

# Our readers' views



Gerhard Heyneke

The first colour morph animal recorded in South African history was a golden oryx, which was shot in 1906. Golden wildebeest have been seen naturally in nature in southern Botswana for decades. Wildlife ranchers have responded to recent negative publicity in the media. The executive editorial committee decided to share this letter received from Gerhard Heyneke with our readers and industry stakeholders.

Please also read an unsolicited article by Erich D. Graupner, **A CASE FOR COLOUR VARIANTS – A game rancher's perspective**, on page 154.

The breeding of colour variations proves to be a thorn in the side for certain individuals and institutions. Once again, the year began with emotional, inaccurate and misconstrued statements in the popular media, creating false perceptions regarding the intensive breeding of colour variations and rare game. Such perceptions can cause significant damage to our industry, in a one-sided attempt to destroy, in effect, a beautiful and unique operation of modern conservation practice.

Let's take one step back. Over the past 50-odd years, the wildlife industry has been developed and financed at the considerable cost of about R400bn by farmers who saw the opportunity to make conservation sustainable through utilisation. In recent years, intensive breeding of certain species has played an increasingly important role to this effect, which is conveniently omitted from the 'media hype' created by people with a poor understanding of the 'greater picture'. In this context, consider the following:

1. Millions generated by trade in colour variations are directly applied

to save other species from extinction. For example, this enables the farmer to buy and breed rare wildlife such as bontebok, and protect them as a sustainable subspecies. Today, 85% of the bontebok population in South Africa is privately owned, and we are now able to export trophies to America because of the increase in numbers.

2. Increased income from breeding with animals such as golden wildebeest enabled some wildlife ranchers to obtain and/or protect bontebok, Cape mountain zebra, black wildebeest and blue duiker, which were all previously critically endangered. This financially enabled several farmers to donate money for research to be able to prove that the

## The Colourful game changer

by Gerhard Heyneke



Falling gold price: A golden wildebeest, right, with a herd of spots wildebeest in Limpopo

### COLOUR GAME IS OVER

The breeding of wildlife to produce unusually coloured animals, in the hope that hunters would pay a lot more to shoot them, has fallen flat in a spectacular manner — with the practice being widely condemned

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If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. The old adage has become a painful reality for speculators who stampeded into the colour-variant game sector.

Luring them were rocketing prices being paid at game auctions for colour variants bred in captivity and not found in the wild. Described as "unnatural freaks" by Peter

With colour-variant animals, a supply was created for which there is no real demand where it counts most — from hunters, says Lizanne Nel, conservation manager at the 45,000-member SA Hunters & Game Conservation Society (SA Hunters).

It is not only because of their unnatural nature that hunters shun colour variants. "Most hunters want a responsible hunt"

"The colour-variant game is over," says Flack. Damm agrees.

But Damm, Flack and Nel stress that the colour-variant controversy has dealt SA's game industry another big reputational blow. It follows the huge damage done by the "canned lion" hunting debacle.

Canned lion hunting involves releasing

See: <http://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/features/2017-01-26-colour-game-is-over/>

farmers have increased the numbers of some species significantly. The same so-called short-sighted ranchers are now being subjected to this skewed chastisement by ill-informed individuals. We should not stand for this. How much did these 'backseat drivers' invest in the enhancement of our wildlife species? Without the major inputs of farmers, the above species would still be critically endangered, and nobody would be able to hunt them sustainably.

3. Income from colour variations enabled ranchers to protect their rhinos, and to improve the genetic diversity of the populations on their farms, which is incorrectly criticised daily in the media.

4. Income from colour variations helped to create jobs where there was only despair. Today, wildlife ranching is reported to be the biggest employer in the agricultural sector. The fact that farming started to make economic sense again motivated young and upcoming farmers to consider farming.



Impala (*Aepyceros melampus*).



Golden wildebeest (*Connochaetes*).  
Photo © Quintus Strauss



Until recently, the average farmer in South Africa was about 62 years old.

Sensation sells like hot cakes... To breed and conserve wild animals mostly takes blood, sweat, and years of perseverance. The one-sidedness of these media statements not only damages the game rancher but also the precious development of an industry that was proudly and solely responsible for the unprecedented and unique increase in wildlife numbers in South Africa, where the reverse trend (dramatic decline) is still seen in the rest of Africa and the world and where the numbers of the bigger mammals (over 100kg) in particular have declined and continue to decline dramatically.

Over the past 50 years, we have game from around only 550 000 animals to several million head of game, in part through the successful and sustainable breeding programmes initiated by game ranchers.

Gemsbok or gemsbuck (*Oryx gazella*).

5. Colour variations are beautiful. As the saying goes: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." To our knowledge, no game farmer ever suggested/intended for any colour variations to be introduced into any national parks, provincial reserve, or other formally protected area, although this is where many originated. This is an ideal opportunity to develop a niche market for the person who likes to offer something special to hunt, and in the same breath, to allow the game farmer to ply his trade in a sustainable manner.

#### CONTRIBUTION:

1. Colour variations give the hunter more variety to hunt.

2. Colour variations offer the game rancher a wider product range from which to make a profit, and promote sustainable farming.

3. Colour variations increase available capital towards the enhancement

of species, enabling the farmer to contribute to the 'wildlife pantry' of Africa. It is impossible for all farmers to breed buffalo exclusively and hunt them sustainably. Game farmers must diversify to survive.

4. No-one is forcing any hunter to hunt something he does not want to. Market forces have their own rhythm. Use the opportunity to offer something new to the market that is unique to South Africa.

5. Do not underestimate the contribution that colour variations have had and will have in the future of the wildlife industry. Colour variations are already being hunted, and there will always be a market for them. Let's get over the negative rhetoric regarding colour variations and focus on a sustainable future.

#### ALTERNATIVE

1. No farmer can make a living based on the hunting prices of the

past. There should be room for new developments that make it possible for the game farmer to survive economically, through breeding and hunting, offering a greater variety in the long term.

2. Without this, many species and subspecies cannot possibly survive sustainably. Every farming method should be looked at holistically. If we look at only one aspect in isolation, and attempt to align everything perfectly in order to please the purists, game farming will not have a sustainable future.

#### DAMAGE

1. Unprecedented damage is done to any industry if the background is not put into perspective. If we continue to play the ball, in this case, the game farmer, and not the game, we run the risk of losing the ball. If an industry does not make economic sense anymore, it will be replaced by something else. Surely not all implications are looked at in reports like these and it is unfortunately detrimental to the wildlife industry as a whole.

2. It is a fact that the doubt being sowed causes significant damage. Face facts, and tell the sad but true story of how poor the horn size of animals available to the hunter was a few years ago before game farmers started to actively breed with game. Ask yourself the question whether hunters prefer to shoot kudu with inferior horns, or bulls over 50 inches. We should not allow others to cause damage to our industry.

#### ADDRESSING ASSUMPTIONS IN ARTICLE

The claim that there is "no real demand" for colour variations – until recently, prices were very high because of the higher breeding value of bulls, compared to hunting bulls. This is not unusual. Colour variations are already hunted successfully. It is a niche market. *Stafford Thomas' article is factually incorrect.*

The claim that "animals are dependent on humans" – quite right. The recent drought experienced in

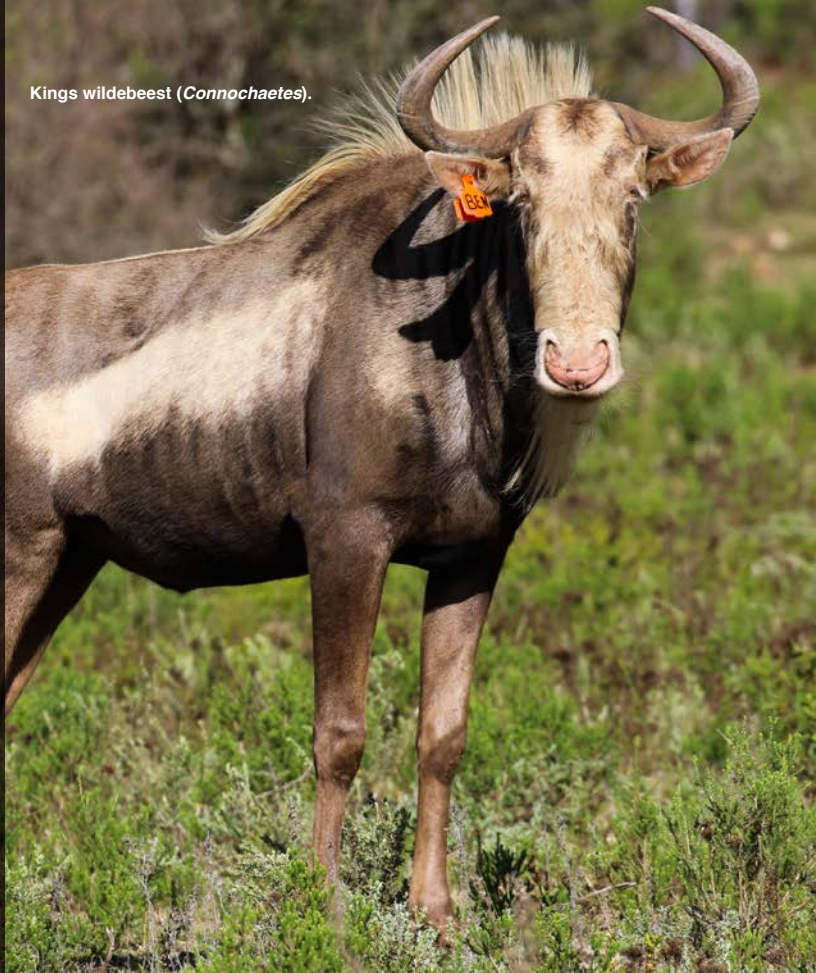
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the Kruger National Park and various other parks in South Africa confirmed it. It will always be like that on any farm. The game farmer is, like any other farmer, responsible for his livestock. The vast open bushveld of yesteryear sadly no longer exists. *Are we expected, as happens in the parks, just to let the animals die?*

The claim that “the world agrees” – *agrees on what?* The purists and preservationists, as opposed to conservationists, of the world do not have an understanding of, or a willingness to learn about, the perspective of the game farmer. How many people in the world really care about what happens in Africa, or on our farms? Does the world really care about the thousands of people being murdered in South Africa, or other African countries, on a daily basis?

The claim that “the big winner is Namibia, free of canned hunting and colour variants” – *not true. Shockingly poor, uninformed and malicious reporting.* Go and check the facts.

Kings wildebeest (*Connochaetes*).



Blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes*).

The claim “most hunters want a responsible hunt”. By selective hunting in the past, the best genetic traits were eradicated. Thanks to the efforts of game ranchers, the industry is beginning to restore the genetics of yesteryear. This means that, because of their scarcity, high-value animals are bred in smaller areas for better control, secure survival of the genetic quality, and also the protection of the farmer’s investment. In time, as numbers increase countrywide, practice will change. *This is absolute nonsense, Stafford’s article is one-sided and gives no perspective.*

The claim of “advocacy work with hunters” – it may be true that some hunters are short-sighted in their actions, but articles like Stafford’s clearly reflect a one-sided approach. This is also a major contribution towards the breaking up of our own market.

The claim “real damage has been done by the realisation that there is

no viable market". Again, assumption stated as fact. *This is not true.* The perspective of the worst drought in 100 years is not provided in this article. Whether you are a livestock farmer or a game farmer, the toll taken by the drought was extremely high. The farmer has no choice but to get rid of his animals in times where bank accounts are under pressure, feeding bills and co-operative accounts must be paid. Come and walk a few steps in the farmer's shoes during a drought, then we can talk again. This type of malicious propaganda, originating from within the ranks of one of the beneficiaries (local hunters) of what we do, is now added to the long list of obstacles and barriers facing the game farmer every day.

**PERSPECTIVE**

Let's enjoy our genetically manipulated oranges, grapes, peaches and all other genetically manipulated fruit. Let's roast our genetically manipulated corn and eat our genetically modified maize porridge. Let's drink our genetically improved wine, and let our children play with our genetically inbred dogs and cats of different colour variations as well. Enjoy the exotic Merino lamb chop we braai on a Saturday, while we enjoy the beautiful colour variations of flowers, such as our wonderful yellow 'Mandela's Gold' *strelitzia*, yellow *clivias* and so on.

Known naturally occurring specimens of golden wildebeest and black

impala were observed in 1920 and 1960 respectively. Colour variations in birds, plants and animals, including humans, are a natural occurrence, and exist all over the world. This is a wonderful opportunity to generate an income out of something rare and extraordinary, to the benefit of all our wildlife species. We love our game, and are passionate about the protection and enhancement of our beautiful game species.

The insinuation, in the article under

review, that we are destroying our own industry is a cowardly attempt to discredit our trade, and reflects poorly on those individuals and the members of their organisation. We will not stand for it! The game farmer must also be able to survive sustainably, like the wildlife. *Let's turn this unilateral criticism into a positive, towards a sustainable future. Consider what we have done and still can do with a colourful approach to our country and industry. The sky could be the limit.*



**WILDEBEEST GRAND SLAM!**  
Photo courtesy Waltie van der Walt.



# The Colour hunt has begun!

Send letters, comments or photos for this column to:  
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