

A HUNT ETHIC

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Boone and Crockett member Aldo Leopold, considered the father of wildlife management, coined the term “Land Ethic” based on his observations of the need to manage the land and the wildlife living on it as a biotic community—one in which man is a part. He concluded that simply managing one species within an ecosystem and forsaking all others was ultimately destructive to the community. He further believed that whether the responsibility of government (public land) or the individual (private land), an overall land ethic had to drive what is right and for the greater good. He provided us with this litmus test:

“Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”
-Aldo Leopold

Leopold may have set us on course of a Land Ethic, but knowing man was the fulcrum, and because of our inevitable use of natural resources, including hunting, he also pointed us to a “Hunt Ethic”—a parallel path to his Land Ethic.

“Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”

- Aldo Leopold

The concept of an ethical code of conduct and the need for it was discussed at the very first meeting of the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887, long before Leopold’s time. Theodore Roosevelt and the other founding fathers of the Club believed strongly in wise and prudent use of natural resources. Club member George Bird Grinnell would later call this practice conservation.

The commercial market hunting industry at the time was not deemed anything remotely close to conservation. It had no code, no honor, no ethic, gave no regard for the wildlife resources of the future, nor what the public thought about hunting. It was the opinion of Club members that if what remained of our wildlife, especially big game, were to survive, commercial market-hunting had to be eliminated. The Club further believed that legitimate sportsmen needed something to distance the traditions of hunting from commercial market gunning. At the time an increasingly angered public was wrongfully lumping for-market slaughter and legitimate hunting together. Since the killing of wildlife for profit in the most efficient and economical way possible had no code, one was provided by the Club for legitimate sportsmen to follow. The name given was “fair chase.”



Those who cherish hunting—for themselves and for future generations—understand that hunting is a privilege to be recognized, cherished, and maintained by today’s hunters through deeds to benefit wildlife and through establishment and adherence to standards of fair chase.

FAIR CHASE—WHAT AND WHY

Fair chase is the mantra of the Boone and Crockett Club. It is also the title of its quarterly publication and the reason why many sportsmen join the Club. Furthermore, fair chase provides the ethical undergirding that guides the legitimacy of hunting in North America and elsewhere in the world. Ethics—the discipline of dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation—requires definition when determining principles of conduct.

It has been wisely noted that intelligent discourse requires defining terms. The word fair has many meanings and uses in the English language, i.e., fair weather, fair skin, a fair amount of time, fair ball. It is a common belief that when paired with chase, the literal definition of fair chase is being used—treatment that does not favor one over the other. This is to say hunting is fair. It is not. Fair as in fair chase does not imply hunting is fair in that the engagement treats each participant equally, or that each has agreed to an equal set of rules. In hunting, the prey hasn’t agreed to anything, nor does it have an equal, or nearly any, chance to kill the human hunter. The best prey can do is escape the hunter. Rather, the concept of fair chase is based on the alternative definition “of pleasing appearance; desirable; reputable; free from blemish; tolerable; legitimate.” Hunting carried out for pleasure defines the sportsman; one who lives up to the ideals—i.e., the ethical constructs—underlying hunting activities.

Chase is the pursuit of an animal with a chance of catching/killing it. A chaser is one who hunts. Therefore, fair chase occurs when hunting is pursued in a reputable manner. That definition begs elaboration as to what is reputable. The Boone and Crockett Club advocates fair chase as an essential underlying foundation for hunting in modern

society. How, then, does one know when fair chase has been achieved?

The concept of inner restraint is indispensable, yet inadequate in addressing moral issues. It is essential to develop an ethic of virtue wherein positive qualities are developed and, then, reinforced. In ethical hunting, those restraints and virtues can be expressed through constraints upon all actions involved in hunting.

The Boone and Crockett Club believes that fair chase exists when actions involved in hunting pass successfully through four filters:

- (1) complies with applicable laws and regulations,**
- (2) occurs within the bounds of behavior prescribed by hunting organization(s) or a group to which one belongs,**
- (3) matches with personal standards including the reasons why an individual hunts and considering individual skills and capabilities, and**
- (4) The action does not facilitate negative criticism toward hunting in general from those who do not hunt.**

If a hunt meets all four standards, it can be considered fair chase. The hunter can be judged by self, peers, and others as having met those standards. If not, adverse consequences of non-adherence may differ at each level.

Non-compliance with applicable laws and regulations can and should result in

punishment such as fines, incarceration, and/or loss of hunting privileges. Violations of organizational or group standards can result in social disapproval ranging from castigation to dismissal from such a group. Failure to meet personal standards comes to rest on the conscience and self-esteem of the individual. Crossing the line and fostering an overall negative public perception of hunting is an affect that is oftentimes hard to measure but manifests itself in the form of public protests, disparaging print and television editorials, negative teachings at our schools, and passed ballot initiatives, to name a few. Such violations are the responsibility of all sportsmen to police swiftly and hard.

Filters one and two are societal constructs and relatively straightforward—spelled out rules or standards with which to comply. Filter three, development and adherence to individual standards, depend to a large extent, on the individual’s honest evaluation of skills and compliance with those standards. It is critical that the individual honestly evaluates and considers personal skills and abilities in developing personalized standards. The goal is to deliver essentially instant death and to minimize suffering to prey. Filter four is the end game, the purpose; why we should care about how, and what ethical choices mean to the bigger picture of the continuance of hunting and the conservation achieved from hunting.

It is incumbent upon the hunter to develop and practice skills in marksmanship. Then, in the case of big game hunting, the hunter gets within a distance of the prey that will ensure a killing shot and, then, shoots straight using adequate weaponry to ensure an immediate death, or at least a quick and assured recovery. Shots are taken only within distances the hunter has demonstrated the ability to consistently deliver the bullet/arrow on target. It is best,



by far, if the targeted animal is standing or lying versus moving—especially running—when the shot is loosed. There should be adequate light and light-enough wind to allow accurate shooting and, if necessary, the tracking and dispatching of wounded prey. If any are in doubt, fair chase (ethical) hunters let the opportunity pass. If the animal is wounded, it is essential to pursue and dispatch the animal quickly and learn from the experience as to not be repeated.

In the final analysis, fair chase hunting is an ethical construct that defines what is good or bad in the process by outlining moral duties and obligations expressed as standards of conduct. Commitment to fair chase hunting is intended to have a three-fold impact. It is, first, essential to the hunter's personal moral health and self-respect, as hunting should entail more—much more—than killing. Second, in a democratic society, the majority of the citizenry must be supportive, or at least tolerant, of hunting if it is to continue to be supported and considered acceptable. Third, hunters must be considered, and recognized as, primary contributors to and proponents for the overall welfare of all wildlife—especially game animals—and their habitats.

When the general public considers hunting to be less than fair—i.e., less than “desirable, reputable, tolerable, and legitimate”—hunting and hunters will lose their support for and/or tolerance of hunting. That will bring hunters and hunting under

increasing attack. It is important for hunters to understand that they are a distinct minority and a slowly declining percentage of the overall growing population.

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation declares that wildlife belongs to all people—of which hunters are but part. Native non-migratory wildlife are managed under the auspices of the states while migratory wildlife and species declared to be “threatened or endangered” are the responsibility of the federal government. In the United States, while the right to keep and bear arms is constitutionally assured, hunting is a privilege to be repeatedly earned—year after year—by those who hunt. It is well for hunters to remember that in a democracy, privileges, which include hunting, are maintained at the will or sufferance of the people at large.

Adherence to the principles of fair chase by the vast majority of hunters—and the castigation of those who do not adhere to those principles—is critical to sustaining such public support and/or tolerance for hunting. That depends on (1) development, statement, and adherence to fair chase standards in hunting; (2) development and support of federal, state, and private programs that benefit wildlife; (3) establishment and support of private sector organizations that strive to benefit wildlife; and (4) embracing and promulgating ideals of fair chase hunting.

Fair chase hunters are made—not born—as ethics transfer. If hunting is to

continue as a viable part of our culture, it is essential that new hunters replace the old on a continuing basis. Recruits to the ranks of hunter-conservationists must be educated and cultivated to appreciate and adhere to the principles of fair chase and as to their responsibilities to assure proper treatment and management of wildlife—both game and other species.

That begs the question of just how fair chase relates to the Boone and Crockett Club's program for measuring and recognizing outstanding big game trophies (antlers and horns). Compliance with the Club's records program for measuring and honoring trophies of North American big game species is inclusive with the concept of fair chase—but with additional filter(s) to be considered. For example, trophies taken from within high-fenced enclosures are precluded from consideration for inclusion in the Club's records books for trophy heads and horns even if the four filters that define fair chase have been met. Why? In this case, other factors come into play. For example, it is purposeful to exclude such trophies from inclusion in the Club's record books because of the potential enhancement of trophy quality of antlers and horns that can and do take place within enclosures through selective breeding; controlled quantity and quality of dietary supplements; delaying harvest until antler growth/form has approached maximal trophy potential; and other potential manipulations to maximize animal size and antlers and horns. The inclusion of manipulated, unnatural trophies into a data set that is intended for use in future wild- or natural-condition wildlife management decisions and policy, renders this data set tainted and unuseful.

In the final analysis, the statement of, and adherence to, the ethic of fair chase hunting is a lens through which ethical hunters can see and judge their actions and the actions of others. In democratic societies, the future of hunting depends on how the activity is viewed by the majority of the citizenry—most of whom do not hunt, will likely never hunt, and are easy prey for misinformation about hunting. It is well then for ethical hunters to harken to the plea by the Scottish poet Robert Burns and act



It is critical that the individual honestly evaluates and considers personal skills and abilities in developing personalized standards.

Greg Grupenhof took this typical whitetail deer while hunting in Warren County, Ohio in 2009.

A HUNT ETHIC



accordingly:

**Oh wad some power
the gittie gie us**

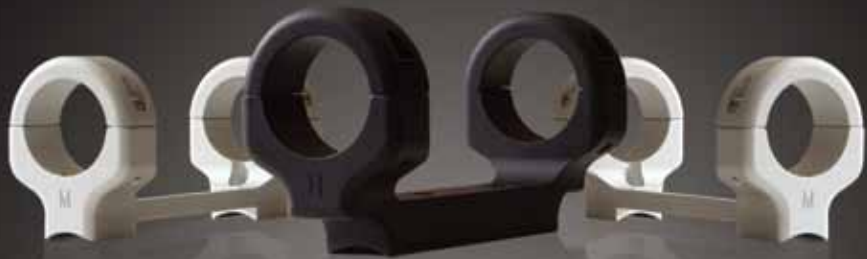
**To see ourselves as
other see us!**

**It wad frae monie a
blunder free us**

An' foolish notion.

Those who cherish hunting, for themselves and for future generations, understand that hunting is a privilege to be recognized, cherished, and maintained by today's hunters through deeds to benefit wildlife and through establishment and adherence to standards of fair chase. Those who cherish the hunting tradition must therefore, always, strive to "see ourselves as others see us." The future of hunting and wildlife conservation hangs in the balance. ■

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Duane M. Vinger took this bighorn sheep in 2010, in Fergus County, Montana.

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