

# HUNTERS FAIL TO SILENCE CRITICS

**THE level of public interest in or, more accurately, concern about, hunting, was heightened in July 2015, when US recreational big-game hunter Walter Palmer shot a south-west African lion (*Panthera leo bleyenberghi*).**

Affectionately known as Cecil, the lion was a major attraction at the Hwange National Park in Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe. Cecil was allegedly lured out of the sanctuary, then shot and wounded with an arrow. However, his wound was not fatal, and he was tracked and killed with a rifle, doubtless after enduring severe, prolonged suffering, approximately 40 hours later.

Cecil was being studied and tracked by the University of Oxford as part of a larger study and his death resulted in global scrutiny and condemnation of both Walter Palmer and recreational hunting (Capecci and Rogers, 2015).

Given the considerable public interest, and the stated intention of Britain's Government to repeal the Hunting Act, hunting seemed an ideal topic for the first major animal welfare sym-

## ANDREW KNIGHT

MANZCVS, DipECAWBM(AWSEL), DipACAW, PhD, SFHEA, MRCVS

discusses criticisms faced when trying to arrange a hunting debate at an animal welfare symposium

posium hosted by the Centre for Animal Welfare at the University of Winchester.

### Inviting speakers

The first question was which speakers to invite? As members of the academic community, we are committed to ensuring a diverse and balanced range of viewpoints can be heard at our symposia. And yet, it cannot be denied most forms of hunting involve inflicting some of the most extreme forms of violence on animals.

Indeed, short of rare cases of wanton torture, such as by psychopaths or deliberate animal fighting – both of which are illegal in most jurisdictions – hunting probably incorporates the most extreme forms of violence inflicted on animals. Hunting is, for example, generally more violent than animal sacrifice, religious slaughter or invasive research.

Not all hunting is like this, of course; the notable exception being instant death that accompanies the accurate delivery of a bullet or arrow to the brain – notwithstanding the difficulty of achieving such accuracy, when conditions of wind, distance or movement are not conducive. However, it cannot be denied, in the absence of instant death, most forms of hunting do involve the infliction of particularly extreme forms of violence.

Universities do not normally tolerate speakers who advocate law-breaking or violent behaviour towards people. And, although frequently overlooked or marginalised, mammals, birds and fish commonly hunted are, nevertheless, legitimate subjects of moral concern, due to their sentience and other morally relevant psychosocial characteristics (Benz-Schwarzburg and

Knight, 2011; Proctor, 2012).

Additionally, Winchester is not just any university, but one that has a particular commitment to values such as compassion and social justice through its Strategic Plan 2015 to 2020 (University of Winchester, 2015). Animals are consistently denied justice and focusing on the advancement of their welfare is an act of compassion.

The plan states: "We are driven by our pursuit of social justice and the common good, and where people, the planet, and all living things are held in the highest regard."

Accordingly, to state universities, and the University of Winchester in particular, should not tolerate speakers who advocate extreme forms of violence towards animals, is not only a reasonable position, but, arguably, the correct position.

Despite this, and particularly in light of the range of anti-hunting speakers that did accept our invitations to talk, we made every effort to locate speakers willing to provide arguments in support of hunting, in any of its diverse forms.

We scoured academic literature in search of authors who might have published even the most tenuous defences of hunting. We invited every pro-hunting organisation we had heard of or been informed about. We contacted contacts of contacts that might possibly know of anyone willing to defend hunting. And yet, we were only able to find two such speakers.

### Disturbing tactics

Still, two is better than none. Or so we thought. Despite being extended multiple invitations to speak and, indeed, every courtesy, leading pro-hunting organisation the Countryside Alliance declined to speak and instead published a scathing attack on our speakers and symposium (Countryside Alliance, 2015).

Following this, our two pro-hunting speakers – one a paid consultant for the Countryside Alliance – both withdrew.

This followed a similar range of disturbing tactics, by other pro-hunting speakers and their organisations. One refused to speak unless provided double the time allotted to other speakers. Another made allegations about the criminal behaviour of an anti-hunting speaker and tried to get him banned.

We took this seriously, of course. But on investigating, we found those allegations to be grossly overstated. There was indeed criminal damage – to a field of cabbages and



Cecil the lion was killed by an American bow hunter at a national park in Zimbabwe.

IMAGE Daughter#3/Wikimedia Commons.

some roof tiles – about 30 years ago. And a horn was blown in the vicinity of a hunt. One of the subsequent convictions for these "criminal and harassing" actions was overturned on appeal.

Disturbingly, the potential speaker that tried to have this speaker banned was, and remains, a serving Conservative politician.

Two weeks prior to our symposium, pro-hunting website The Aldenham reported twice contacting a PhD student due to speak at our symposium on her research analysing hunting discourses (Thealdenham, 2015).

She cancelled her presentation at short notice, and around the same time The Aldenham published the bold headline "Hunting Symposium cancelled", presumably in the hope our audience would not turn up (Thealdenham, 2015).

Clearly, some leading sectors of the hunting community were extremely concerned about our symposium and willing to engage in some very disturbing tactics to try to silence their critics. And yet, a range of highly knowledgeable and, in some cases, eminent speakers, remained willing to deliver their presentations.

Speakers included animal law barrister Noel Sweeney, who provided a detailed analysis of the Hunting Act's effectiveness, while world-leading primatologist Jane Goodall gave a presentation on the impacts of hunting on chimpanzees, delivered by video.

Others included Toni Shepherd, an animal behaviourist from the League Against Cruel Sports, David Bowles from the RSPCA, and the author, as an animal welfare specialist. "Carpet baggers and snake oil salesmen" is how The Aldenham subsequently described those speakers who remained willing to speak (Thealdenham, 2015).

It is very revealing that instead of accepting repeated invitations to present and defend their arguments in an academic forum, the hunting

community instead chose to maliciously attack their opponents and attempted to undermine this symposium in a variety of ways. Needless to say, they did not succeed and the symposium was very successful overall.

To ensure our speakers can be heard as widely as possible, videos of their presentations are available via [www.winchester.ac.uk/huntingsymposium](http://www.winchester.ac.uk/huntingsymposium)

### References

- Benz-Schwarzburg J and Knight A (2011). Cognitive relatives yet moral strangers? *J Anim Ethics* 1(1): 9-36.
- Capecci C and Rogers K (2015). Killer of Cecil the lion finds out that he is a target now, of internet vigilantism. [www.nytimes.com/2015/07/30/us/cecil-the-lion-walter-palmer.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/30/us/cecil-the-lion-walter-palmer.html) (accessed 6 December 2015).
- Countryside Alliance (2015). Hunting the wrong debate. [www.countryside-alliance.org/hunting-the-wrong-debate](http://www.countryside-alliance.org/hunting-the-wrong-debate) (accessed 6 December 2015).
- International Fund for Animal Welfare, League Against Cruel Sports and the RSPCA. Trail Hunting. <http://huntingact.org/?q=node/61> (accessed 6 December 2015).
- Knight A (2015). Risks posed to wildlife by dog hunting packs: a case study from England in 2014. *Winchester Hunting Symposium*, University of Winchester.
- Nathan M (2015). David Cameron drops plans to relax fox hunting ban after SNP vowed to inflict first government defeat. [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/plans-to-relax-fox-hunting-ban-could-be-delayed-after-snp-vows-to-oppose-move-in-war-against-cameron-10387217.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/plans-to-relax-fox-hunting-ban-could-be-delayed-after-snp-vows-to-oppose-move-in-war-against-cameron-10387217.html) (accessed 6 December 2015).
- Proctor H (2012). Animal sentience: where are we and where are we heading? *Animals* 2(4): 628-639.
- Thealdenham (2015). J Barrington cancels appearance at hunting symposium and explains why. <https://thealdenham.wordpress.com/2015/11/13/hunting-symposium-cancelled/> (accessed 6 December 2015).
- University of Westminster (2015). Strategic Plan 2015-2020. [www.winchester.ac.uk/aboutus/Documents/04536%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf](http://www.winchester.ac.uk/aboutus/Documents/04536%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf) (accessed 6 December 2015).

**ANDREW KNIGHT** is a professor of animal welfare and ethics, a European and US veterinary specialist in animal welfare, director of the Centre for Animal Welfare at the University of Winchester and a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

