

# Field Ethics...

## or how to kill with a clean conscience

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*Photos courtesy of Author*

**Wayne's rifle rang melon-size gongs at 780 yards. But he belled to within 125 yards of this buck.**



Between a grasp of hunting's role in conservation and the collapse of a well-shot animal looms a considerable gap. It reaches from muzzle to harvest—beyond science, philosophy, and that primal urge to hunt. It is where you find or dismiss ethics.

Ethical behavior isn't just meaning well. It's the exercise of restraint; denying yourself at times to ensure humane kills. With age, most hunters find restraint easier. Killing becomes less an imperative than a finish. Properly executed, it seals a memorable event. Clumsily shot, a dying animal disgraces you.

In another life decades ago, I drove a log truck—a '63 Peterbilt with 20 unsynchronized gears. It wore a loading boom and grapple, so I could attack remote decks by dawn, filling the bunks with 40 tons of Oregon lodgepole or p-pine before fallers and skidder crews arrived.

One night in a narrow canyon, the headlamps picked movement from roadside. A mule deer doe struggled to rise. She couldn't. I left the Cummins rattling at idle and walked to her. A hunter had shot off her jaw. I crushed her skull with a hammer.

I had no deer license. But this was hardly sport. A charity killing. It seemed the right thing to do.

Years later, on prairie under a dark ceiling, I spied a deer trudging through sugary snow. Though far off, it seemed odd in form. I sneaked closer. Its jaw was hanging. At 100 yards my softpoint punched its lungs. This was not the buck I wanted.

Lest you think me an angel of mercy, I'll concede, with shame, that I've crippled animals too. A few hunters I've met have insisted they've never lost game. Exceedingly skilled and careful marksmen? Lucky? The benefit of doubt permits both possibilities. Hunters who've bagged every beast they've fired upon have an enviable record. But failure to retrieve is hardly evidence of a miss. In fact, a marginal hit is more likely. To miss, your sight must drift far off the mark—outside the vitals, off the animal. Game that runs away is as likely to be injured as merely frightened. A sprint at the shot means the bullet did strike.

"I aim for the head. So I kill quickly or miss." Even before I found the bloody aftermath of such folly afield, I knew this claim was bogus. The brain of a deer, elk or bear is relatively small. A tennis ball-size; generously, a softball. Nose and jaw are several times as big. On only four occasions have I deliberately sent bullets to the brain. All were very close shots.

Neck hits hold the same risk. Shatter the spine, and the game is yours. Miss it, and the trail can be long. With luck, your bullet will have nicked jugular or carotid. If not, you'll find little blood. Your bullet will have lacerated muscle and esophagus. Infection is apt to finish what you started—days later.

Humane shot placement is just part of acquitting yourself well as a hunter. But it's increasingly a pivotal act, as riflemen and archers both attempt longer shots. Planting bullet or broadhead in vitals gets harder as range increases. Hitting the shoulder crease at distance can be more difficult than a brain shot or one to the upper spine at ordinary yardage.

The Very Long Poke, a challenge for riflemen, has become anathema to hunters who



Memories of any hunt begin well before the shot. Your behavior affects all aspects of the adventure.

Risking failure with a closer approach than necessary tests your hunting skills, increases reward.



think it an affront to the tradition of fair chase. But like nuclear power, long shooting has no capacity for evil. People can bend either to unethical purpose. Arguably, killing at distances so great the animal has no awareness of danger smacks of assassination, not sport. For some riflemen, that's okay. They've chosen the challenge of the shot over that of the approach. Which is harder—sneaking close so pie-plate accuracy kills, or, from afar, keeping bullets within 2 minutes of angle? They're different tasks.

Long shooting can boost the odds of crippling. At distance, follow-up shots come harder. There's delay in reaching the animal or its trail. A bullet's arc gets steeper (and correct range read more critical) at distance. Wind has greater effect. But mostly, distance is a multiplier, less the cause of error than a factor increasing it. Over many yards, small flaws in marksmanship become more significant. Still, an accurate shot can be made at great distance. Each year, bad marksmanship delivers many crippling hits up close.

I'm a get-close guy. While I delight in banging steel with bullets at half a mile, memorable hunts are those that show me

reflections in the animal's eye. An elk I arrowed at 7 yards, a buck skewered at 12 both qualify. A big moose dropped to my rifle at 32 steps, my first elephant at 16. Of course, I've botched many finishes. An elk that almost stepped on me refused to stay for a broadhead. I managed to miss a fine buck at 14 feet—with a rifle! But such embarrassments age gently in memory, brightened by the intimacy denied hunters who let flat-flying missiles close the distance.

An ethical shot is not necessarily sport. Sport can be unethical. In New Mexico I once took a very long poke at an animal that couldn't know it was in peril. My hunt was almost over, and I'd had no other chance. Conditions were perfect, my rifle a proven champ at extreme range. I knew the bullet would kill. It did. But though the week had challenged me, there was no sport in that 600-yard finish.

Many years earlier, bowhunting in steeps above the yawning Snake River in Idaho, I spied an elk and scrambled to within 55 yards. Alas, I'm a 30-yard archer. My arrow nipped the quartering elk wide of my mark. An irresponsible shot. But my blood was up,

Wayne's last-day, free-range aoudad ended a challenging hunt. But ethics has little to do with sport.



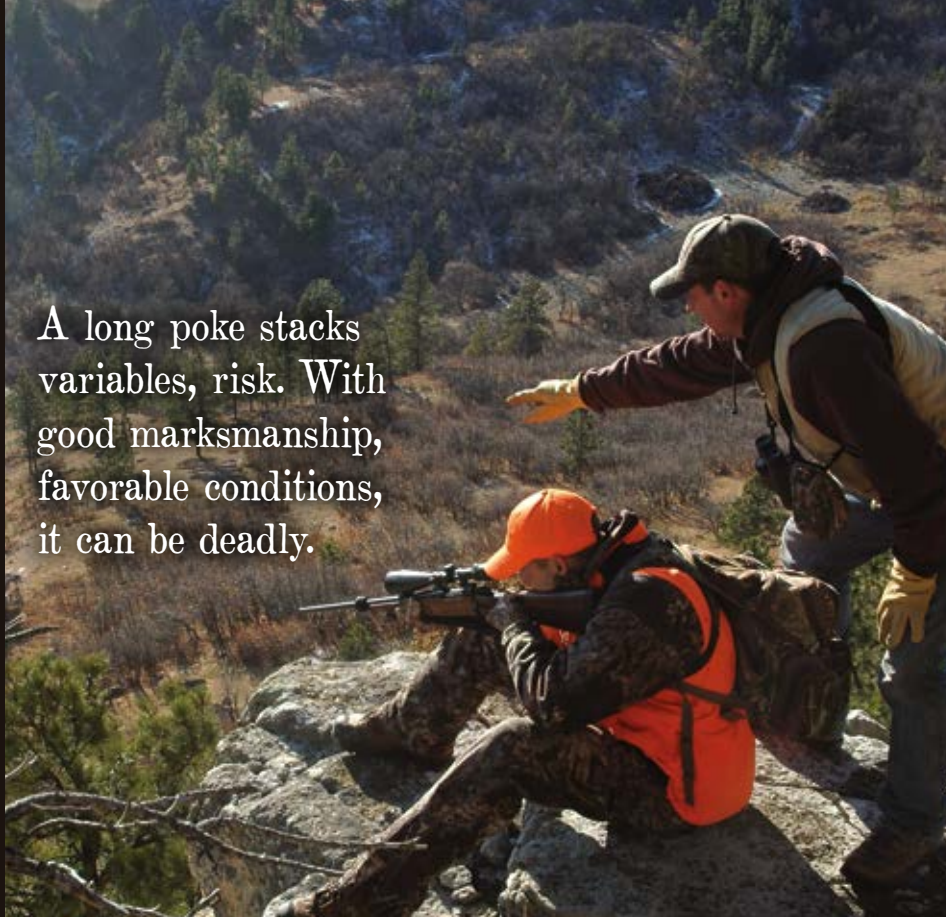
## Milestones?

Efforts to kill at distance date to the bowstring and atlatl. Centuries later, Holless Wilbur Allen's compound bow (developed in 1966, patented three years later) alarmed traditionalists. While compounds now dominate sales, and bowmen loose mechanical broadheads at 300 fps, Pope and Young records show average kill distance has increased by only 1.5 yards in the last decade, to 23.8. The skirmish has shifted to crossbows. Fifteen years ago, three states permitted them in archery seasons. The tally is now 24. More kills with less effort?

Meanwhile, the 300-yard rifle shot, made practical by belted magnums and mid-century progress in telescopic sights, has become a point-blank event. Hunters hurl bullets two, even three times as far. But a tiny percentage of kills happen past dead-on distance. Most game falls within 200 yards. Shot distance is a bit like automobile speed: numbers grow in conversation. Few motorists bury the speedometer needle or would gain advantage if they did. But equipping rifles to reach where hunters once had to walk remains a lucrative industry.

**Short-range limits  
hike difficulty.  
The mandate  
of a humane  
shot applies  
whatever  
the level  
of sport.**

**A long poke stacks  
variables, risk. With  
good marksmanship,  
favorable conditions,  
it can be deadly.**



and I loosed another shaft, which skewered the heart. The bull sprinted, then tumbled down a slide. Sport? Yes. But this kill was hardly certain, the shot hardly ethical.

Another time I was less fortunate. Sneaking along a steep, timbered hill toward a bedded bull, I belied to my last cover, a rock, 120 yards off. Patiently I waited for the elk to stand and turn. When it did, I sent a bullet to the crease. I saw and heard the hit. Spot on! The big six-point dashed downhill—a death-sprint, I was sure. But blood, pink and profuse at first, thinned on a track that led me into the night. Next morning, I lost the trail. My .30-30 bullet had likely struck the lungs high and done insufficient damage to anchor this tenacious beast. A local boy found the bull a mile away the following spring. With my saddle gun, I'd given the elk a sporting chance, and exercised restraint. But the kill was not humane.

"You talk as if you can kill an animal ethically. What do you say to people who think killing itself is unethical?" Hunters might well back themselves into this corner, just to engage with the perspective. It is hardly far-fetched. We in the Brotherhood, steeped in wildlife management principles and loath to give the shadow of a sop to the dim rabble calling for our Winchester, too readily assume humane kills made within the law qualify as ethical behavior. By our standards, they do. But we also defer to rules that block shooting at certain times, in certain places. We endorse full protection for some

species. To people who do not hunt, killing as management seems odd. That it actually benefits the hunted population is counter-intuitive.

Education can turn receptive minds—or at least bring understanding. Programs I've conducted to introduce more women to hunting have flipped the switch for many. With the crosswire quivering on a rib, the murky concept of predation crystallizes. Explanation can wait.

Those who rail against hunting may call fair chase a euphemism, as the hunter, in losing, is not asked to pay with his life. But forfeiting a shot because he (or she) insists on closing to spitwad range has merit. It shows a willingness to put time and effort on the line, and pit hunting skills against the animal's superior senses. Tackling a grizzly with your bare hands or wrestling a leopard would add another level of sport. Neither trial would brand you as an ethical wonder.

Hewing to game regulations and taking only shots that all but ensure quick kills, you put ethical behavior ahead of a trophy. It's hard to argue that you must, further, close to some arbitrary distance or forego specific hardware. I enjoy hunting with recurve bows and iron-sighted lever guns. But scoped bolt rifles make most of the humane kills each season. Ethics is not what you carry. It is a choice of behavior.

Neither shot distance nor equipment is responsible for deer that die of starvation at roadside. ■