that are native to Texas ranches? It is right to potentially harm a natural ecosystem in the name of 'conserving' a non-native species?

Additionally, America relies heavily on the animal agriculture industry to feed our population, and purchasing decisions that support the commercial livestock industry result in the maltreatment of millions of living creatures daily. According to PETA, over 42 million cows lose their lives do the beef and dairy industries. They also suffer abuses such as castration, forced pregnancy, branding and confinement for the purpose of providing humans with food and other consumer goods^{xviii}, many of which could feasibly come from alternative plant-based sources.

In conclusion, I cannot definitively state whether the Texas exotic ranchers are 'right' because in my opinion the legality and morality of their actions fall on a spectrum, and the factors outlined above shift my opinion back and forth along the continuum of judgment. Initially, I was very quick to condemn the actions of the exotic ranchers, but after reflecting on both American

society's and my own relationship to non-human species, I am left conflicted and unable to confidently take one side.

ⁱ “Can Hunting Endangered Animals Save the Species?,” CBS News, January, 30, 2012, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/can-hunting-endangered-animals-save-the-species/>.

ⁱⁱ Friends of Animals is an international not-for-profit animal advocacy organization that works to cultivate a respectful view of animals, both in the wild and domestically. Their goal is to free animals from cruelty and institutionalized exploitation. Learn more at www.friendsofanimals.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ “EWA Mission,” Exotic Wildlife Association, last modified 2015, accessed November 8, 2015, www.myewa.org/mission.html.

^{iv} “Endangered Species Act of 1973,” Digest of Federal Resource Laws of Interest to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, accessed November 8, 2015, www.fws.gov/laws/lawsdigest/esact.html.

^v “Captive-bred Wildlife Registration under the U.S. Endangered Species Act,” U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, last modified August, 2015, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://www.fws.gov/international/pdf/factsheet-captive-bred-wildlife-and-endangered-species-act.pdf>.

^{vi} “Can Hunting Endangered Animals Save the Species?” CBS News, last modified January, 30, 2012, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/can-hunting-endangered-animals-save-the-species/>.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Molly Hennessy-Fiske, “Texas Ranchers Fight to Breed, Hunt Endangered Antelope,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2012, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2012apr/03/nation/la-na-nn-texas-antelope20120403>.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} “Conserve,” Oxford Dictionaries, accessed November 8, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/conserve.

^{xii} “Friends of Animals Files Suit to Stop Killing of Endangered African Antelope on U.S. Hunting Ranches,” Friends of Animals, October 16, 2013, accessed November 7, 2015, http://www.friendsofanimals.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/Final%20Antelope_HRP_Complaint.pdf.

^{xiii} Lena Masri, “Want to Hunt Exotic African Animals? Just Go to Texas,” *Reuters*, August 25, 2015, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/08/25/want-to-hunt-exotic-african-animals-just-go-to-texas/>.

^{xiv} “Where the Antelope Play: The Fight to Save Exotic Species,” Marzulla Law Legal Report, December 2012, accessed November 7, 2015, <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs068/1104865327757/archive/1108991569887.html>.

^{xv} Here I am focusing on the mainstream animal agriculture industry, although I realize this generalization neglects the factions of society that actively purchase products such as grass-fed, free-range beef and chicken, hormone-free milk and other products that are produced using more animal-friendly processes.

^{xvi} Lena Masri, “Want to Hunt Exotic African Animals? Just Go to Texas,” *Reuters*, August 25, 2015, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/08/25/want-to-hunt-exotic-african-animals-just-go-to-texas/>.

^{xvii} For more information on issues of animal ethics in zoos and circuses, visit the BBC Ethics Guide at http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/animals/using/entertainment_1.shtml.

^{xviii} “Cows Used For Food,” People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/factory-farming/cows/>.