

12 June 2018

Umbabat Response to Media Article on Lion Hunt

In response to a recent media article published by the Daily Maverick (“Outrage after Kruger lion baited and shot by trophy hunter in neighbouring reserve”, by Don Pinnock, 11 June 2018), the Umbabat Private Nature Reserve (UPNR) management releases this statement. Its purpose is to set the record straight, but also to provide some information about the management of the reserve itself.

UPNR is a privately owned nature reserve, situated in Mpumalanga Province, on the Western border of the Kruger National Park (KNP). At the promulgation of the UPNR in 1968, fences existed not only between the UPNR and KNP, but also between several other privately-owned entities and other proclaimed areas in the same region. During the late 80’s, talks between UPNR, other private reserves and the KNP began to remove the dividing fences, allowing the free movement of game in an open ecological system. Conservationists and specialists agree that being part of a large open system is a far better choice for the ecosystem, than being fragmented into fenced off areas. In this sense, Umbabat is proud to be part of this African conservation success story.

The UPNR was able to contribute 18000 hectares to the open system. Like all the other reserves that is part of this unfenced landscape, UPNR is managed by its own members. This is done according to good conservation practices as outlined and agreed upon by all the reserves and relevant provincial authorities, such as the MTPA (Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency).

Annual animal censuses conducted indicate that the UPNR has a permanent residency of approximately 200 elephants, 800 buffalo, 40 giraffe, hippo and smaller herbivores, as well as a healthy lion, leopard, hyena and rhino population.

The UPNR has many managerial obligations to itself, its neighbours and the state owned KNP. These obligations are defined by a Management Plan and implemented by the Management Authority of the UPNR. Some of these obligations outlined in the Management Plan include Wardenship, Anti-Poaching, Vegetation monitoring, Herbivore monitoring, Predator monitoring, Alien vegetation encroachment, Veterinarian obligations, Fire prevention, Water use and Socio-economic and Human development.

The costs of complying with these obligations have increased dramatically due to the magnitude of poaching in the whole area, including the KNP and neighbouring reserves. In the UPNR’s instance, most of the insurgents originate from Mozambique and penetrate the UPNR after traversing across the KNP. To secure its area, the reserve employs security staff at huge costs, with no subsidy from the State. Approximately 65% of the UPNR’s annual expense budget goes to security cost for the prevention of poaching.

Like many other reserves, the UPNR engages in commercial hunting to assist in funding its conservation costs. Approximately 30% of its annual income is from hunting, with the rest provided by owner’s levy’s. None of the funds from hunting goes to any individual. There is no personal gain from hunting for UPNR members.

All hunting in the UPNR is governed by National and Provincial law, and is further guided by the Greater Kruger Hunting Protocol, which is a well-defined document compiled by representatives and experts from the KNP, State, Province and private. All the requirements stipulated in the hunting protocol are adhered to by the UPNR.

Before a hunting permit is issued, a rigorous process of assessment and adjudication takes place. Animals are counted, studies are compiled, experts are consulted, reserve management practices are scrutinised and assessed, needs are considered whether appropriate, and only thereafter, will the authorities consider issuing a permit to hunt. Often the process of issuing a permit to hunt is subject to several interactions and communications between experts. Interception of a document during this process of assessment would be incomplete and out of sequence. The information submitted with the initial offtake application was submitted sporadically. The predator survey results were submitted late and after a declination had been given by the authorities for the lion off-take. In later review of the application process, UPNR Management were relieved that the checks and balances in the offtake application process, were functioning appropriately, since no predator offtake had been granted, until the appropriate information i.e. the predator survey had been submitted and scrutinised, and the UPNR could sustain a lion permit. After the submission of the predator survey, the offtake was authorised.

This is what occurred in the approval process of the UPNR's hunting quota. Someone distributed a premature document to journalists, with the intention to bring discord, and allege that the UPNR was engaging in illegal hunting activities. To state that the UPNR illegally hunted a lion is simply incorrect.

It has also been reported that the UPNR "lured" a lion from the KNP to hunt it. During the 2017 predator census, there were no less than 3 lion prides and 37 hyenas assessed over a period of only 2 nights in the UPNR. The UPNR does not engage in luring animals from beyond its boundaries for any purpose whatsoever.

Regarding the identity of the hunted lion, it was reported that a named pride male has been hunted – this statement is also incorrect. Meetings were held before any hunting took place, with photographs being shared of the lion that was not to be hunted. Subsequently, the hunting party complied with that request. A meeting held on 11 June with Chairperson's of the Nkorho Reserves (a Sub Reserve of the UPNR) adjudicated the evidence of the hunted lion and the following excerpt from that meeting is quoted below:

"legal and other requirements regarding the hunting protocol was adhered to, including principles and ethics, as well as specific and general procedures and guidelines. Furthermore, the hunting application, approval and permit process was in full compliance of all the regulatory requirements. The meeting also sought to review the photographic evidence of all the photos supplied to the Hunting Outfitter and Reserve Representative prior to the hunt. These photos act as a specific guideline to assist the hunting party to take all reasonable steps to prevent the hunt of an identified male lion, so as not to disrupt pride dynamics in the region. In comparing the post-hunting pictures, it was concluded from the facial features and scars, that the hunted lion was not the same as the lion portrayed in the earlier provided pictures."

It became common knowledge to members of the UPNR at the end of February 2018, that a lion hunt was permitted. At the beginning of May, members were advised that the hunt would commence from the 26th of May. Prior to the commencement of the hunt a meeting was held with interested parties for input and discussion. The hunt was completed on Thursday the 7th June. The hunted lion was well past his prime – as per the hunting protocol – and was not a pride lion. The hunted lion had worn down and broken teeth, a protruding spine (all signs of advanced age) and had no evidence of the leucystic gene (i.e. white lion gene). Thirty hours after the hunt took place, a cease and desist request was received. It has been falsely reported that this was ignored, yet it was impossible to comply or respond to it, as it was after the fact.

Alternative sources of income, to fund the UPNR's conservation budget, are continually being sought. In the meantime, the UPNR management is morally, economically and ecologically obliged to find and allocate resources for the prudent management of the reserve. We do this in the knowledge that our 18 000 hectares are part of a larger thriving ecosystem, where different land-uses and governance models co-exist.