

Auction exposed as marketplace for discarded hunting trophies

Undercover investigation reveals trophies and parts from threatened and endangered species sold to the highest bidder



Investigators from the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International found a table made of elephant feet and a black bear mother and cub taxidermy for sale at Circle M's fall auction in October 2021. *The HSUS*

OVERVIEW

Trophy hunters travel far and wide seeking animals to kill for fun, bringing home parts of their kills to hang on the wall as a grotesque souvenir of their exploits. But what happens when these trophies are no longer wanted? Little is known about the ultimate fate of these hunting trophies. In October 2021, the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International conducted an undercover investigation of the Circle M Premier Taxidermy and Decor hunting trophy auction in Maquoketa, Iowa, to shed light on what happens to hunting trophies once they are no longer wanted. Here's what our investigators discovered.

KEY FINDINGS

- Many hunting trophies no longer wanted by their original owners are sold at auction.
- Hunting trophies end up at auction for many reasons: Hunters want to make space for trophies of new kills; hunters move, downsize or sell their homes and are told by realtors to "get rid of the dead animals"; or hunters die and their relatives want to offload their trophies.
- This auction sold hunting trophies and taxidermy of more than 550 mammals and many more birds, reptiles, fish and other species.
- This auction included threatened and endangered species such as elephants and polar bears alongside other imperiled species, including giraffes and hippopotamuses.
- Auctioned trophies included those of iconic American wildlife such as grizzly bears, black bears and mountain lions.
- This auction included grotesque and disrespectful home décor items such as a table and floor lamp made from the four legs of a giraffe and tables and wastebaskets made from elephant feet.

- Trophies and taxidermy of juvenile animals such as giraffe calves and bear cubs were sold. A taxidermy black bear mother and cub sold as a pair.
- Skin, bones, claws, antlers, tusks, fur and skulls of domestic and exotic species were sold.
- Some taxidermy products were described as being made from animals previously exhibited in zoos.

TROPHIES OF THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

Trophy hunters often target threatened and endangered species such as those sold at this auction. African elephants, for example, have suffered a 60% population decline over the past 50 years; the International Union for Conservation of Nature now classifies the African forest elephant as critically endangered and the African savanna elephant as endangered, and all African elephants are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Similarly, wild giraffe populations have declined by about 40% over the past 30 years and are threatened with extinction. Based on their coat patterns, it's possible that three of the items sold at this auction were derived from endangered subspecies of giraffes, namely reticulated and Masai giraffes. Polar bears are also threatened with extinction and listed under the ESA.

The hunting of these animals and the commercial sale of their trophies and taxidermy perpetuate the commodification of—and spark demand for—the parts and products of these vulnerable species, further pushing them toward extinction.

THE “GARBAGE BIN” OF THE TROPHY HUNTING INDUSTRY

Each year, trophy hunters from the United States target hundreds of thousands of animals both in the U.S. and abroad just to hang a gruesome keepsake of their kill on a wall. What we saw at this auction—what could be called the “garbage bin” of the industry—suggests that many trophies are ultimately unwanted and are sold to the highest bidder. The sale of trophies and taxidermy perpetuates the barbaric and antiquated idea that killing iconic wild animals for bragging rights and home display is acceptable. This cruel practice also disrupts fragile ecosystems and shatters family groups of targeted species.

Taxidermy resellers and collectors comprised most of the bidders in this auction, but online and proxy bidders participated as well. Auction staff and participants commented that taxidermists and resellers often attend such auctions seeking animal “parts” and will disassemble taxidermy mounts to create new, more marketable mounts or other items. At auctions like these, taxidermists also sell trophies and taxidermy from clients who failed to pay for their services. Further, some taxidermy and trophy resellers buy up items at auction and then hold their own auctions, essentially flipping these animal parts for profit. And according to staff and participants we interviewed on site, much of the taxidermy sold at these auctions ends up displayed in commercial businesses, including lodges and retail stores.

All of this reselling and exhibiting of trophies spurs demand among the public for parts and products of these wild animals, many of which are species that are threatened and endangered. For many of these species, illegal hunting and illicit trade in products is already a major threat to their continued survival in the wild. Auctioning off trophies and taxidermy of these species only adds to the dire threats they face.

POTENTIAL FOR SALES OF ILLEGALLY OBTAINED ANIMALS

Auction staff and participants agreed that the age and origin of most of the trophies and taxidermy up for auction were largely unknown, raising concerns that some of these animals and their parts were obtained illegally. Further, the auction website offered shipping to other U.S. states, potentially undermining any state laws that prohibit the purchase or sale of parts and products of animals sold at this auction, such as African elephants, hippos or giraffes.

SOME PRODUCTS SOLD AT AUCTION

- Tables made of four African elephant feet with elephant skin tops
- Two hollowed elephant feet advertised with a note saying they “would make a nice trash can”
- A taxidermy polar bear with a ringed seal—this set sold for \$26,000, the highest price of all trophies sold at the auction
- A matching coffee table and floor lamp made of four giraffe legs
- A hippo skull and two hippo shoulder mounts (head, neck, shoulders); two sets of hippo teeth
- Baby zebra taxidermy, six zebra skins and rugs—including one from a calf—and several zebra heads for “tabletop display”
- 39 black bears, including five cubs and a mother-cub pair; seven grizzly bears; and three brown bears

For more information, please contact Adam Peyman, director of wildlife programs at Humane Society International, at apeyman@hsi.org.

Circle M Premier Taxidermy and Decor Auction listings

Type of mammal	Number of animals	Notes
Antelope, pronghorn	5	
Baboon	1	
Baboon, chacma	3	
Badger	12	
Bear, black	39	
Bear, brown	3	
Bear, grizzly	7	
Bear, polar	1	
Beaver	18	
Binturong, Asian	1	
Bison, American	10	
Blesbok	2	
Boar, wild	1	
Bobcat	7	
Bongo, African	2	
Buck, bush	1	
Buffalo, Cape	3	

Type of mammal	Number of animals	Notes
Caribou	10	
Cat, fisher	2	
Cat, serval	1	
Chamois	1	
Coyote	11	
Deer, axis	1	
Deer, fallow	3	
Deer, mule	11	
Deer, red	5	
Deer, roe	1	
Deer, whitetail	64	
Dingo, Australian	1	
Duiker, African	3	
Duiker, African Blue	2	
Duiker, African Bush	2	
Duiker, African Red	1	
Eland	1	
Elephant, African	2	Includes the elephant set (two-leg coffee table + two end tables with one leg each = one elephant) + two elephant foot trash cans (assuming they came from one elephant)
Elk	18	
Ermine	2	
Fox	1	
Fox, Arctic	5	
Fox, blue ranch	3	
Fox, grey	5	
Fox, marble ranch	1	
Fox, ranch cross	1	
Fox, red	11	
Fox, silver	1	
Fox, silver cross	1	
Fox, silver ranch	6	
Gazelle, Grant's African	1	
Gemsbok, African	5	
Genet, African	2	
Gerenuk, African	1	

Type of mammal	Number of animals	Notes
Giraffe	4	Includes the giraffe set (three-leg coffee table + one-leg floor lamp = one giraffe)
Gnu, white bearded	1	
Goat, mountain	6	
Goat, Spanish	4	
Groundhog	5	
Hare, snowshoe	1	
Hartebeest, African	7	
Hippopotamus	5	Including the skull
Hyaena, African	2	
Impala	5	
Jackal, African black back	2	
Kinkajou	1	
Kudu, African	8	
Lion, mountain	8	
Lynx	2	
Macaque, Celebes	1	
Macaque, rhesus	1	
Mink	2	
Monkey, De Brazza's	1	
Monkey, vervet	3	
Moose	6	
Muskox	3	
Muskrat	7	
Nilgai, Indian	1	
Nyala	2	
Nyala, Mountain	1	
Opossum	4	
Opossum, bushtail Australian	3	
Oryx, scimitar horn	1	
Otter	1	
Otter, river	2	
Porcupine	3	
Porcupine, African	1	
Rabbit	1	
Rabbit, cottontail	3	
Racoon	54	

Type of mammal	Number of animals	Notes
Reedbuck, African	1	
Sable, African	2	
Seal, ring Arctic	1	
Sheep, blue Asian	1	
Sheep, Corsican	2	
Sheep, Dall	4	
Sheep, desert bighorn	1	
Sheep, Fannin	1	
Sheep, Jacob's four-horned	1	
Sheep, Rocky Mountain bighorn	4	
Sheep, stone	3	
Skunk	16	
Springbok	3	
Springhare	1	
Squirrel, black	2	
Squirrel, flying	2	
Squirrel, fox	3	
Squirrel, grey	3	
Squirrel, pine	1	
Squirrel, Red	1	
Steenbok	1	
Tahr, Himalayan	2	
Tsessebe, African	1	
Wallaby	1	
Warthog, African	2	
Waterbuck, African	5	
Weasel	6	
Wildebeest, African Nyasaland	1	
Wildebeest, blue African	3	
Wolf, Alaskan	2	
Wolf, Arctic	1	
Wolf, Canadian	1	
Zebra	13	
Zebra, Burchell's	1	
Grand total	557	

