



Safari Club International convention peddles hunts of endangered and imperiled species

Undercover investigation documents lion, rhino and elephant hunts being offered for sale at the world's largest gathering of trophy hunters with a kill-them-while-you-still-can sales pitch



Overview

According to Safari Club International, 853 exhibitors posted up in the convention center to offer hunts and products of threatened and endangered species in a la carte “menus.” While such hunts and sales may be legal, they drive demand for animal parts and products, and pose a serious animal welfare concern since trophy hunts often lead to prolonged animal suffering when animals are wounded—even for hours—before the hunters can get a kill shot.

The hunting trips were romanticized and often advertised as all-inclusive luxury. One vendor offered the “Roosevelt experience,” another promised an experience “just like the movie *Out of Africa*.” One could visit a new country, see a museum, take a city tour, kill a majestic animal and follow it all up with a wine tasting—normalizing the recreational killing of wildlife as if it were another tourist attraction. In addition to the trophy hunts being offered, the convention was sprinkled with vendors selling fur coats, hats, scarves, taxidermy, purses and jewelry—all made from animal parts—and attendees were entertained by performances from various musicians.

This year, the convention was marketed toward women and children with ads focused on female attendance and participation and youth evening events.

SCI’s annual conventions are some of the world’s largest sales and promotion events for the trophy hunting industry, and they serve as a key revenue generator. This year’s convention is expected to generate about \$6 million for SCI. The funds contribute to its lobbying efforts to protect trophy hunting interests and roll back or block species protection laws and regulations, such as the Endangered Species Act.

Investigation findings

Between Feb. 22-25, 2023, an HSUS investigator attended the Safari Club International convention, held at Music City Center in Nashville, Tennessee, and visited 47 vendors selling hunts. Findings include:

- A total of 853 total exhibitors were selling hunts or animal products from 140 different countries.
- Nearly 400 hunting trips were auctioned off, including a polar bear hunt that sold for \$100,000. The polar bear is currently listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.
- The donated hunts up for auction were valued at almost \$6 million.
- The most expensive hunt seen was a “12-day Alaska Big Game Hunt for One Hunter,” which sold for a whopping \$140,000.
- Twenty of the 47 exhibitors visited offered elephant hunts, including add-on options for African forest elephants, which are classified as critically endangered.
- Nine offered white rhino hunts and some offer hunts for black rhinos, which are classified as critically endangered, on their websites.
- 26 of the 47 offered lion hunts, including captive lion hunts in South Africa in contravention to SCI’s own exhibitor policies and despite the U.S. federal government issuing notice in 2016 that such hunting undermines the conservation of the species. The South African government has further committed to shutting down the captive lion industry in the near future due to animal welfare, conservation and tourism reputation concerns.

- One vendor was selling lion hunts in South Africa at a discount because they needed to “get rid of them” and they “didn’t have as much value” due to the inability to import the parts to the United States. Another vendor explicitly recommended that a white rhino hunt be booked “as soon as possible” since population numbers are going down from poaching and he suspects hunting rhino will be banned as the species will go extinct soon.
- 27 of the 47 exhibitors visited offered leopard hunts, the majority of which included baiting—a practice that violates fair chase ethics and can cause serious harm to conservation efforts by luring animals out of protected areas and into hunting zones.
- Exhibitors that the investigator visited offered hunts in over 15 countries including South Africa (20 different vendors offered hunts here), Namibia, Zambia, Spain, Botswana, Mozambique, Canada, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, the United States, Uganda, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland.
- Baiting, the act of luring an animal with food, was extremely common in hunting packages, especially with leopards.
- Hunt prices ranged from \$4,000 to \$40,000 on the convention floor.
- Two horns from critically endangered black rhino were displayed in a rotating case, labeled as hunted in 2015. At a previous SCI convention, a black rhino hunt made headlines when it was auctioned off for an unprecedented \$400,000, before taking place in 2015.
- Wolf and lynx pelts and leopard claws were amongst the many items made from imperiled species for sale.
- Trophy hunts for rhinos, elephants, lions, giraffes and other imperiled species were available for purchase.
- One outfitter was willing to allow hunters to shoot from the truck. This practice violates fair chase ethics and poses serious safety hazards. The exhibitor said they were fine with bending the rules to allow it.
- One hunt entailed baiting wolves just outside of a cabin so you could shoot from the cabin window.
- Looping videos displayed real recordings of elephants and lions being shot to death by celebrating hunters. Many of the animals in the videos were seen writhing in horrific pain, as the hunters needed more than one shot to kill the animals.
- Animal taxidermy was for sale or on display, including a monkey dressed as a cowboy riding an animatronic, taxidermy goat as a novelty.
- Luggage made with elephant skin was on display to promote a business that offers customized personal items made from rare or coveted animals.



A vendor displays luggage made with the skin of elephants and offered to make similar pieces for roughly \$10,000 if the buyer supplied the elephant skin.

LIONS HUNTS OFFERED AT TROPHY HUNTING CONVENTION

Lions, listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, were a hot topic at the convention and hunts were widely offered. The “experience” of killing a lion was offered by dozens of vendors, from anywhere between \$4,000-\$14,000, not including trophy fees, which range from \$20,000-\$40,000. One vendor was offering a promotion on lions to “get rid of them,” explaining how lions were of lesser value due to the inability to import them into the U.S. Exhibitors from several countries were offering lion hunts, including Zambia, Tanzania and South Africa. One told the investigator that only three booths—including his—were offering wild lions from South Africa, and the remaining were from canned hunts, where animals are captive bred and kept in fenced enclosures. Another told the investigator that a lot of the lions in South Africa are tame, but his offerings were “the real deal.” This news came of little surprise but was noteworthy considering Safari Club International banned such advertisements at the convention and posted a statement on its very own website that canned hunts are against its values.

ATTENDEES OFFERED OPPORTUNITIES TO KILL RHINOS

Despite their declining populations, rhinos are still being offered to shoot and kill. One vendor pitched to our investigator that, because the numbers are dwindling, it’s best to get them while we still can. Another vendor pitched that there are copious amounts of rhinos in South Africa “on private land” and offered the investigator the chance to kill one. The exhibitor stated that they hunt around 12 rhinos per year, and they promoted hunts over non-lethal rhino darting experiences.



A vendor’s “menu” shows animals available to kill, including rhinos.

POTENTIAL VIOLATIONS OF STATE LAW

Tennessee state law prohibits the commercial use of endangered species and imposes limitations on the use of threatened and other species. Nevertheless, multiple vendors displayed or offered for sale items made from imperiled species in potential violation of state law. At one booth, for example, a taxidermy company advertised its services by displaying horns from an endangered black rhino. Another vendor showcased luggage-style trunks made from the skin of an elephant while promoting its services to future trophy hunters who may want the skin of animals they kill to be made into similar products.

Other products offered for sale or display in potential violation of state law include wolf rugs, a taxidermied wolf and a taxidermied Canada lynx. These species are listed as endangered or threatened in some parts of their range, but not in others; information about these items’ origin was not clearly available but violations may have occurred if particular items were sourced from protected populations. The investigator also observed taxidermied brown bears, gray wolves, leopards and lions, all of whom are classed as federally threatened or endangered in at least some parts of their range. Several booths selling elephant hunts also displayed ivory tusks, which may have violated state law depending on the species and country of origin.

One booth offered for sale pillows made out of Axis deer, in potential violation of Tennessee’s prohibition on the import of cervid products from outside the state.

CONCLUSION

The way many of these outfitters construct their hunts reveals their lack of sportsmanship. Offers were made to join hunts where leopards were baited in trees or corralled with dogs. One could join a hunt where wolves were baited outside the window of your cabin where you could shoot from in comfort. Looping videos showed laughing hunters gunning down a defenseless lion. One video showed hunters executing enormous elephants, one after another. Another video revealed the inaugural kill by a young boy who was held down by an adult while having the blood of his victim smeared onto his face. The investigator documented that a large number of children were present and exposed to the graphic videos without warning or parental guidance precautions, normalizing for children the death of animals for entertainment and possessions. Ultimately, this convention served as one of the world's largest event-based sources for trophy hunt sales and promotions, catering to a broad range of customers and driving demand for imperiled species' parts and products.

SCI is scheduled to hold its 2024 convention at the same venue in Nashville.