

# THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND FOOD SECURITY

*How lawful wildlife use, invasive-species control, and management culls could feed people far more often than they do.*

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***Here is the uncomfortable truth too many policymakers still refuse to face: edible meat is being wasted while people are hungry.***

Not poached meat. Not black-market bushmeat. Not some fantasy of deregulated killing. I am talking about meat from animals that are already being lawfully harvested, culled, removed, or used under regulated systems: deer donated to food banks, invasive fish turned into food, community hunting meat shared with rural households, or management off-take routed into drought relief. In far too many places, the animal is removed but the humanitarian imagination never shows up. That is not conservation. It is a bureaucratic failure. Protein is not ideological. Hunger is not theoretical. Waste is a policy choice.

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## **PLACES ALREADY DOING IT RIGHT**

The clearest proof comes from the United States, where hunter-donation systems have been turning wild game into food relief for years. Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry says it has provided 24.1 million servings of meat since 1997. Pennsylvania's Hunters Sharing the Harvest recorded 283,789 pounds of donated venison from 7,855 deer in the 2024–25 season, equal to roughly 1.1 million servings. Wisconsin says hunters have donated more than 100,000 deer since 2000, producing over 4 million pounds of ground venison for charitable distribution.



▲ *Programs like Hunters Sharing the Harvest and Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry convert legally harvested deer into protein for food banks.*

That is not symbolism. That is a functioning pipeline: legal harvest, inspected processing, distribution through community food networks, and real protein reaching people who need it. It also destroys one of the laziest caricatures about hunting. Sustainable use is not only about recreation, trophies, or commerce. It can also be a hunger-response mechanism when institutions bother to build the bridge between harvest and need.

Marine systems offer another good example. NOAA has been blunt on invasive lionfish: “If we can’t beat them, let’s eat them.” NOAA says an invasive lionfish food-fish market is practical, feasible, and should be promoted. That matters because lionfish are not just a nuisance; they are a reef predator harming native fish communities in U.S. Southeast and Caribbean waters. Here, removal and food use are not in tension. They reinforce each other.



▲ *Lionfish removal in the Caribbean has increasingly been paired with seafood markets promoting the invasive species as food.*

Southern Africa offers a different but equally important lesson. In Namibia's communal conservancies, meat distribution is not a fringe extra; it is part of the benefit structure of community conservation. The 2022 State of Community Conservation report says conservancy residents received 317,898 kilograms of game meat from hunting, and explicitly links game meat provision to household food security. During the 2024 drought emergency, Namibia's Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism said 723 animals would be contributed to the government drought-relief programme, with 56,875 kilograms of meat already delivered.



▲ *Community conservancies in southern Africa often distribute game meat from regulated hunting to rural households.*

This is the first lesson the policy world keeps dodging: the hard part is often not biology. It is administration. The animal has already been harvested. The real question is whether the government, processors, veterinarians, and relief networks can act like adults and move the food.

## **POTENTIAL IS CLEAR — BUT MORE MUST BE DONE**

The Arctic is a perfect example of a food-security system that much of the outside world still insists on misunderstanding. NOAA's co-management plan for St. Paul Island explicitly states that subsistence use of marine mammals is tied to improving food security. NAMMCO has argued for years that marine mammal resources should be considered within food-security discussions, noting their nutritional value. Greenland's own white paper describes whale meat and related products as a vital source of protein, omega-3 fatty acids, and food security.



▲ *In Arctic regions, marine mammals remain a critical traditional protein source supporting food security in remote communities.*

A serious food-security debate cannot simply erase culturally rooted, legally regulated marine use because urban activists elsewhere find it emotionally inconvenient. The conversation should be about sustainability, food safety, community rights, and management quality — not about pretending these food systems do not exist.

***“The regulatory architecture exists. The monitoring exists. The humane framework exists. What does not exist is strategic thinking about public nutrition.”***

— IWMC

Australia’s kangaroo sector is perhaps the clearest example of a lawful protein system operating well below its strategic potential. The Australian government says harvest quotas are generally set at around 15–20% of estimated populations, but actual harvest is usually far lower — around 3% — because use is constrained by market demand and processing capacity. What does not exist at anything like the necessary scale is strategic thinking about public nutrition, institutional procurement, or relief use.

The United Kingdom has a smaller but telling version of the same problem. NatureScot says one of the ongoing barriers in deer management is the lack of secure and financially attractive outlets for carcasses. A country can accept that deer need managing for habitat, climate,

forestry, and biodiversity reasons, yet still fail to build robust routes for the resulting venison. That is a market and policy failure, not a biological one.

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## WHERE ALMOST NOTHING IS BEING DONE

India may be the most frustrating case of all. The government publicly acknowledges that farmers across India have suffered increasing crop losses from wild animals including wild boar, nilgai, deer, monkeys, and elephants. The Wildlife (Protection) Act allows the central government to declare certain Schedule II animals vermin in a defined area for a defined period. India already recognises the conflict problem and already has legal tools for exceptional management. What it does not have is a serious, national conversation about whether lawful off-take in some contexts could ever be channelled into inspected, traceable, socially useful protein rather than pure waste.

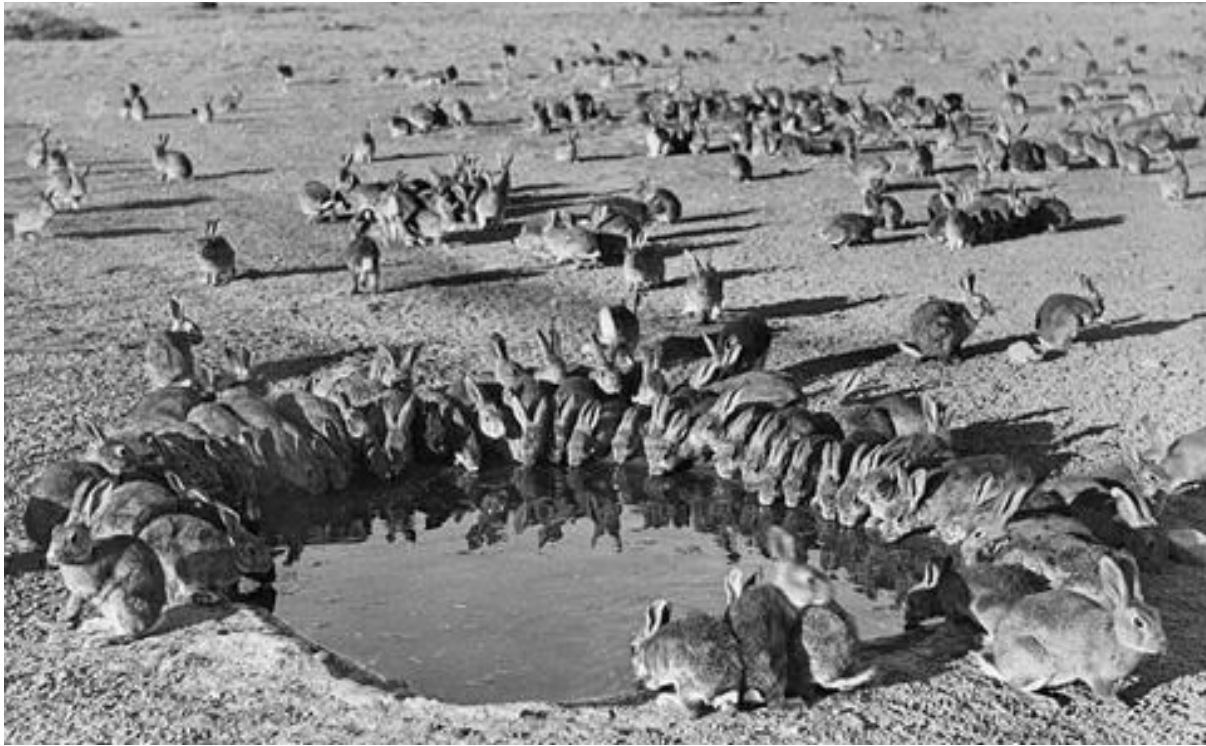


▲ *Crop-raiding wildlife such as nilgai and wild boar cause significant agricultural losses across India, yet the resulting off-take is rarely channelled into food systems.*

That silence is not morally superior. It is intellectually lazy. If nilgai or wild boar are being lawfully destroyed because the state says conflict and crop loss have crossed a threshold, then policy should at least confront the next question: what happens to the carcass? Can it be tested? Can it be processed? Can it be routed to institutions, community kitchens, relief channels, or local markets where culturally and legally appropriate?

Australia's own pest-animal strategy describes wild rabbits as the country's most widespread and costly vertebrate pest, costing more than A\$200 million a year in lost agricultural production. New Zealand's regulatory framework includes pathways for possum meat for human consumption. These are signals that governments can regulate unconventional wild protein

when they choose to. Yet these species remain policy footnotes instead of being assessed honestly as possible contributors to local nutrition, emergency reserves, or circular rural economies.



▲ *Australia's rabbit plague is one of the country's most costly invasive species problems — and a largely untapped protein resource.*

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## CONCLUSION

The next generation of policy should be brutally practical. Whenever lawful wildlife off-take happens — whether through sustainable use, invasive-species control, subsistence systems, or management culls — governments should run a simple test. Is the off-take legal? Is population management defensible? Is the meat safe? Is there cultural acceptance? Is there a traceable processing and distribution route? If the answer is yes, wasting the protein should be the exception, not the norm.

***An edible animal removed under law and science  
should not automatically become a missed opportunity.  
Too often, that is exactly what it is.***