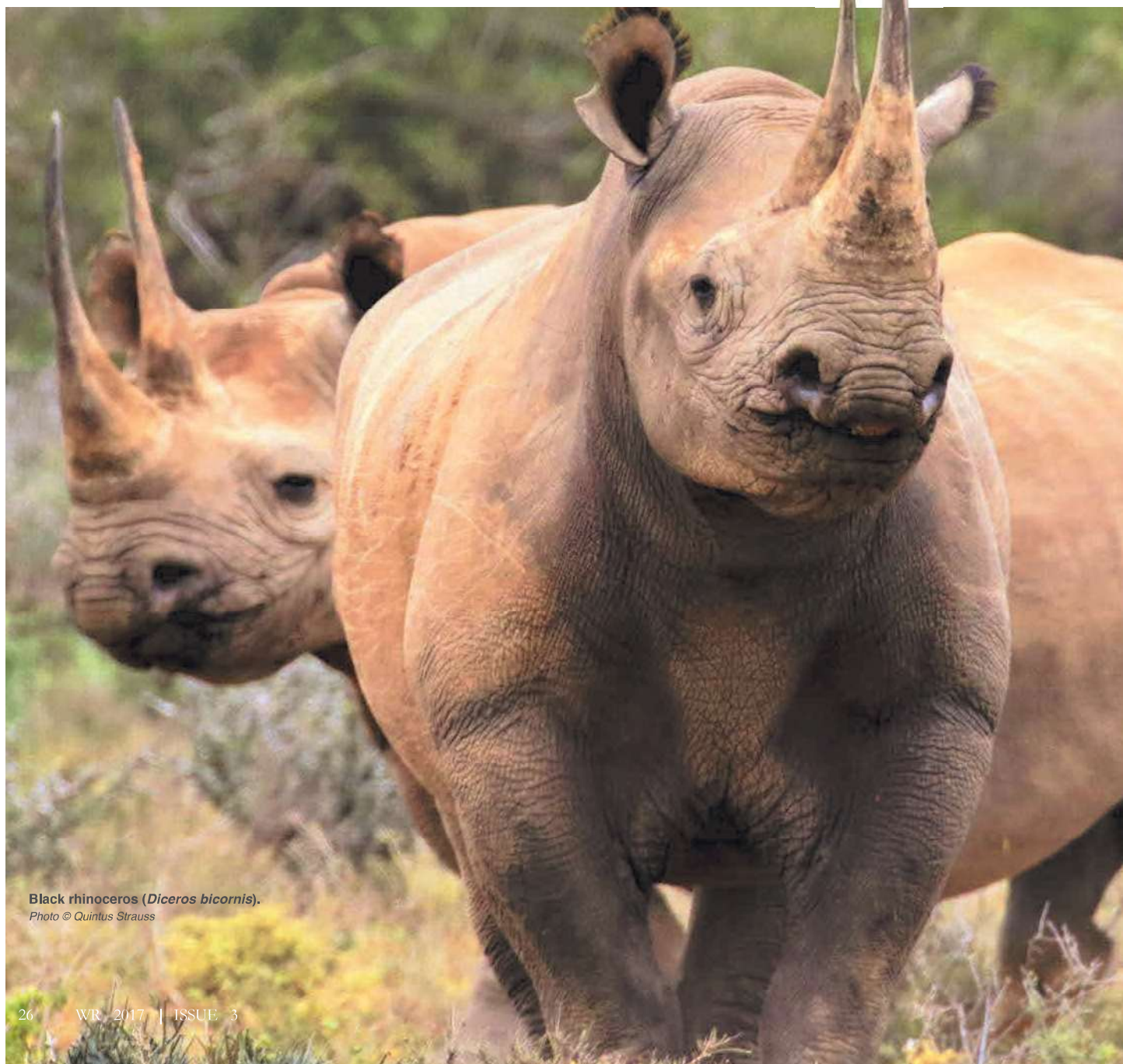


INDUSTRY & AUCTIONS

Producing THE WILD

by Michael 't Sas-Rolfes



Black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*).
Photo © Quintus Strauss



Michael 't Sas-Rolfes

“Production of live animal stocks remains only one part of the industry’s potential production portfolio: much of the remaining potential lies in capturing the elements of wildness that scientists – and the market – increasingly value.”

Wildlife ranchers are, first and foremost, producers. But what exactly do they produce?

Perceptions of the industry vary, both within it and from an outsider’s perspective. Some see ranchers as playing a vital role in conserving biodiversity, maintaining and even restoring free-ranging populations of certain species, natural landscapes and important ecological processes. Others perceive them as commercially driven farmers, exploiting and genetically manipulating animals harvested from the wild while modifying natural ecosystems in ways that are incompatible with broader conservation objectives. To some extent, both views may be valid, depending on specific circumstances, but what is the overall contribution of the industry to nature and human society?

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This question has attracted much attention recently, especially in the wake of concerns over increasingly intensive and selective breeding of rare and commercially valuable species such as buffalo, rhino, roan, sable, lions and various colour variants. Most recently, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) has taken an interest in this issue, seeking to understand the production side of the industry – both its present and potential future contribution to the green economy. SANBI researchers are currently accumulating and processing information for South Africa's next National Biodiversity Assessment, a comprehensive report that guides future policy. To this end, they are interested in understanding the various facets of the wildlife industry and whether they can be categorised in useful ways.

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Thinking about ways to categorise the industry points to ways of thinking about production. The 2015 ABSA report ‘Game Ranch Profitability in South Africa’ emphasises the profitability and revenue generated by four classes of commercial activity within the industry, often referred to as the ‘four pillars’ of wildlife ranching, namely husbandry (breeding and live sales), hunting (trophy and biltong), ecotourism and game products. The report’s authors, Professors Flippie

Sable antelope (*Hippotragus niger*) breeding bull, ‘TILMAN’.
Photo courtesy Thaba Tholo.



▲ African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) breeding bull, ‘INALA’. Photo courtesy Thaba Tholo.

Cloete, Peet van der Merwe and Melville Saayman, view the industry through a conventional economic lens, and therefore focus on market prices, turnover and economic multipliers within those four categories. However, adopting this approach does not necessarily provide the full picture of wildlife industry production.

Other recent assessments of the industry consider broader social and environmental concerns that are on the minds of many conservationists



and policy-makers. One example is a 2016 Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) report, authored by Drs. Andrew Taylor, Harriet Davies-Mostert and Peter Lindsey, who view the industry from their perspective as conservation scientists. Their report – and others – highlight ecological concerns such as potential impacts on species composition and genetics, undesirable levels of predator persecution, habitat fragmentation and land degradation through overstocking of enclosed areas. These factors, which may be associated with some intensive breeding practices, are all thought to undermine national conservation objectives.



▼ Black wildebeest or white-tailed gnu (*Connochaetes gnou*).

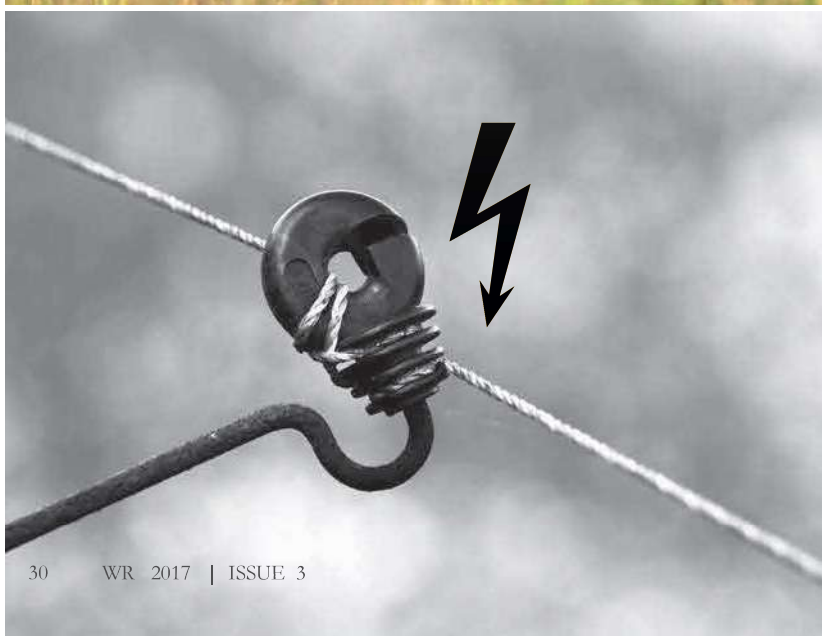


Another way of thinking about these ecological concerns is in terms of 'wildness'. In a 2011 article in the academic journal 'Bioscience', a group of scientists led by Kent Redford asks the question "What does it mean to successfully conserve a (vertebrate) species?" The authors argue that successful species conservation means "maintaining multiple populations across the range of the species in representative ecological settings, with replicate populations in each setting". They go on to say that such populations should be

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"self-sustaining, healthy, and genetically robust – and therefore resilient to climate and other environmental changes". They go on to explain in detail what they mean by each of these terms and then present a spectrum of states from 'captive-managed' to 'self-sustaining' to measure success. In other words, they effectively equate conservation success with a notion of wildness.

Redford's group does not take account of commercial approaches to wildlife management and how this might impact on species, ecosystems and their wildness. Consequently, a group of South African scientists, led by Matthew Child from SANBI, has worked on a more detailed way to evaluate the issue of wildness as





▲ White rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*).

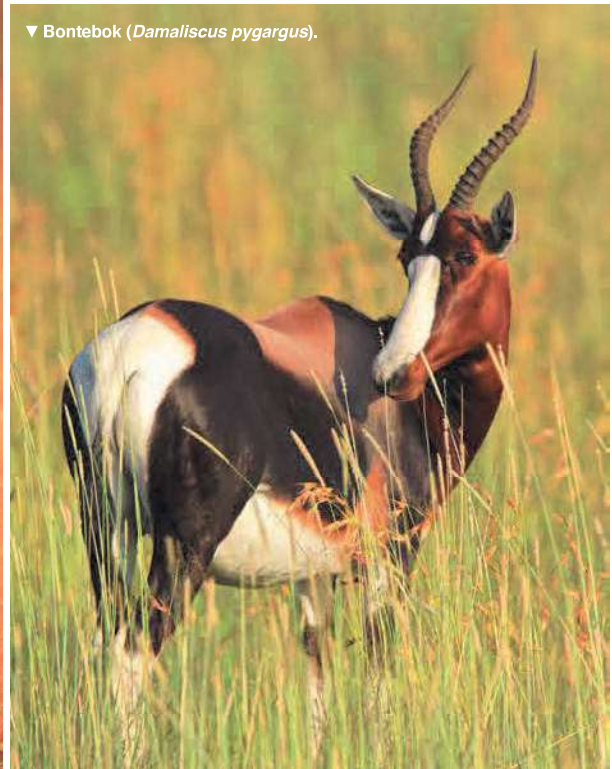
it relates to large mammal species. Although the results of this work have yet to be published, the level of analysis is sophisticated and was convincing enough to be successfully used in the assessment that led to last year's CITES downlisting of the Cape mountain zebra. It seems that scientists consider that sufficient numbers of Cape mountain zebra on private land have conservation value.

Market demand and prices in recent decades have motivated wildlife ranchers to produce – or in other words, breed – live stocks of rare animals. In this regard, the industry has been hugely successful: not only have numbers of several previously endangered species such

as the bontebok, white rhino, black wildebeest and Cape mountain zebra fared impressively under private management, but even rare colour variants are being produced to the point where they may no longer be rare. The industry is also able to provide increasing stocks of valued trophy animals, thereby generating economic value, creating jobs and

potentially reducing unwanted excess hunting pressure on wild populations elsewhere in Africa. But production of live animal stocks remains only one part of the industry's potential production portfolio: much of the remaining potential lies in capturing the elements of wildness that scientists – and the market – increasingly value.

▼ Bontebok (*Damaliscus pygargus*).



▼ Cape mountain zebra (*Equus zebra zebra*).
Photos © EcoPrint





Lion (*Panthera leo*).
Photo © Quintus Strauss

The potential scope of increasing both the quantity and quality of wildlife production is illustrated by some noticeable trends in consumer markets. For example, among hunters, there is clear evidence of strong demand for ‘fair chase’ hunting of animals in what is perceived as a wilder environment. Several national and international hunting organisations are establishing certification systems to discourage put-and-take practices involving captive-bred animals such as lions. And statistics show strong growth in Namibia’s trophy hunting industry while South Africa’s appears to be declining – allegedly at least in part because Namibia is perceived to offer a ‘wilder’ hunting experience.

Similar trends are evident in ecotourism, with increasing premiums being charged for destinations that are perceived as more remote and wild.

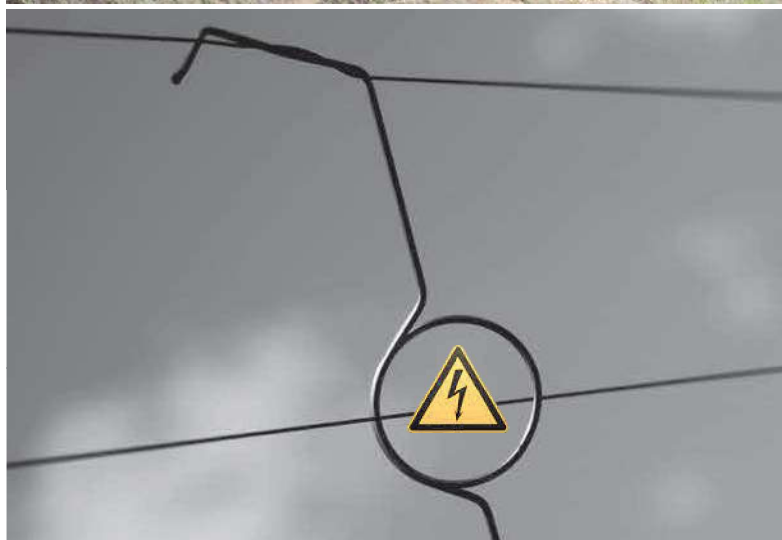
In the wildlife products industry, the future of game meat will be determined by the extent to which producers and processors can walk a fine line between meeting health and safety standards and satisfying growing consumer demand for animal protein sources that are considered as free-range, humanely harvested and free from unwanted antibiotics, hormones and artificial feed. Also, an interesting research study recently released by the International Trade Centre reveals that rhino-horn

consumers in Vietnam would prefer to buy horns that are non-lethally harvested, but from ‘wild’ animals rather than those that are ‘farmed’. As international NGOs continue to engage with consumers in overseas markets, we can expect tastes and preferences to shift toward sources that are perceived as ethical and sustainable. This trend points the way toward future opportunities for entrepreneurial wildlife ranchers.

As a final desirable by-product of ‘wilder’ production methods, ranchers can provide for the growing evident public demand for ecosystem services: soil conservation, improved water catchment management, biodiversity conservation in



“The next frontier – and opportunity – for wildlife ranchers will be the production of an enhanced suite of economically desirable goods and services within landscapes and systems that can credibly carry the label of ‘wild’.”



intact natural habitats and associated climate-change resilience. Recent trends to focus on producing specimens of commercially desirable species have not been in vain and animal husbandry will remain a mainstay of the industry, but it seems clear that the demand for wildness and natural landscapes is robust and likely to increase, especially if growing human populations and land conversion elsewhere in Africa continue to reduce the overall availability of natural habitat. The next frontier – and opportunity – for wildlife ranchers will be the production of an enhanced suite of economically desirable goods and services within landscapes and systems that can credibly carry the label of ‘wild’.