

Trophy Nature: Exploring the Discourses and Social Practices of Commercial Hunting on Game Farms in South Africa

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Game farming – i.e. the conversion of land-use from conventional agriculture to various forms of wildlife production - is a growing industry in South Africa. Although some conversions are aimed exclusively at nature-viewing tourists and/or the conservation of biodiversity, the game farming sector relies to a large extent on commercial hunting. There is some degree of incompatibility between the two constructions: it is difficult to combine commercial hunting operations with viewing-based wildlife appreciation, and the management practices involved in each case differ. However in both cases, processes of nature commodification through the construction of a wilderness landscape are evident. Both shape, in different ways, the valuing of specific animal species; both are to some extent reliant on purchasing valuable animals at game auctions, now massively lucrative opportunities for game farmers and state conservation authorities to generate income.

This paper focuses specifically on the commodification of the wild animals themselves, and how this occurs through the discourses and social practices associated with commercial hunting on game farms. Intensive research conducted in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape over a four-year period is presented together with some insights into the operation of the game farming industry in the Free State province. Within the hunting sector, “biltong” or meat hunting is differentiated from trophy hunting, which is considered ultimately more lucrative but requires careful management and investment in more valuable animals, bred in some cases specifically for the trophy hunting industry (sable antelope is one example here). From the point of view of conservation authorities, this is an industry that requires greater regulation because it can lead to overt exploitation of wild animals: there is no pretence in this sector that animal species are valued for themselves or their role in the ecosystem, and conservation authorities are concerned about many of the management practices involved in hunting-based game farming. In terms of its socio-economic impact, the hunting industry claims to create new jobs in the meat processing sector and other related activities; however in practice, hunting as a land-use often requires the removal of former farm dwellers from farms in order to make way for game.

