

Trophy care during the hunt

Congratulations! You are going on safari. Whether you are organizing it yourself, or relying on an experienced booking agent, a successful trip requires detailed planning. One detail that can be overlooked is the care and proper treatment of trophy skins and horns while in Africa.

Unfortunately, it is common for taxidermists to receive African skins that are damaged by careless field care and skinning. A good taxidermist can work wonders to restore most damaged trophies to a usable condition, but the appearance of the finished product has much to do with how the trophies were handled during the hunt.

Hunt with a reputable, experienced, and professional safari company and most of your worries regarding trophy care can be forgotten. A good Professional Hunter (PH) has a lot of responsibilities, and trophy care is one of the most important. Your PH should know how to handle your trophies and they should take it very seriously. You, as a hunter, should also be aware of the basic requirements of trophy field care so that you can inform your PH, if needed. Remember that it is your hunt, your money, and your animal. Do not be afraid to speak up if you notice any careless treatment of your trophies.

Make a goal to insure that your trophies are cared for properly. When checking references of a safari company it is advisable that you ask questions regarding trophy care. Ask previous clients if their skins and horns were received in good condition and in a reasonable amount of time. Were the horns damaged by direct heat or over-boiling? Did the skins have excessive hair loss or excessive holes from skinning cuts? Do your homework on this before your trip, and you should have little to worry about. When you arrive in Africa, you must convey to your PH that the preservation of your trophies is very important to you.

Take some close up photographs of your trophy after the kill. Photos of the nose, ears, eyes, and horns may be valuable to document any scars, ear tears or other features that you may want preserved on your finished mount. Close-up photos of the horns will also help you confirm that the horns you receive belong to the animal you shot. If you are planning on any mounts with realistic habitats, take some photos of the surrounding area of the kill. These photos can help your taxidermist re-create the soil color and environment of your animal, enhancing your memory of the hunt. Field measurements of the animal are not needed, as your taxidermist can obtain these from the tanned skin.

When loading and transporting your trophy in a hunting vehicle, take precautions to protect the hide and horns. Your trophy animal may be skinned in the field or transported to a skinning area. Avoid dragging the animal as much as possible. Prevent the hide from touching the hot metal on the vehicle by first laying it on a tarp. The animal should be protected from being jostled around in the back of a truck where the horn tips could be broken. Sections of flexible tubing slipped over the horn tips can also provide some protection. Anything that rubs against the hide such as straps or ropes can damage the hair. If the animal is strapped down, make sure the straps are only rubbing against areas of the hide that are not needed for the desired mount. Keep the animal shaded.

Insist that your animals be skinned as soon as possible after they are killed, especially in warm weather. If you are hunting in hot weather or in tropical, humid areas, do not delay in properly caring for the skins. Leaving this chore until the next day is asking for problems. The bacteria that cause hair loss or hair “slip” begins to work as soon as an animal dies. Heat and humidity will accelerate this bacteria growth. Animals that are kept in a cool, dry, shaded place, and skinned, fleshed, and salted quickly will remain in the best possible condition. They should have very minimal, or no hair loss, which will improve the look of a finished mount. Very large,

thick-skinned animals like giraffe require additional care. In order for the salt to penetrate, the flesh side of the skins must be thinned or scored. Make sure your PH has the experience, a trained crew, and the facilities to handle these animals before you pull the trigger.

Before the first skinning cut, give specific instructions to your PH regarding the type of mount you would like. After your photos are taken, the animal should be moved into the shade as soon as possible and plans should be made to skin the animal. Excess skin can be trimmed by your taxidermist. It is better to have too much skin, than not enough. It is common to see sections of the arm pit area or brisket completely missing from a cape. This kind of skinning error is difficult to repair. A pedestal mount requires more skin than a shoulder mount. If you want a pedestal mount, the circular incision around the body should start at the half way point of the animal's back, much farther back than for a traditional shoulder mount. Also insure that any life-sized mounts have all four feet attached to the skin. Some hunters choose to give knives to the skinners as gifts or tips. It is advisable not to do this until the very end of your safari. You do not want a skinner to use an unfamiliar blade. Please understand that this is not a condemnation of all the skinners in Africa. There are many experts of the trade. This information is simply intended to provide you with the ability to identify potential problems if they occur. Be thankful that you do not have to do the skinning yourself, as this involves many hours of tedious work

Every inch of the flesh side of the skin should be heavily salted. Salt draws moisture out of the skin, locks the hair in place, and prevents bacteria growth. Fine salt is better than coarse "rock" salt for drying skins. Ask your PH if you can see the skinning and salting area, and if possible, drop in periodically to insure that your trophies are being skinned, fleshed, and salted with care. A salting rack that allows both drainage of fluids and air circulation is ideal. Once the initial moisture has been drawn out of the skin, the wet salt should be removed and the skins should be salted again. Make sure all the ears have been turned inside out and salted. This will prevent the common problem of hair slip on the ears. Properly salted, dried, folded, and tagged skins should then be stored in a safe, dry area where they will not be damaged by animals and insects.

Horns and skulls should be carefully treated to avoid damage. During the cleaning process, skulls are commonly boiled to loosen and remove the meat. It is important that the horns remain out of the water in the cook pot. Horns that are boiled for a long period of time and come in close contact with high heat can be "cooked" and damaged. Once this occurs, their dried, cracked appearance can never be restored to their original beauty. Over-boiling skulls causes the bone to become weak and brittle. This leaves the nasal area prone to breakage and in extreme case, causes the horn cores to crumble into powder.

It is recommended that you personally attach your laminated identification/shipping tags to all your trophies. They must contain your name and the correct shipping address and relevant contact information. One tag should be attached to the skull, one for the cape/skin, and one for the back skin or tail as needed. These tags help to insure that the trophies you receive from Africa are YOUR trophies. These tags are your best insurance to prevent any mix-ups.