

WORLD

The World's Most Influential Animal Conservation Group Has Links To Trophy Hunters And The Fashion Industry

Who is the world's most important conservation organization really looking out for — endangered animals, or the people who want to pay big bucks to hunt them?

By Roberto Jurkschat



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GENEVA — Giraffes may well tower over all other animals in the natural world — but in the wild, their numbers are rapidly dwindling, and they are desperately in need of protection. The giraffe population in Africa has collapsed by 40% over the last three decades, with climate change and agricultural expansion the main factors.

In 2018, six African countries — the Central African Republic, Chad, Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Senegal — joined together to sound the alarm about this stark decline. They believed there was another threat the animals faced: the international trade in giraffe trophies and body parts.

You can, after all, buy giraffe heads as decorations for your home for around [\\$9,000 online](#), or pay for a craftsperson to stretch the animals' skin [into custom furniture](#). Giraffe brains meanwhile are used to make medicine, sold in some African countries as [supposed remedies for AIDS](#).

Representatives from the six African countries turned to a body they hoped would support their goals: the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), one of the world's largest and most influential conservation organizations.

They requested a scientific analysis of the situation from the IUCN, knowing a favorable expert opinion would greatly improve the chances of success of a joint motion to help protect giraffes from trophy hunters that they planned to submit to the organizers of the UN's World Wildlife Conference.

But several months later, the IUCN [concluded](#) that international trade in giraffe trophies did not present a decisive threat to the species.

The IUCN is widely recognized as the global leader on species conservation. Its huge network of 15,000 experts advise national governments on what endangered species deserve protection, and its headline-grabbing [Red List](#), published between every five and 10 years, is the world's most comprehensive account of which species are most at risk of extinction.

But an investigation by BuzzFeed News shows that trophy hunters and luxury fashion brands have been working for years to influence the IUCN, to expand the [billion-dollar trade](#) in endangered animal species.

Trophy hunting is big business — in the past decade 1.7 million hunting trophies were traded worldwide, and [according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare](#), 200,000 of those are believed to have come from endangered species.

[Advocates defend trophy hunting](#) as a way to fund conservation efforts that ultimately help the animals being hunted, even if they are already endangered. But critics say the benefits are exaggerated, and a convenient argument to make for those people who simply want to kill wild animals for sport. As an issue trophy hunting has been etched into the public consciousness since worldwide anger erupted over the killing of [Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe, by an American dentist](#) who had a permit.



A pamphlet showing an image of Cecil the lion, held at a vigil in central London on July 30, 2016.
Daniel Leal-olivas / Getty Images

BuzzFeed News has identified conflicts of interest within the IUCN, revealing the links that exist between IUCN member organizations and the trophy hunting and fashion industries. Meanwhile, some conservation experts have been shut out of the IUCN groups involved in the crucial decisions about which species should be classified as the most threatened.

BuzzFeed News has spoken to conservation experts worried about the influence trophy hunters have on IUCN policies; tracked flows of money from big game hunters to organizations with links to IUCN members; heard that experts were censured for speaking out against the leather trade; learned that efforts to support the protection of animals were suppressed by the IUCN; and seen an email sent from the account of an IUCN member asking trophy hunting lobbyists and rhino breeders to publicly support China for expanding the trade on tiger and rhino parts.

“IUCN is considered the world’s leading authority on science and species conservation, but when you look at the members who influence the organization, you have to question whether this status is still justified,” biologist Daniela Freyer of the German organization Pro Wildlife told BuzzFeed News.

In response to BuzzFeed News’ findings, the IUCN said its member organizations were screened before admission, and required to report potential conflicts of interest.

“The process through which IUCN policy is determined ensures that the Union’s policy is not unduly influenced,” a spokesperson said. “IUCN policy is determined democratically by its over 1,300 members at World Conservation Congresses. Neither IUCN Commission members nor staff can determine IUCN policy outside of that process.”

But how can an organization tasked with the monumental responsibility of global conservation decide which species deserve our protection when some of its members have numerous links with people who pay big money to hunt some of the world’s most threatened species, and those who want to harvest skins and furs for clothing?

A worker at a small shop that makes snakeskin purses and wallets dyes snakeskins in Comal, Indonesia, in March 2014.
Ed Wray / Getty Images

Explaining exactly what role the IUCN plays in wildlife conservation worldwide is a little complicated, but it’s essential to understanding how truly influential it is. Ready? Here goes!

Let’s start with one of the most prominent global conservation agreements, the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES.

The international treaty aims to ensure that global trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species in the wild. Almost every country in the world has agreed to abide by the convention’s rules.

Whenever member countries want to propose stricter protections of certain animal species by getting them “uplisted” in the CITES agreement, they typically approach the IUCN for scientific analysis, and the conservation NGO known as Traffic, just like the six African countries did when they wanted to increase

protection for giraffes.

Traffic, a monitoring network for wildlife trade, is a joint program of the IUCN and the World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF). Its website says that supporting the enforcement of CITES has been the NGO's "ongoing priority" since it was founded in 1976 and that it works to "ensure that international trade in wildlife remains at sustainable levels."

After the IUCN and Traffic publish their joint analyses, CITES-member countries vote for or against the proposals at the CITES Conference of the Parties, also known as the World Wildlife Conference, which takes place every three years.

There are 160 specialist groups in the IUCN, each focusing on a specific species or several similar species. It is these groups that prepare the analysis that is eventually presented to the World Wildlife Conference, where countries' representatives decide which endangered animals can be traded, and to what extent.

In an email to BuzzFeed News, a spokesperson for the UN-administered CITES Secretariat, which helps run the convention, said: "Governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, stakeholders, industry, academia, etc. are also free to express their opinions and disseminate information as they see fit and no 'rules' exist to govern such commentaries."

The rules decided at the World Wildlife Conference have huge ramifications for trophy hunters, the global food industry, and fashion companies that buy masses of skins and furs from endangered species.

The IUCN says it has clear rules that require members to report conflicts of interest, but potential conflicts are everywhere.

Julian Fennessy is a 46-year-old Australian biologist, director of an NGO called the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) based in Namibia, where he has lived for the past 20 years.

He is also the chair of the IUCN expert group for giraffes and okapis, which according to its own website "leads efforts to study giraffe, okapi and the threats they face, as well as leading and supporting conservation actions designed to ensure the survival of the two species into the future."

The GCF makes a lot of money from trophy hunters — its own website makes no secret of the fact that they are among the NGO's biggest sponsors. The foundation for the Dallas Safari Club, the largest hunting association in the world, has donated at least \$50,000 to the GCF, as has the Ivan Carter Wildlife Conservation Alliance, whose founder Ivan Carter has repeatedly promoted trophy hunting.

A giraffe at the Mashatu game reserve in Mapungubwe, Botswana.
Cameron Spencer / Getty Images

Fennessy said that these donations don't impact his work for the IUCN, where he is supposed to make objective decisions about the future of giraffe populations.

"GCF has never been nor will we ever be a mouthpiece for any supporter who provides assistance in helping us achieve our mandate to save giraffes in the wild in Africa through a science-based conservation approach," Fennessy wrote in an email to BuzzFeed News.

"I in my personal capacity or as Director of GCF have never received any payment to provide an IUCN recommendation of the giraffe proposal. Our views and conservation approach are science-based and this approach is applied to all aspects of our work."

Shane Mahoney, from Canada, is the chair of the North American IUCN group on "sustainable use and livelihoods." But he's a big game hunter too.

He's also a former member of the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) and the Dallas Safari Club, and currently is the director of a trophy hunting lobby group called Conservation Force.

Conservation Force states on its website that Mahoney attended an IUCN meeting in 2004 to lobby for African elephants to have their status on the Red List lowered from "endangered" to "vulnerable." On the page for his own personal pro-hunting initiative Conservation Visions, Mahoney poses with a rifle slung over his shoulder. The Dallas Safari Club gave financial support to Conservation Visions in 2017 and 2018. In 2017, Mahoney spoke at the hunting club's annual meeting, where he said that the Dallas Safari Club was "the real deal" when it came to species conservation.

When contacted by BuzzFeed News, Mahoney said he had never witnessed an IUCN decision being unduly influenced. "I have never witnessed, nor have I ever been approached by anyone or any organization to try and unduly influence the decisions, policies or actions of IUCN, nor would I do so, and nor would I tolerate such behaviour," he said via email.

Conservation Force's president, John Jackson III, has fought several attempts to protect white rhinos, classified on the Red List as "near threatened". According to the group's own website, Jackson has prevented stricter protections of lions and North American desert sheep, and has filed at least a dozen challenges to the US Endangered Species Act, to lower the bar for importing hunting trophies.

In an interview with BuzzFeed News at the World Wildlife Conference in Geneva last summer, Jackson, 73, said he has killed elephants, lions, leopards, African buffalo, and rhinos: animals that big game hunters refer to as the "big five." He also has a stuffed polar bear at home, he said.

The IUCN's relationship with big game hunters has been a major concern for some wildlife experts for years.

"Internally, the influence of trophy hunters has long been the subject of debate within the IUCN," said Freyer of the Pro Wildlife organization in Munich. "The hunting associations repeatedly commission studies to be produced whenever a species comes into the focus of conservationists. In the IUCN, there are also critical voices, but they are not always welcomed."

According to a report from the UK-based Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting, members of the Conservation Force in the IUCN are currently concentrating on the promotion of the hunting of leopards and lions. Lion hunting is controversial because, according to the IUCN's own data, the number of lions in Africa shrunk by 43% between 1993 and 2014. In recent years, the trade in trophies and lion bones for traditional Chinese medicine has increased significantly. The IUCN estimates that only about 20,000 lions now live in Africa.

It's not just the big five that conservationists worry about, however.

In 2018, China lifted a 25-year moratorium on the trade of tiger and rhino body parts, which are highly valued in traditional Chinese medicine. China's actions were praised by Hank Jenkins, who runs a consulting company in Australia called Creative Conservation Solutions, and is also a member of the IUCN's expert group on crocodiles.

BuzzFeed News has obtained an email sent from Jenkins' account in which recipients were asked to support the "bold decision taken by China to try a new approach to conserving tigers and rhinoceros." The 21 people the email was sent to included the owner of one of the world's biggest rhino farms, and other trophy hunting advocates. The email said that Jenkins had been asked by an acquaintance in the Chinese government to reach out to his network.

Obtained by BuzzFeed News

Three days after the email was sent, Jenkins praised the Chinese government's actions as a "ray of hope for tigers and rhinos" [in an article published online](#).

Jenkins told BuzzFeed News that he did not send the 2018 email in question, describing it as "clearly a fabrication."

"I can assure you there is no foundation to the allegations which I consider are defamatory and have the potential to impact adversely on my character and profession," he said via email.

Days later, amid international outcry over the impact its decision would have on tigers and rhinos, endangered in the wild, [China reversed its decision](#).

There are more potential conflicts of interest. Dietrich Jelden was a department head at Germany's Federal Agency for Nature Conservation until 2016. Since retiring, he has acted as a lobbyist for the CIC hunting association and campaigned against the protection of giraffes. He's also [still a member](#) of the IUCN expert group on crocodiles. In an email to BuzzFeed News, he said he had no conflict of interest, was not a trophy hunter, does not receive any money from the CIC, and acted out of conviction only.

Grahame Webb.
Roberto Jurkschat / BuzzFeed News

Grahame Webb has led the IUCN expert group on crocodiles for decades — he also owns a vast crocodile farm in Australia, where eggs are collected from wild nests. Up until two years ago, Webb told BuzzFeed News, he sold crocodile skins to brands such as Louis Vuitton. Webb said he had never made a profit from the sale of crocodile skins, and that the sales merely financed conservation efforts. He said that selling crocodile products was the "best way" to preserve the reptiles and their habitats. He said the skins he sold to Louis Vuitton and Hermès, among others, hold a CITES certificate, while crocodiles are classified as "least concern" on the Red List.

When asked how many of its 15,000 experts reported possible conflicts of interest, the IUCN declined to respond, saying that experts were chosen solely on the basis of their expertise, not the organizations they represent.

The red tegu.
Obtained by BuzzFeed News

Sabine and Thomas Vinke are German herpetologists who moved to Paraguay in 2004. They have written 160 texts in journals and published eight books. They even present a weekly TV program, *Paraguay Salvaje*, or *Wild Paraguay*.

Since moving to Paraguay, the Vinkes have been campaigning for better protection for the red tegu, a lizard that lives in the Gran Chaco forest in Paraguay and Argentina, a fragile ecosystem threatened by the spread of livestock farming. Every year, about 150,000 red tegus are caught for the leather industry, killed, skinned, and shipped to Europe.

The Vinkes believe that the red tegu is endangered, and that trade should be prohibited, or at least severely restricted. But their attempts to protect red tegus have been beset with difficulties.

Under the terms of CITES, the global conservation treaty, the less endangered a species is on paper, the more skins and body parts are available on the market. Therefore, when a species is classified as more endangered, it can cost the fashion industry millions.

In September 2014, the Vinkes submitted a motion to the IUCN to establish a new expert group, with the ultimate goal of working out how the red tegu should be categorized on the Red List. A written agreement, seen by BuzzFeed News, to form such a group already existed, so things should have been straightforward. The agreement carries the signature of Simon Stuart, who in 2014 was the head of the IUCN Species Survival Commission.

LETTER OF AGREEMENT
between the
IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC)
and the
Co-Chair of the Whiptail and Tegu Specialist Group Specialist Group

I, **Sabine Vinke**, have read the formal letter of appointment and the accompanying Terms of Reference for IUCN Species Survival Commission Specialist Group and Task Force Chairs (2013–2016). To the extent possible within available resources, I agree to meet the responsibilities and deliverables described therein and to contribute towards delivering on the objectives of the IUCN Species Strategic Plan (2013–2016).

I further agree to ensure that all activities of the Whiptail and Tegu Specialist Group Specialist Group conform to IUCN and SSC policies.

I understand that the SSC Chair and Steering Committee will periodically review the production of deliverables from Specialist Group/Task Force Chairs and that, in the case that these deliverables have not been produced, the SSC Chair may find this sufficient cause to remove Chairs or dissolve Groups, as appropriate.

This agreement will be effective from the date signed and will remain in force until the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2016, unless terminated by either party in writing before that time. Any amendment to this agreement will only be made on the basis of a written agreement signed by both parties.

Signed by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Stuart'.

Simon Stuart
Chair
IUCN Species Survival Commission

14 October, 2014

Signed by

Sabine Vinke
Co-Chair
IUCN SSC Whiptail and Tegu
Specialist Group

Date:

But Sabine Vinke said that immediately after they submitted the request to establish the expert group their efforts were battled by what she described as the leather lobby in the IUCN — members pushing the idea that trade in reptile skins was the best way to protect certain species.

The Vinkes said Stuart also put roadblocks in their way.

He wrote to them in 2014 to say that several IUCN scientists had expressed concern about the creation of an expert group centered on red tegus. “I would be grateful if you could hold off on appointing any members of the new specialist group or launching any other specialist group activities until we have had a chance to speak,” Stuart wrote in an email seen by BuzzFeed News.

Obtained by BuzzFeed News

Sabine Vinke said that in a subsequent phone call, Stuart told them to stop messing with the leather industry. She said he told them to give up the specialist group. “He was very angry and urged us to resign,” she said.

When contacted by BuzzFeed News, Stuart said that he could not remember the phone call with Sabine Vinke in detail, but denied threatening them. “They are not the sort of things that I would have said.” Stuart, who worked for the IUCN for 30 years, said that the Vinkes voluntarily stopped their attempt to form the group, and that he himself thinks it would be helpful for such a group to be set up. Stuart completed his tenure as chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission in 2016 after eight years in the role. The 63-year-old is now director of the Synchronicity Earth charity in London.

Sabine and Thomas Vinke
Obtained by BuzzFeed News

Years later, in June 2019, the Vinkes published a long-term study in a peer-reviewed journal on the distribution of red tegus, concluding that the lizard population had declined considerably, principally due to deforestation causing habitat loss. Shortly after the study was published, the Vinkes were expelled from the IUCN expert group they were still members of, which specialized in boas and pythons.

In a letter, seen by BuzzFeed News, the group’s chair Tomás Waller told the Vinkes that he doubted their data, and that their anti-trade attitude was not in line with the work of the IUCN.

“You have been very clearly working for your own agenda, a radical anti-use, anti-trade one, very afar from the objectives and vision of IUCN,” Waller wrote. (In some conservation circles, the phrase “anti-use” refers to an opposition to making money from wild animals.)



To the attention of:
Thomas Vinke
Sabine Vinke
(via email)

Buenos Aires, July 6th, 2019

Dear Thomas and Sabine Vinke,

Although quite unusual in the professional world, at this time I am addressing you together, since this has been the way you yourselves have chosen to work.

For a long time now, I and other colleagues of the BPSG have been putting up with certain behaviors from you that have now reached a point of significant gravity. Please allow me to remind you that it was I, when I became the BPSG Chair, who invited you to join the group. I did so in the belief that being based in Paraguay and because of your conservationist formation and interest in reptiles, you would be able to contribute to our work.

Unfortunately, I was wrong. Not only have you not produced any significant contribution to the group, but to the contrary, you have been very clearly working for your own agenda, a radical anti-use, anti-trade one, very far from the objectives and vision of IUCN.

In past years, you have fostered serious conflicts with the Paraguayan authorities and with officials whom we hold in high regard. It is clear to me, and to several of our colleagues in Paraguay, that you have failed to build a positive, constructive relation with stakeholders in the country that has so generously received you.

I am particularly concerned about how far you are decided to go in your quest to promote IUCN Red List categories of high threat for different species, with no supporting data or valid arguments and with total disregard to the damage that such an approach will cause on the credibility of this valuable and internationally recognized instrument.

In this regard, your publication on the supposed decline of red tegus in their range States is simply unacceptable. Colleagues who have read it coincide in pointing out the lack of data, the poor science and the obvious sources of like-minded radicals like yourselves. The aim is crystal-clear and I must now tell you that this IUCN/SSC Group will not serve as a platform for the launching of such unfounded concepts. You even include a statement in a recent email on this paper, which needs to be brought up here:

"We have been impressed by the reactions of authorities and decision makers respectively advisers regarding leather trade. Particularly authorities criticized that the article will not result in a category of threat in the Red-Listing process. Furthermore, it had been mentioned that IUCN-SSC in general shows a lack of distance to leather trade, especially the BPSG and Natusch/Waller had been mentioned."

I will not go into a detailed analysis of the paper itself at this time, but it is easy to analyze and any scientist can detect its serious flaws in a short time. Really, a lack of respect for colleagues who have worked with the species for many years and now have to waste their valuable time in refuting your biased arguments

Executive Office: Fundación Biodiversidad - Argentina

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Waller told BuzzFeed News that he had excluded the Vinkes from the expert group because they had not contributed anything to its work. Furthermore, he said the "attitude and ideology" of the Vinkes was incompatible with the IUCN.

"As distasteful as it may seem to some people, there is strong evidence that allowing local communities to sustainably utilize wildlife resources is a proven way to ensure species and habitat conservation — as well as derive important livelihood opportunities to people and ensure the conservation of important indigenous culture," Waller wrote in an email.

In early December 2018, the luxury brand Chanel declared it would no longer process the skins of exotic animals. [Chanel's president Bruno Pavlovsky](#) said it had become difficult for the company to trace exactly where reptile skins had come from.

Just three days after Chanel's announcement, an online fashion magazine published an article entitled "[Why Chanel's Exotic Skins Ban Is Wrong](#)." The authors of the article were all members of the IUCN, including Webb, the head of the IUCN group on crocodiles, and Waller.

Fred Bercovitch
Obtained by BuzzFeed News

Fred Bercovitch is one of the most renowned giraffe experts in the world and a member of the IUCN [specialist group on giraffes and okapis](#). The 67-year-old American is director of the San Antonio-based Save the Giraffes, and has taught as a professor at universities in Japan and South Africa.

When the IUCN/Traffic analysis requested by the six African countries was published anonymously on the CITES website in March 2019, he set out to find out who the authors were, [believing](#) their recommendation that the trade in giraffe parts did not represent a threat to the animal's future was wrong — it did not matter whether it was the most important factor, what mattered was that the [giraffe population was shrinking](#) overall.

"I asked half a dozen people from our specialist group, but nobody knew who the authors were. And most of them disagreed scientifically with the IUCN analysis," he told BuzzFeed News. "I don't know anybody who was asked for his opinion before the analysis had been finalized."

A month before the IUCN/Traffic analysis was published, Bercovitch learned that seven conservation NGOs had sent a letter supporting the African countries' motion to protect giraffes to the IUCN specialist group on giraffes and okapis. However, the letter had never been passed on to experts like Bercovitch.

BuzzFeed News has obtained a copy of the letter, which cited scientific data showing that from 2006 to 2015, more than 3,800 giraffe trophies were delivered to the US alone. The letter was addressed to the expert group's chair, the Australian biologist Fennessy.



February 5, 2019

Dear Members of the IUCN Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group,

The undersigned organizations thank you for your work on behalf of giraffes and for sounding the alarm about the on-going silent extinction of this species.

We write to urge you to support the proposal submitted by Central African Republic, Chad, Kenya, Mali, Niger and Senegal to list the giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) on Appendix II under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).¹ This proposal will be considered at the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP18) to CITES, which will be held in Sri Lanka from 23 May – 3 June 2019.

Beyond our shared concern over declining giraffe populations, our organizations have worked on CITES matters for decades and seek to provide you with our views on why a CITES Appendix II listing is an essential component to preventing the extinction of giraffes.

Indeed, we are aware that members of the IUCN Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group (GOSG) may be involved in reviewing this proposal as part of the IUCN/TRAFFIC analysis of species proposals to be considered at CITES CoP18. We would like to ensure that you have all the information you may find useful in conducting an informed review including, but not limited to, international trade data for giraffe.

We understand that the GOSG has not identified international trade as one of the primary threats to giraffes. However, as explained below, international trade does not have to be a primary threat to a species for it to qualify for listing on CITES Appendix II. Often, international trade may act synergistically with primary threats to negatively impact wildlife populations. Moreover, a listing on Appendix II does not result in a trade ban. Rather, Appendix II listing would result in regulation of international trade. Currently, most international giraffe trade is occurring without regulation for conservation purposes.

This letter explains why the giraffe meets the CITES criteria for listing on Appendix II, and what it would mean in terms of regulation of international giraffe trade if the proposal is adopted. We stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

I. About CITES

CITES is a United Nations treaty signed and ratified by 183 countries (or "Parties").² It aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. The treaty has three Appendices:

¹ https://cites.org/secretariat/working/18thCoP/2019/02/19_dfc_CoP18-Proc_draftGiraffeCamelopardalis.pdf
² <https://cites.org/>

In an interview with BuzzFeed News, Fennessy defended the IUCN/Traffic analysis and said he did not know who wrote it. However, an IUCN paper identifies Fennessy as a reviewer of the analysis. An IUCN spokesperson clarified in an email, "At least one member of the core team was in direct contact with each reviewer, or was copied into correspondence with each reviewer."

At the World Wildlife Conference in Geneva in August 2019, Bercovitch, at the request of the delegation from Chad, made the momentous decision to speak out against the IUCN. It was the first time he had ever done so. In a 10-minute presentation, he made a strong plea for the protection of giraffes. "When I finished my presentation some people from the IUCN were looking at me as if they thought, *Who the hell is this guy?*"

But, the professor's appeal worked, and delegates sided with the six African countries, voting 106–21 against the IUCN recommendation. The international trade in giraffe parts would now be controlled for the first time ever.

Such victories for trophy hunting critics are extremely rare, however. In 2017, the IUCN Council, the union's governing body, was faced with a dilemma. The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) had applied to join as an IUCN member organization, but the NGO was explicitly against trophy hunting in all forms. Trophy hunting advocates in the IUCN Council had serious concerns and argued that it would be impossible to build consensus within the IUCN if any member organization refused to recognize trophy hunting as a valuable conservation tool. The IUCN Council was split, some councilors sided with the IFAW position.

So the IUCN Council commissioned an internal report it hoped would settle the dispute between trophy hunters and their critics, to finally clarify what position IUCN should take.

Responsibility for producing the report eventually fell to the chair of the IUCN's specialist ethics group, a German lawyer called Klaus Bosselmann.

Klaus Bosselmann
Gottfried Boehnke

Bosselmann put together a team of six experts who worked on the report for half a year. By October 2017, it was ready, and its conclusion was truly explosive.

"The crucial question is whether trophy hunting, as practised by individuals and promoted by certain hunting organisations, is compatible with the general objectives of the IUCN. This is clearly not the case," the report said.

"Any other view would jeopardise the credibility of IUCN for moral and ethical leadership in conservation policy."

Before the finished report was forwarded to the IUCN Council, however, trophy hunting advocates in the IUCN were given the chance to have their say first. The chair of the IUCN's Governance and Constituency Committee (GCC), Jennifer Mohamed-Katerere invited members of the sustainable use and livelihoods specialist group to address the GCC on the issue, emails seen by BuzzFeed News show. The sustainable use and livelihoods group, which Canadian hunter Mahoney is vice-chair of, strongly promotes the "advantages" of what its members call "sustainable trophy hunting."

In a statement to BuzzFeed News, Mohamed-Katerere said she had encouraged "full and transparent debate on all issues that come before the committee."

She said she invited speakers "with different perspectives on the issue and gave them equal time to address the GCC. The aim of the expert session was for all the speakers to bring their insights on these issues to the GCC meeting. The objective was to enrich the understanding of the committee members." (IFAW was ultimately admitted as an IUCN member in November 2017.)

It would not be until September 2019, almost two years later, that the IUCN finally published the [complete findings of Bosselmann's team](#). But then, after media interest, the report was suddenly removed from the IUCN website. Three days later, it was restored, but with "further information" added — the IUCN had attached page-long statements from supporters of trophy-hunting.

[In an official statement](#) released around the same time, the IUCN officially disassociated itself from Bosselmann's report, which, the union said, was only an "opinion," and not the view of the organization, despite it being issued by its own ethics group.

An IUCN spokesperson told BuzzFeed News, "the document is referred to as an opinion because it is in fact an opinion."

Bosselmann, who teaches in New Zealand and has been the director of the New Zealand Centre for Environmental Law for 20 years, was nevertheless pleased that his team's report had finally seen the light of day. "I've received a veritable flood of emails from several members of the IUCN and many organizations with acknowledgements," he wrote in an email to BuzzFeed News last year after the report was finally published.

In June 2020, the IUCN World Conservation Congress will take place in Marseille, France. The quadrennial congress is the world's largest conservation event, dwarfing even the World Wildlife Conference. It's an opportunity for members to vote on new principles to guide the work of IUCN.

After Bosselmann's report was published, eight IUCN member organizations submitted a motion requesting that the World Conservation Congress recognize its conclusions as IUCN principles.

But last November, the IUCN committee responsible for deciding which topics proposed by member organizations are actually discussed at the congress rejected the motion. That means the next time a resolution on trophy hunting can be debated at the IUCN is 2024.

Mark Jones of the Born Free Foundation, one of the eight organizations that wanted the Bosselmann report recognized, told BuzzFeed News, "I am personally saddened that the IUCN, an organisation that purports to be the 'global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it', seems to be so heavily influenced by trophy hunting proponents with vested interests in exploiting wildlife for financial gain."●

Opening image: Cameron Spencer / Getty Images

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