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After the Killing of Cecil the Lion, Delta Joins Airline Ban on Game Trophies



Cecil was well known in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe.

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The recent killing of a popular lion named Cecil by an American dentist in Zimbabwe sparked considerable outrage on social media and elsewhere against safari hunting. The

event has also brought to light the role that airlines play in transporting trophy kills as cargo, and may have contributed to changing airline policy.

On Monday, Delta Air Lines became the latest carrier to change its rules about transporting hunting trophies. Its announcement came as a group of airlines including Air France, KLM, Iberia, IAG Cargo, Singapore Airlines and Qantas signaled last week they would ban the transport of trophy-hunting kills, according to Paul Ferris, the campaign director at SumOfUs.org, a consumer-based petition agency in Brooklyn, which has pressed for changing cargo policies.

“Airlines and other large travel corporations would be foolish to ignore the public reaction to the killing of Cecil the lion, and growing concern about the plight of endangered species,” Mr. Ferris said.

Such a ban was initiated by South African Airways in April, and Emirates, Lufthansa and British Airways later joined. These airlines pledged not to carry big game trophies, including elephants, rhinos, lions and tigers as cargo.

One major holdout had been Delta, which has direct service between the United States and countries in Africa. But bowing to pressure from some travelers and activists, and an online petition on Change.org, Delta changed its position too.

“Effective immediately, Delta will officially ban shipment of all lion, leopard, elephant, rhinoceros and buffalo trophies worldwide as freight,” according to a statement by Morgan Durrant, a Delta spokesman. “Prior to this ban, Delta’s strict acceptance policy called for absolute compliance with all government regulations regarding protected species. Delta will also review acceptance policies of other hunting trophies with appropriate government agencies and other organizations supporting legal shipments.”

Still, resistance to change can run deep. South African Airways initially banned trophy cargo after a shipment of elephant tusks marked as machine parts bound for Kuala Lumpur was discovered during a stop in Australia. But since July there have been reports that South Africa Airlines lifted the ban and has resumed shipping trophy kills.

Americans make up the bulk of non-African hunters. About 15,000 American tourists visit Africa on hunting safaris every year, according to Conservation Force, a nonprofit group that advocates responsible hunting. Currently, 11 African countries issue lion-hunting permits, including Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and Tanzania.

Of those, South Africa’s hunting industry is the biggest, estimated to be worth around \$675 million, according to the Professional Hunters Association. And just as important, it is woven into the luxury sector of the travel industry, with fees that can reach \$55,000 to hunt lions, for example.

Many of the ranches in Africa where big game is hunted have their own luxury accommodations. Such is the case with Bushman Safaris, the outfitters used by Walter Palmer, the Minnesota dentist.

Luxury hotel chains do not condemn trophy hunting or ban hotel guests from big-game hunting, even though it does little for the local economy. Less than 3 percent of the revenue from trophy hunting goes to local guides, business owners or people living in communities near the animals, according to a report by the think tank Economists at Large.

Many conservationists are concerned that the laws regulating trophy hunting can be ambiguous and often lead to poaching.

African lion population numbers vary, but many estimate there were about 100,000 a century ago. Today, there are around 35,000. Lion populations had been stable, but because they dropped noticeably in the last three years, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed listing the lion as a threatened species.

While this would not eliminate trophy hunting, it would regulate it through a permit system for importing sport-hunted trophies into the United States. Opponents to the listing are concerned that the agency's proposal would hamper conservation funds raised by the fees collected for trophy hunting. A decision is expected by January 2016.

But while the pace of federal regulation moves slowly, conservationists said airlines like Delta and other travel corporations are in a much better position to press for change.