

THE ETHICS OF FAIR CHASE

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Oh Brother ... He does get it!

Since this is the first time this column appears on the inside back cover in *Fair Chase*, it seems an opportune time to say some things you might not expect—especially from me. I hope to open your eyes a bit wider and broaden the context of our discussion as we explore the ethics of hunting. I also want to demonstrate how open-minded I can be...

How's this?—"This column is a great opportunity to spread the good word about hunting ethics. Instead, I'm just making noise because I am too self-righteous to be taken seriously."

Where the heck did that come from, you ask? Let me tell you about my brother Mike.

Mike and I grew up hunting and fishing, mostly together. What is surprising is that, even with everything Dad and I taught him, his hunting theology is not exactly the same as mine. Don't get me wrong. He is not "off the deep end" by any stretch. Our differences are more a matter of nuance and fine detail. For the record, he is a dandy hunter and a great shot, and I'd hunt with him pretty much anywhere, most any day. What is difficult for me to understand is that when he talks about the big picture of the hunting community, he just doesn't get it. Or at least I thought he didn't get it.

When Mike and I share a campfire and a little of what we call "brown water," we tend to hyper-analyze the parameters of the hunt equation. Lately, when I am about to lay down the "proper definition of the hunt" and some of my best "Fair Chase do's and don'ts," he lets me know that many of my positions are way too narrow, too black and white. He says, true or not, my views don't have reach because many hunters are tired of hearing they are doing it wrong. He has even gone so far as to say, "you guys are the leaders, but you are losing your edge," and "your standing in the community is at risk." He says we are too dogmatic and inflexible, and we are driving away the very people we want to influence.

Imagine my indignation! Sitting in my ivory tower, the truth is the truth, plain and simple. I am a protector of all that is virtuous and right about hunting, and I proselytize a message that is self-evident. I cannot compromise because the message will get diluted and eventually lost. But then again, even the finest preacher needs folks to listen, or his efforts are for naught.

If I swallow this bitter pill, what then? How do we establish, practice, preach, and protect the "right" hunter's creed and at the same time accept other versions of it? Or perhaps more importantly, are we so high and mighty that we don't care if we alienate some for what we determine is best for the hunting community? Sounds a bit arrogant in those terms, doesn't it? This is not good leadership. In fact, it is ineffective and likely, even erosive.

In the end analysis, we need to highlight the honesty, integrity, and respect that underlie the concept

of fair chase while we reach as many hunters as possible with a message they can abide. By example, hunters that have limited opportunities to pursue game do not want us to head them off at the pass by unduly criticizing what may be their only reasonable access to hunting. If we lose ground with these folks, we end up preaching to the choir.

As this newfound perspective came flooding in, I began to see fair chase as an ideal. It is sustainable, defensible, and it is aligned with the North American Model; to us, it is hunting at its finest and purest, but it is **not the only way**. If one cannot meet all of the requirements of fair chase hunting, he or she should not stay home and consider the virtues of vegetarianism.

Let's continue to preach the good word but let's leave plenty of room for our brothers and sisters to do the best they can. Let's agree on what we can agree on and, let's openly and honestly discuss our differences without condemnation and exclusion.

I believe we can agree that the pursuit should be as uncompromised as possible. I also believe we can all agree that the animal should be as wild and natural as possible, and it should have the greatest opportunity to elude the hunter. For me, the differentiator between a kindred hunter and one that is not is a matter of intent. By example, if one goes afield with the intent of circumventing or short-cutting the pursuit in the name of antler inches, I have a very hard time listening to their story.

We all have a primal, DNA-level need to hunt. Some of us have more layers of civilization in our way, but it is there. It is not my place or intent to dissuade or diminish your inner hunter; quite the contrary. I/we should all celebrate the hunt, the hunters, the game animals and wild places. We need to be as united in our celebration as we can. There can be honest disagreement on the nuance and fine details, but we cannot let profiteers and carpetbaggers influence the public perception of our community. We need to stay vigilant on this front because there are more threats to our way of life every day. I intend to continue to point them out for what they are so we can include them in our debate.

Remember, we are hunters, not collectors. We conduct ourselves with skill and knowledge, and we accept the fact that the outcome is uncertain. We are tireless in our pursuits, and we do not choose to compromise the circumstance that nature provides. We need to be a united, strong community based on integrity, honesty and respect. Within these guidelines, we owe each other some tolerance if we are going to be a resilient, sustainable, and relevant group.

Thanks Mike. ■