
Texas: Death Sentence or Hidden Oasis for Endangered African Antelope?

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Many western cultures have romantic notions that locations such as Africa and Asia are a wide-open region of unclaimed wilderness for limitless herds of animals to thrive. However, the hardening fact is that most natural habitats have been destroyed at a record rate and many animals are finding it increasingly difficult to locate appropriate areas of land for survival. Most native wildlife has been restricted to constructed and controlled game parks. This restriction of wildlife is an attempt to prevent conflict with human priorities. Ungulates create competition for grazing land and often destroy crops needed for human survival. Several species of animals, such as the hoofed animals discussed later, have been hunted to extinction; hunted to ease the conflict between humans and agriculture, hunted for sport, or to gather pieces of the animal for cultural rituals and displays.

There are several places on our planet that have been created in order to help protect and allow animals to thrive. In the United States there are places designed specifically for exotic hoofed animals to thrive; many Americans believe these a form of sanctuaries, or modern zoo exhibits. In reality, these areas are the vast plains of ranches owned by Texas hunting operations.

The three species of at the center of controversy include the addra or dama gazelle (Nanger dama), scimitar-horned oryx (Oryx dammah), and the addax (Addax nasomaculatus). According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) the scimitar-horned oryx is listed as Extinct in the Wild, whereas the addax and addra are listed as Critically Endangered ("IUCN Red List," 2013). According to the 2009 Regional

Collection Plan for the Antelope & Giraffe Taxon Advisory Group of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, there are currently 205 addra, 270 oryx, as well as 200 addax listed in the Species Survival Program. In addition, the plan lists an additional 1,000 addax in zoological parks and over 2,000 in private collections in North America.

Dr. David Mallon (2012) of the IUCN Antelope Specialist Group notes that the organization lists the addra and the addax as a special species of concern, and is striving to give special consideration to the full range of genetic, morphological, phenotypic and ecological diversity. Facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquarium (AZA) formed the Conservation Centers for Species Survival (C2S2) to create new strategic solutions for hoofed animal conservation. Through this consortium, C2S2 members are using new tactics to increase breeding likelihood, most of these new methods that cannot be employed in a traditional zoo setting. These new strategic actions include developing larger herds living in spacious naturalistic enclosures with minimal public disturbance (Fischer et al, 2012). Before the consortium was formed, large-scale hunting ranches were already completing the same work as C2S2. Ranchers argue that they helped revive the three rare species. In 1979, Texas had fewer than three dozen captive-bred scimitar-horned oryx and as of 2010, it was home to more than 11,000. During the same time period the number of captive-bred dama gazelles increased from nine to more than 800 and the number of addax from two to more than 5,000 (Hennessy-Fiske, 2012). Due to a special loop-hole, and lack of enforcement, all three of these species were exempt from Endangered Species Act regarding personal use and commerce.

Public opinion

The public opinion regarding the hunting of any nonhuman animal is usually controversial with each circle having its own philosophical views. Research conducted by Duda and Jones of Responsive Management Inc. (2011) on the topic of public opinion of

hunting indicates that most Americans support hunting in general; however, support for and opposition to hunting can vary dramatically based on numerous factors including personal values and characteristics, attitudes toward hunters, attitudes toward animal welfare, the motivation for participating, and the species involved. Regardless of personal ideas on animal welfare or rights, 77% of adult Americans support legal hunting. For instance, more Americans approve of hunting as a method of food source collection and for the protection of human populations; yet, there is less favorable support of hunting solely for recreation, and the species being hunted. In this study, it is even documented that 27% of hunters do not support the act of hunting for the sole purpose of recreation and sport. Only 28% of adult Americans approve of hunting only for sport and recreation. The national study additionally found that 18% of anti-hunters were opposed because of the pain inflicted on animals and 15% because they love animals, the second- and third-ranked reasons in that study (Kellert, 1980). In a study conducted by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources found that a large majority of study participants were concerned about animal pain: 74% of those who oppose recreational hunting agree that they are “bothered by disrespect for animal life,” and 52% agree that they “believe the animals experience a great deal of pain and suffering” (Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources, 1992).

In order to better assess the public opinion that surrounds this topic, an online survey was made available in November of 2012. This included a series of eight questions that asked the responder to express their opinion regarding the topic. Of the individuals who fully responded (n=34), 53% do not support the activity of sport or recreational hunting, whereas 64% of respondents approved regulated or controlled hunting for the purpose of species management. Only a total of 18% fully opposed the use of hunting as a method of species management. When it came to answering questions about hunting ranches in the state of Texas, less than 20% of respondents believe that there are laws and regulations, including

penalties, put into place to monitor the practice of captive hunts. On average, it was found that approximately 40% of those who participated in the study had no prior exposure or previous knowledge about hunting of Endangered Species on ranches. Approximately, 94% of respondents believe that between 25%-75% of a herd is culled annually for the use of sport hunting (Ogle, 2012).

Regulation & Legislation

In the United States, there are no federal laws designed for the regulation of hunting as an activity, including captive hunts. Currently, only one-half of the states have laws banning the hunt of exotic game in captive settings. The federal government regulations lie within the Animal Welfare Act and the Endangered Species Act; which ironically did not apply to game preserves, hunting preserves, and captive hunts until April of 2012 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2012). The captive-bred wildlife regulations were approved in 1979 as an attempt to reduce permitting regulations and to facilitate breeding of endangered species. The main focus was primarily set for conservation, and did so by launching a registration program. Under the program things such as interstate commerce, are authorized, but only when positively demonstrated to enhance the propagation of the species. Registrants of the program are required to deliver an annual report with details on births, deaths, and transfers of individual specimens.

In 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service added the three species of African antelopes to the federal list of endangered wildlife. In addition, with the listing of all three species as endangered, the Service published a rule excluding these species from permit requirements for activities within the United States, as well as export and re-import, for any specimens that had been captive-bred in the United States (50 CFR 17.21(h)). This allowed ranch operators and public exhibitors displaying these species to continue activities, such as hunting on a private ranch operation (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2012). It was believed that captive-

breeding programs in the United States so far had been successful. The Fish & Wildlife Service decided to ease the permitting requirements in recognition of the captive breeding success and contribution to the overall survival of these species.

Changes to these exemptions came in April of 2012, when the regulation facing many ranch operators was to become enforced, requiring the obtainment of two permits. These two permits are the Captive Wildlife Breeder, as well as a special permit focusing on the import/export of these animals across state lines. These permits are required for those ranchers who are using animals as a source of revenue generation, but are not required for those individuals who are simply raising the animals on their private land (Roehl, 2012). Fish & Wildlife Service (2012) states that if a captive-breeding facility was carrying out activities that were previously authorized under the exclusion should be able to continue with those activities by obtaining a permit or other authorization. The removal of this exclusion requires such authorization for interstate or foreign commerce, import/export, or various forms of take or hunting. The Service does not have jurisdiction over breeding or ownership within a state. Therefore, no federal authorization is required to simply breed or maintain these antelope species. This change in legislation sparked controversy amongst animal activists groups and the ranch operators. While activists viewed this as a sign of victory in the protection and establishment of animal rights, many ranch operations found this to be an encroachment of the Federal Government. One ranch operator described the new enforcement as a misnomer and that it is not centered directly around the animals, but upon protection of personal property (Roehl, 2012). E. Mungall, a Texas state biologist, notes that ranchers don't want to be subject to federal inspection; these permits allow the government to come onto their private property at any time, unannounced for inspection (Freemantle, 2012). Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott and Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples noted in a statement that the “burdensome new regulation from the federal government threatens

economic viability...and the continued preservation of these rare animals.” In April of 2012 only 58 people have applied for federal permits to register the antelopes, 52 to hunt them, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service told the Austin American-Statesman. All but one of the applications was from Texas (Hennessy-Fiske, 2012).

Despite the lack of federal laws to regulate the actions of hunting ranches, there are several state legislation pieces in existence. The Texas Park & Wildlife Department (TPWD) defines an exotic animal used for trophy hunting as a grass-eating or plant-eating, single-hoofed or cloven-hoofed mammal that are not indigenous or native to Texas, including animals from the deer and antelope families that landowners have introduced into this state. The TPWD bans the use of any predator and potentially dangerous animal, such as elephants and rhinos, in canned hunts. In addition, the state of Texas regulates which exotic animals may be used for the purpose of trophy hunting. Also, contradictive to the expressed public opinions demonstrated in the online survey, it is against the law to hunt an exotic without a valid hunting license and possess an exotic or the carcass of an exotic without the owner's consent. It should be noted though, that there are no state bag or possession limits or closed seasons on exotic animals on private property. A person who violates these laws commits an offense can incur a fine of \$500-\$4000 and/or up to one year in jail (Texas Park & Wildlife Department, 2012).

Exploration of Hunting Ranches

The Humane Society of the United States estimates that there are a total of 500 specialized game ranches in the state of Texas. Currently, this multibillion dollar enterprise employs nearly 14,000 individuals in the state of Texas (Logan, 2012). The average size of these ranches is estimated to be around 1,200 acres and can be as large as 40,000 acres (Roehl, 2012). Most of are equipped with modern facilities and lodges for the comfort of the sportsmen. The hunters are allowed to track and hunt the free-roaming animals. In essence,

the enterprise is a unique combination of agriculture and hospitality management, in attempt to recreate the aura of traditional African hunting safaris. Most operations would allow up to ten percent of the herd to be culled annually and maintained consistent breeding seasons (Richardson, 2012).

Charly Seale, Executive Director of the Exotic Wildlife Association (EWA), describes that the lucrative business has been a well-kept secret, but ranch operators are now finding themselves in the public's eye. He continues to point out those members of EWA own more numbers of endangered species than any other association in the world. Their biggest successes have been the scimitar-horned oryx, the addax and the dama gazelle. Pat Condy, CEO of the AZA accredited Fossil Rim Wildlife Centre, estimates that there are approximately 10,000 of the rare oryx in the state alone (Hennessy-Fiske, 2012). In Seale's opinion, these animals might be endangered or extinct in other places in the world, but they are thriving in the state of Texas (Logan, 2012).

In a phone interview with Eric Roehl (2012), owner/operator of Buck Valley Ranch, he provided an insight into mental process of those who hunt trophy animals. Throughout the interview Roehl painted an image of individuals who have a respect and passion for the animals that they hunt. According to Roehl, most hunters have a great respect and admiration for all animals, who wish to hunt these animals using the most humane methods as possible.

As described by several individuals involved in the industry, they state that hunters may be interested in the antlers but, it is more than just that. These individuals also enjoy the meat they collect from harvesting the animal. It was stated that many of these hunters will not eat beef due to the inhumane production and harvest of cattle. The animals that are hunted on the ranches are allowed the freedom to escape, to roam freely in herds, and to make choices. The use of these animals for meat is more humane in many individual's minds.

In the late 1970s, David Bamberger offered to devote more than 600 acres of his property to save an endangered animal at his own expense. American zoos sent him nearly all of the remaining known genetic stock of scimitar horned oryx in the world and from that he raised hundreds of animals. He's since sent some to African reserves for eventual reintroduction into the wild, but he believes the best hope is to sustain the species today lies on the Texas range. Bamberger states that he is not fond of hunting the antelope, but is wise enough to know that altruism alone will not create participation in creating conservation success; there must be some form of incentive to get individuals to participate in breeding and raising these animals (Freemantle, 2012).

Role of Accredited Zoos

In the United States the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) governs the panorama of zoological parks we recognize by name. Meeting accreditation standards, and working as a collective unit, these facilities routinely contribute to the education, conservation, and research that is vital in protecting wildlife across the globe.

The AZA has several programs that are designed for the conservation and preservation of endangered species, including hoofed animals. Through programs sponsored by correlating Taxon Advisory Groups (TAG) and Special Survival Plans (SSP), topics such as regulated breeding, education, husbandry, and conservation sciences are explored. There are six TAGs that represent ungulates in AZA. The Antelope & Giraffe TAG (2012) oversees the primary species that have been discussed earlier, and will be the center of our main conversation. Within AZA, this specific TAG is charged with the management of 23 North American Studbooks, 7 International Studbooks, and 39 SSP programs. A key in-situ conservation program endorsed by the TAG and AZA is the Sahara Conservation Fund, which actively supports wild species and habitats of some of the most endangered species of antelope, including the addra and scimitar-horned oryx. Today, there is a diminishing trend from

thundering herds to fading hoof-beats as more AZA facilities scale-back their once dynamic collection of ungulates. In fact, in the past three decades, many species of ungulates have disappeared completely from representation in many AZA facilities. This creates a dilemma because these animals are also disappearing from their native habitats at an increasing speed.

Too much surprise, only two species of ungulates are considered to be sustainable in captivity, neither which are an antelope species. According to Martha Fischer (2012), Curator of Ungulates at the Saint Louis Zoo and Chair of the Antelope & Giraffe TAG, 68% of ungulate species currently managed are recommended to be phased out of collections, or no longer eligible for formal management at this time. There is a potential that the number of ungulate species in our collections in the future will be half of today's current number. Adding to the dilemma of proper management of these species are the actions taken by the zoos themselves. In the past nine years, there has been a loss of 900 individual spaces for exhibiting ungulates. This is due to the fact that to successfully manage and display ungulates, a large outdoor habitat is required. Often, this is the most attractive piece of real-estate when zoos wish to add new exhibits or infrastructure. The decrease in these areas to house large herds of antelope species decrease, the genetic health of the overall population also decreases.

The best example of the situation occurring in AZA facilities can be highlighted by the Arabian oryx, also known as the gemsbok (*Oryx leucoryx*). In 1962, the first zoo herd of Arabian oryx was brought in, comprising of nine animals. Ten years later this animal was declared Extinct in the Wild by IUCN (Conservation snapshots, 2012). By 1990 the number of animals in accredited zoos soared to 1,300. However, in 2012 there are only a total of 90 animals housed in only sixteen AZA institutions, a 93% decrease in individual animals. With these declining numbers, new guidelines were promoted by the TAG to work with outside organizations to find new individual animals for breeding purposes (Fischer, 2012).

According to Lawrence Killmar (2012), Vice-President of Animal Science & Conservation at Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, there has been a noticeable small improvement with select antelope species. Killmar believes that the industry has received a rude wake-up call when it comes to captive population management. Despite new efforts being made to correct these issues, it will take time to see the results. Simply put, what took years to occur within the captive management community will take equal, if not more time to correct. One of the key departures from the old AZA format is the inclusion of the private sector in their conservation breeding programs. Killmar believes that these fully licensed and reliable operators have a great deal to offer, being mostly genetic variability of their stock.

Future of the Three Antelope Species

Leading up to the change in legislation in April of 2012, many noted that ranch operators were selling or killing off their herds at an alarming rate. Gary Broach, a taxidermist in Kerrville, Texas, typically receives 10 to 12 scimitar-horned oryx in a year for processing and mounting; in March of 2012 alone, 23 have come in for full-head mounting, and at least 17 others for lesser treatments. Additionally, Tommy Oates livestock trader in Huntsville, picked up a load of 20 scimitar-horned oryx for auction from a South Texas ranch in the weeks leading up to the new enforcement of the Endangered Species Act. Oates said the market price for the animals already has dropped as much as 40 percent and will go down even further when the new legislation goes into effect. David Bamberger concedes by adding "There's ranchers up here that lined them up and killed every damned one they had because after April 4 they have no value at all" (Freemantle, 2012). Due to the scare of the change in legislation it is unknown how many oryx, addax, and addra were disposed of by ranch operations. The Exotic Wildlife Association is currently in the process of conducting a census to properly estimate the numbers of remaining individual animals of these species (Roehl, 2012). "In this instance, Texas ranchers have done an astonishing job of rebuilding three

species of African antelope, one of which is extinct in the wild. When it comes to saving a species, government on its own cannot save those species. The private sector has to get involved. I don't think anybody's winning the day. One thing is for sure, they are losing it. Those species are losing it,” said Pat Condy of the Fossil Rim Wildlife Center (Freemantle, 2012).

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