

Part IV

Management

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From a Commodity to a High-Value Species

The African buffalo has always been taken for granted. Due to its massive body size and vast herds, the species has constantly been perceived as an infinite source of wealth. Local hunters were fairly certain to bring home lots of valuable meat for their neighbours, friends and family. Scientists paid little attention to this abundant and rather unattractive cattle-looking beast compared to charismatic creatures threatened with extinction. Foreign hunters knew that a hunt for buffalo would not be in vain, that they would most certainly be challenged by a formidable adversary, with at least a thrilling fair chase as a result. Even conservationists were disinterested after the spectacular recovery of the species from the rinderpest onslaught. It is no surprise that such a commodity animal remained largely unnoticed and overlooked for so long.

Until things changed. With the human demographic upsurge, the escalating demand for game meat overtook the ability of wildlife – including buffalo – to match the needs. Buffalo habitats shrunk under unrestrained assaults of agro-pastoral encroachment. With the spread of modern weapons all over the continent, the fear of stalking buffalo faded. Buffalo started to struggle to cope with death tolls that were exceeding birth rates. They disappeared from large parts of their range, and were cornered in a few strongholds, mainly National Parks. Hunting Areas, another category of Protected Areas, became their last frontier outside National Parks, acting as critical buffer zones of National Parks and corridors in between.

Then the time came when visionary scientists such as Anthony Sinclair and Herbert Prins focused their minds on the species. Increasing

numbers of tourists were excited to tick buffalo off their wish list as one of the Big Five. A new generation of veterinarians became conscious of the unique capacity of the indigenous African buffalo to resist or tolerate diseases that devastated exotic livestock. They also gained expertise in capturing and moving buffalo individuals and herds. Innovative cattle-ranchers initiated buffalo ranching as a new animal production system for multiple uses, both consumptive and non-consumptive, with a wider scope than dairy and beef, and as a means to rewild former cattle ranches.

Nearly restricted to very few countries in southern Africa, the private ownership of wildlife has changed the picture quite dramatically. By adapting livestock farming science and technology, the productivity of buffalo herds in captivity has improved. With optimized nutrition, especially during the dry season, buffalo ranchers get rid of the seasonality for breeding year-round and obtain earlier attainment of sexual maturity. However, the quest to produce ever larger trophy horns, driving prices up to at times unsustainable levels, is resulting in contentious breeding practices that include genetic manipulations such as outbreeding with East African buffalo and extreme inbreeding. Therefore, the large stock of captive buffalo is not considered part of the wild free-ranging populations for the long-term conservation of the taxon.

More recently, several non-African countries started to peremptorily impose bans on the importation from Africa of hunting trophies from charismatic wildlife species such as elephant and lion. This effectively posed an embargo on hunters from their jurisdictions to hunt for most trophies in range states of the African buffalo. Although buffalo (a non-controversial species) is not targeted by the bans, it is impacted by them. By downsizing the hunting market, the bans leave many Hunting Areas vacant and exposed to poaching and habitat conversion, rendering the buffalo a collateral victim of bans directed at other species. In the meantime, the bans are elevating the value of the buffalo, making it a foremost game in an attempt to compensate for the loss of other huntable game. Although less profitable than more prominent game, the buffalo finds itself in a position to financially contribute more to sustain hunting concessions so that they can continue to function as Protected Areas for preserving vast tracts of wilderness and their biodiversity. Hunting the African buffalo, if done judiciously and with restraint, could showcase the concept of sustainable use, which is one of the two pillars on which the Convention on Biological Diversity rests, the other being conservation.

When well-managed, the buffalo is a typical example of a high-value species producing high income from a low percentage of the population

harvested. After being a commodity species throughout history, the African buffalo is now appearing as a promising prospect for Africa. It is time for buffalo to be considered a prominent asset for people rather than a banal species.

However, there are limitations that constrain the necessary change in paradigm. One is related to southern Africa, where the modified (“augmented”) buffalo stock in captivity makes an *ex-situ* population incompatible with conservation. Another is external to Africa, because foreign standards dictated by non-African countries are working hard to prevent Africa from using its own renewable natural resources such as wildlife, including buffalo (meat and trophies). This is leading the intrinsic values (existence values) advocated by many in the North to prevail over the use-values (utilitarian values) needed by the South. It is as if African wildlife only exist to make nice movies and serve as tourist attractions for temporary visitors. One more constraint is the need to make more progress in some fields, notably in veterinary science, for example how to manage diseases where cattle and buffalo cohabit, and how to develop physical restraint technologies that rely less on chemical immobilization, especially opioids.

The information provided in this section is not only based on different forms of academic research, but also on extensive field experience, gained by hard work, successes and also failures. As such, the expertise acquired from field experience forms part of what is known as ‘experiential knowledge’, important in fields such as conservation science, biomedical research, farming and veterinary science. While often difficult to collate, this information is commonly useful in practice. Therefore, in this section, we formalize some of the experiential knowledge that we have acquired over the years.

