



OUR RESOURCES OUR RIGHTS

March 17, 2021

Dear Governor Lamont

SB 925: Urgent appeal to enable conservation and uphold human rights in Africa

As Chairperson of the Community Leaders Network, which represents millions of rural people in 9 countries in Southern Africa, the majority of whom live below the poverty line, I am urgently appealing to you to assist us by preventing the undermining of our globally recognized conservation efforts and our basic human right to sustainably use the natural resources on which our communities' livelihoods depend.

We understand that the Connecticut Legislature is considering legislation, SB 5104, that will ban the import, sale and possession of items from legally hunted African species in the misguided belief that this will enhance the conservation of these species. Without an exemption for legally hunted trophies, **SB 925 will have devastating consequences not only for conservation and our livelihoods but will also undermine our human right** to sustainably manage our natural resources, a right clearly recognized in international and national law.

As African's, we share with Americans a passion for wildlife conservation. It is a way of life for us and is deeply ingrained in our culture, traditions and rural economies. But without markets for high value, low impact hunting, we will not be able to sustain conservation or feed our children.

We take this opportunity to share our perspectives and realities and ensure that our voice informs decision making that affects our lives. Successful conservation must start with those of us who live alongside dangerous large animals. During colonial times, European colonists removed our rights to manage and benefit from these animals, and in many instances forcefully evicted us from our lands, often to make way for protected areas. This led to dramatic loss of wildlife and habitat – a disaster for conservation, our traditions and our livelihoods. Post-independent governments restored our rights, integrating wildlife into rural economies through inclusive conservation approaches. This provides us with socio-economic incentives to live with and sustainably manage our wildlife.

Whilst it varies from country to country: 50 – 90% of these economic incentives come from sustainable, regulated, humane and scientifically verified hunting methods. This has led, in southern African countries, to increasing wildlife populations and habitat expansion, in stark contrast to other regions in the world where biodiversity loss and habitat destruction accelerate at disastrous rates.

Although many view elephants, lions and other wildlife through a romantic, idealized lens, our daily reality of living with these valued, yet dangerous animals, requires more pragmatism. We worry daily that our children may be killed on their way to school, or that our ability to provide for our families will be destroyed within a few hours by elephants in our fields or large predators among our livestock. Some facts for consideration:

- In Zimbabwe, at least 30 people were killed by elephants in 2019, in 2020 the number of deaths increased.
- In Botswana, elephants killed 36 people in 2018, injured dozens more and destroyed the livelihoods of thousands.
- Just a few days ago, a 4 year old girl was killed by a crocodile in Zimbabwe and her 10 year old sister seriously injured.

Likewise in all our countries, similar incidents occur and escalate year by year as wildlife numbers increase. Despite this, elephants, lions and other animals live amongst us – not only in protected areas - and are multiplying because we want them to. Hunting is the key component that makes wildlife valuable to us. The consequences of ignoring or failing to encourage and incentivize community involvement in conservation in social contexts steeped in poverty are all too familiar to us. The harsh reality is that if incentives for us to conserve and share our land with wildlife are removed, their future in Southern Africa will be as bleak as that of large predators that were once plentiful in other parts of the world.

We appreciate that for those many people not familiar with the realities of rural Africa, hunting may seem a counter-intuitive conservation strategy. But if the objective is conservation – not solely recognizing individual animal rights – it is necessary to understand the context of coexisting with dangerous wildlife. Consider our perspectives, evidence base, and success stories from a conservation method that recognizes the basic human right of our peoples to manage and benefit from the sustainable use of our natural resources. If we cannot feed our families through humane and sustainable use of wildlife, we will have no option but to adopt land use practices that will destroy our beautiful natural landscapes and exterminate our treasured wild animals – an all too familiar situation throughout the world.

It will be no news to you that many of our countries are not wealthy or endowed with rich resources. One of those which we do have, wildlife, is demonstrably managed responsibly and sustainably. We are tired of people from elsewhere, far removed from our realities, talking on our behalf, misrepresenting our success and dismissing these as ‘myths’ as many campaigns in the US do.

We are an integral part of the solution to illegal wildlife trade, poaching and unsustainable use of biodiversity. It is disappointing that while animal protectionist campaigns – which

we do not confuse with the valued conservation efforts of many conservation organisations - to stop hunting have raised enormous sums of money, we have yet to see evidence of those funds conserving African wildlife or benefiting any of our communities in their role as custodians of that wildlife. What and who do these campaigns benefit? Their impact will be to remove our incentives to manage and live side by side with wildlife. Imposing worldviews and value systems from faraway places, results in disastrous policies that undermine our rights and conservation success.

We welcome international interest and support for conservation in our countries. Indeed, the international community has been instrumental in our success to date through significant investment over 35 years in our Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programmes. Such support has been forthcoming from the US and multi-lateral institutions such as the UN, along with conservation organisations such as WWF and IUCN.

We respectfully request that you hear our voices. Our conservation successes and lived realities are not 'myths'. We trust that you will agree that our human right to sustainably manage the natural resources on which we rely for our livelihoods should not be negotiable. Anything less is to put the rights of animals before the rights of African's.

I write this letter at a time when we trust it will have particular resonance as throughout the world there is increasing acknowledgement of the need to address past and present wrongs stemming from racism, social and environmental injustice, structural inequalities and imposition of Western values and belief systems based on privilege. Black lives matter, everywhere.

Yours sincerely

Maxi Louis
Chairperson, Community Leaders Network
On behalf of the [Community Leaders Network](#)

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