

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Societal Impact of Wild Game as Food



William A. Demmer
PRESIDENT
Boone and Crockett Club

Hunting and fishing have been part of my life since I could hold a rifle or a fishing rod. There was something glorious as a kid in building a fire on a lakefront beach, frying up a fresh-caught batch

of fish and sharing the experience with your fishing buddies. That same appreciation for venison came a little later. I was once invited for a surprise fall meal at a friend's house in East Lansing Michigan. My friend, Rex Schlaybaugh, with whom I've shared many subsequent hunting and fishing experiences, is best described by Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac's* essay on the minimalist sportsman: He is the hunter or fisherman who challenges himself with just enough equipment to take down or catch his prey. His primary tools are instinct, knowledge of the prey, its habitat and its behavior.

Rex is also a wonderful cook, and the meal that he prepared awakened me to the joy of a well-prepared wild game meal. Our feast that evening consisted of fried brook trout caught the previous spring, just-ripened beefsteak tomatoes, crusty bread and venison backstrap scallops that Rex sautéed over melted butter and garlic in a cast-iron

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skillet. I've reflected on that feast many times over the past 42 years.

My wife Linda will tell you that I am comfortable in the kitchen and can produce some excellent meals. Wild game preparation, though, had not been a priority of mine to refine. That was the case until I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in my maternal grandfather's country of birth, Sweden. I had been invited as the Boone and Crockett's executive vice president of

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conservation to speak with and share ideas with the Swedish Hunting Association, a hunting organization that predates the Boone and Crockett Club by more than 50 years. My friend and Michigan State University professor in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Dr. Shawn Riley, had received a year's Fulbright Scholarship for the study of Sweden's moose management. Along with Shawn, I was given the privilege to participate in a moose hunt and spent three days in a traditional Swedish moose camp.

Sweden, a country with a land mass that is three times the size of Michigan, has the challenge to manage and maintain a

moose herd of approximately 500,000. The timber industry controls most of the land in the northern half of the country as timber and engineered wood products have been a key Swedish export for many years. Managing moose who chomp on young pine samplings is critical to the health of the industry, and it seems that managing the moose herd to a population of 500,000 is the desired quota. The Swedish Hunting Association (SWA), in cooperation with the timber industry, has divided northern Sweden into 20 to 30-square-mile hunting leases where teams of eight hunters per lease take to the forests to harvest their moose. Moose venison in Sweden is highly desirable both for the domestic table and for many restaurants. A successful season for an eight-man hunting team might mean up to three moose being harvested, which provides not only enough meat for each member's larder but additional meat that can be sold to the market and potentially pay for their hunting lease expenses.

The more that I learned about Swedish attitudes regarding the consumption of wild game, the more I thought about the positive impact that greater appreciation and enjoyment of wild game consumption could have on the future of hunting in North America. In Sweden, a country of 10 million people, there are approximately 800,000 hunters, not unlike the population and hunting demographics of my home state of Michigan. As in Michigan, the hunter is in the minority of the population, and we owe the right to pursue our passion to the will of the majority. In Sweden, studies continue to show that over 80 percent of the population supports the right to hunt if the meat from the wing or hoof goes to the plate but only 50 percent



supports trophy hunting. I shared that bit of knowledge with the then Director of the Michigan DNR, Rebecca Humphries. She shared with me that her Michigan DNR studies showed almost the same thing, that 80 percent of the people support hunting for food while only 50 percent support trophy hunting.

After three terrific days in moose camp, our hunting association host took us on a visit to a SWA facility. There are six states in Sweden, and each state has a hunting association facility to manage hunting training seminars, license requirements, coordinate conservation challenges, etc. A major feature in each association facility is a gourmet kitchen that would make Emerill Lagasse jealous. Regular wild-game cooking classes are provided to the public. Wonderful cookbooks are offered for sale that display the proper handling of game—from the field through the fabrication process to the creation of fabulous meals.

The Boone and Crockett Club mission statement challenges the Club to work toward a goal of securing the right to hunt for this and all future generations. A critical part of the right to hunt is to keep the majority of the body politic in favor of hunting. It seems pretty obvious to me that the more wild game becomes part of the fabric of North American culture, the more effective our efforts will be in ensuring the right to hunt.

Our Boone and Crockett Extension Specialist Jordan Burroughs has taken a big step forward for conservation by partnering with Erin McDonough, director of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs. These two conservation specialists have created a dynamic new wild game food program called “Gourmet Gone Wild.” The program has been designed to present to young professionals the flavor and health benefits of consuming wild game. Gourmet Gone Wild incorporates an executive chef, who with the organization’s skills of Jordan and Erin, prepares wild game meals including wild-harvested fish, fowl, and hoofed protein for regionally assembled groups of young professionals. The ultimate hope of this program is to inspire these young professionals to not only develop an appreciation of the benefits of wild game consumption but to inspire these people into the stream, forest, and field for the experience of harvesting their own gourmet meal!

I want to thank Steve Williams, Katherine Julian, and Jordan Burroughs for their collaboration on the following article. It is Jordan’s fervent belief that hunting will connect us to our food, connect us to a place and to nature, allow us to live and eat as our bodies have adapted, and to connect us to each other. ■

William A. Demmer

This deer was harvested in the Hunting for Sustainability course in Wisconsin. Participants also learned how to properly butcher and handle game meat. (ABOVE)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL WATT



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Eating Wild to Eat Well: How an Interest in Healthy, Sustainable, Wild Protein is Bringing New Audiences to the Hunter's Table

By Steve Williams, Jordan Burroughs, and Katherine Julian

Food plays a central role in our quality of life, and in fact, perpetuates life on earth. Over thousands of years, our relationship with our food has changed from one in which individuals had to gather/harvest/grow their own food in order to survive, to one in which much of this process is done for us, leaving us with little knowledge of how food moves from field and pasture to fork and plate. For some, this missing information is welcome—we don't need or may not want to know how chickens lived before they became our chicken tenders, or how and with what our strawberries were fertilized—as long as food arrives looking fresh and ready to purchase at a clean and convenient supermarket. For others, this knowledge gap represents a widening and troubling disconnect between our food, our land, and our communities.

How do we re-engage with food, the land, and our communities? The interest in eating foods grown and produced closer to home is described by a rising social movement, the local food or “locavore” movement. Basic tenets of the local food movement suggest that by eating locally produced food, one can reduce the negative environmental impacts of food transportation, support sustainable economies by keeping money in the community, and build community ties as consumers interact more directly with the people who grow and harvest their food. It is an expansion of the farmer's market concept, except it adds homegrown gardens and securing food by oneself. An increasing number of urbanites, exurbanites, and

suburbanites are addressing the disconnect between land and food by raising backyard chickens, growing and canning their own food, acquiring memberships to local food cooperatives and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and even becoming hunters themselves. While hunting once required native tribes to travel great distances with migrating animal herds, today, paradoxically, human development (suburban landscapes in particular) provides an opportunity for families to hunt and eat game acquired closer to home.

Although little empirical research has been conducted to understand how many adults are engaged in hunting through an interest in local, sustainable wild protein, about 10 percent of state wildlife managers are crediting the locavore movement for having an influence on rising participation in hunting. For the first time since the 1980s (a point when hunting participation started to decline), 28 states experienced increased participation, as evidenced by resident license sales between 2006 and 2011. These results, published in a 2013 report by the American Sportfishing Association and Responsive Management, come as a boon when wildlife managers and conservation-minded, nongovernmental organizations are increasingly concerned about funding wildlife conservation activities. In addition to the 10 percent of state wildlife agency managers whose states observed increases in hunting participation, 42 percent attributed increases in participation to their youth hunter recruitment and retention programs, 39 percent credited marketing campaigns, and

32 percent reported that they felt their adult hunter recruitment and retention programs were making a difference.

While many adult hunter recruitment efforts have not been fully evaluated, adults' interest in hunting and their motivation to hunt for food has been documented by popular media over the last three years with an explosion of articles this year.

Additional research is needed to determine the full range of motivations that bring new adult hunters to the table, but at least preliminarily, it appears that acquiring local, healthy, sustainable, free-range protein may be a gateway motivation to support and participate in hunting. Responsive Management reported that 35 percent of hunters surveyed in a 2013 study indicated their primary motivation for hunting was to secure meat, up from 22 percent in 2006. In an open-ended question posed during the study, 68 percent identified obtaining local, natural or “green” food as an influence in their decision to go hunting. Some new adult hunters who grew up in urban or suburban areas did not have immediate family members who hunted, did not have opportunities to go hunting as a youth, and for many, became interested in hunting due to an interest in wild game as a food source. Some of these new hunters are motivated to hunt by their desire to take personal responsibility for the meat they are eating and are intrigued by their newfound access and ability to try new and unique wild proteins not typically found at the corner market. In addition, hunters are motivated by the health benefits associated with harvesting and consuming wild game.

EXAMPLES OF THE DIVERSITY OF ARTICLES AND BOOKS THAT HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THIS TOPIC INCLUDE:

The Mindful Carnivore by Tovar Cerulli

Call of the Mild by Lily Raff MacCaulou

Girl Hunter by Georgia Pellegrini

The Scavenger's Guide to Haute Cuisine by Steven Rinella

The Beginner's Guide to Hunting Deer for Food by Jackson Landers

Oprah Magazine “The Case for Responsible Meat Eating,” by Steven Rinella

Slate.com “Hipsters Who Hunt: More liberals are shooting their own supper,” by Emma Marris

The New York Times “The Urban Deerslayer,” by Sean Patrick Farrell



How do we re-engage with food, the land, and our communities?

What are state wildlife agencies doing to introduce this new audience to hunting and conservation? Recruiting new adult hunters has become a growing priority for many wildlife agencies. Adult hunter-recruitment courses centered on wild game as a sustainable food source are beginning to occur across the country. Many of these programs include wild game tasting during each session as well as a mentored hunt. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) teaches adult learn-to-hunt programs and also sponsors a community college course (Hunting for Sustainability) for adults who want to learn to hunt. Hunt, Fish, Eat is another food-centric adult hunter-education program offered by the Indiana DNR. Michigan DNR, along with Michigan State University, the Boone and Crockett Club, and others started the Gourmet Gone Wild program to introduce local, healthy, sustainably harvested wild game to young professionals. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department partnered with Central Market Cooking Schools to develop Wild in the Kitchen, featuring wild fish- and game-cooking demonstrations and hands-on game-cooking classes. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife offers game butchery classes in collaboration with the Portland Meat Collective. Cornell Cooperative Extension hosts workshops on wild game and fish preparation (e.g., venison canning, jerky-making) and is also working on a nutritional analysis of select fish and game. These are only a few examples of the innovative ways agencies and partners are reaching out to this new demographic.

To truly embrace this new demographic, we may need to address policy measures to expand locavore involvement in hunting by reaching out to these new adult hunters. State fish and wildlife agencies should embrace new-to-hunting adults' interest in hunting for sustainable wild protein as a means of controlling overabundant wild game populations as well as increasing public support and conservation funding. For example, overabundant populations of deer and geese challenge agencies, especially in urban and suburban areas. Motor vehicle accidents, vegetation damage, and public health concerns could be addressed by controlled hunting

opportunities inviting locavores as participants and agency political supporters. Numerous states educate new hunters with respect to hunting, field dressing, butchering, and food preparation techniques. These activities are not instinctive and must be passed from one individual to another. Separate and customized hunter education classes that focus on the different motivations and learning styles of older would-be hunters would provide a meaningful learning experience among similar-aged participants. These classes should be tailored to address hunting's social issues in order to provide participants with knowledge of hunters' roles and responsibilities in wildlife conservation. Expanded mentored hunting opportunities for new adult hunters would address the critical social support for hunting—as the saying goes, “it takes one to make one.” Finally, the Hunters Feeding the Hungry programs that have been established in many states provide an excellent means of reducing overabundant populations while providing healthy and necessary protein to disadvantaged individuals. Social acceptance of hunting is directly tied to the consumption of harvested game animals.

There is no more important connection between humans and land than the food and water that land provides us for sustenance. We should celebrate hunting as a means to secure sustainable food for our families, our friends, and ourselves. We should cherish the public stewardship of our fish and wildlife resources not only for their food value but also for the spiritual and aesthetic values they provide us. We must also pass down the tradition and heritage associated with Thanksgiving—providing thanks for the blessings of natural and sustainable food that allowed our forefathers and ourselves to appreciate and live in this incredibly rich world. ■

TOP TO BOTTOM: Katherine Julian harvested her first deer through Wisconsin's Learn to Hunt Program with support from landowner Rodney VanBeek (seen here with Katherine and her deer). She also learned how to process and package the meat.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL WATT AND WILLIAM FETZER

