



A freshwater crocodile basks at Windjana Gorge National Park in the Kimberley region, Western Australia. Safari hunting has been trialled and ranching is being considered, but some conservation groups are against what they see as commercial exploitation of crocs. Rosemary McArthur

Sustainable use of native animals: a great debate

In the last decade or so, some scientists and conservationists have advocated sustainable commercial use of native wildlife as a conservation measure – a way to protect habitats where existing methods cannot. This has caused passionate debate. Where to, then, from here?

As one authority put it ‘to some this seems like a desperate compromise, but to others it represents a welcome maturation of the conservation movement’.

In a recent Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation report, Mr Neal Finch, of the University of Queensland, has explored the hunting–conservation debate and the problem of different, sometimes seemingly irreconcilable, viewpoints held by various stakeholders.

He finds that considerable support for sustainable use of native animals is emerging. There is an argument that ‘... pressures on wild species and natural ecosystems are becoming increasingly severe. We are reaching a point at which traditional means of conservation, in the familiar guise of protected areas and endangered species recovery programs, are no longer adequate.’

There is increasing concern that ‘protectionist’ conservation practices are

not working particularly well, are expensive, and cover only a small proportion of the landscape.

The respected World Conservation Union (IUCN) notes that ‘ethical, wise and sustainable use of some wildlife can provide an alternative or supplementary means of productive land use, and can be consistent with and encourage conservation, where such is in accordance with adequate safeguards’.

Proponents of wildlife use cite several Australian examples that they regard as successful and sustainable: kangaroo harvesting, crocodile ranching, recreational hunting, mutton birding and emu farming.

A Senate report, Commercial Utilisation of Australian Wildlife, lists many benefits that can arise from sustainable use of wildlife, including: conservation of species under use; provision of incentives for private landholders to retain and rehabilitate natural habitats; alternatives to illegal trade in wildlife; more information gathered about commercialised species; and financial returns from wildlife industries to assist other conservation.

Some ecologists argue the ‘ecological reality’ that practically any species can be used sustainably, even in a consumptive

way, if harvest rates are kept below natural rates of increase.

On the other hand, several conservation groups, but not all, are vehemently opposed to human use of wildlife. It is variously described as ‘a utopian dream pursued at the expense of our natural heritage’, an ‘unrealistic nightmare’ and a ‘polite, non-confrontationist theory’ which is ‘tragic in effect’.

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is opposed to commercial consumptive wildlife utilisation. On the question of sustainability, the ACF claims that ‘no existing commercial use of a wild stock, in particular those harvested for export, can be demonstrated to be ecologically sustainable. Market demands create unacceptable pressure to exceed the ecologically sustainable yield of harvested species.’ Another participant in the debate pointedly argues that Australian governments are not ‘mature enough’ to manage new wildlife industries given the history of over-exploitation in the fishing and timber industries.

Then there is the view that if we put a monetary value on wildlife it will lose its intrinsic value. We should protect wildlife for its intrinsic value alone, because this is morally correct.

Some say that for consumptive use to be acceptable, there must be a conservation benefit; others believe only non-consumptive uses like ecotourism are acceptable. And, as one researcher says, the philosophical divide between those who find shooting acceptable and those who do not is irreconcilable.

Past experience does not provide all the answers either. In many cases, an exploitative policy has failed to deliver a positive conservation outcome, but on the other hand, protectionist conservation policies also have often failed to deliver.

Finch agrees with the suggestion of the Australasian Wildlife Management Society that it is probably necessary to consider wildlife use case by case. The debate continues.

● Steve Davidson

More information:

RIDC Report. See Chapter 3, page 10:
www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/NAP/04-108.pdf
 Senate Committee Report, Commercialisation
 Utilisation of Australian Native Wildlife:
www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/rrat_ctte/completed_inquiries/1996-99/wild/report/contents.htm

Contact: Neal Finch, naf@sas.uq.edu.au