

THE Irreducibility OF Hunt

I would be flattered for my gravestone to read, “A good hunter; a trusted companion; an engaged and contemplative soul who lived his dreams.” Inevitably we “do” but a small proportion of the things we plan, wish, or dream. What hunter doesn’t wish for an African safari, barren ground caribou hunt, javelina bowhunt, speargunning for tuna in the California kelp forests, or a dove hunt in Mexico? These longings are more than daydreams of recreation; we are compelled to hunt from deeper sources than mental musings.

RECOGNIZING A HUNTING INSTINCT

Hunting is a deeply instinctual drive that emerges in virtually all cultures, though it may be masked in some. In much of North America we have unprecedented and almost incomprehensible access to resources. By simply flexing our ankle we unleash the equivalent of a 200-horse team pulling our chariot; where our chariot can bring home the edible, wrapped portions of a large animal without us breaking a sweat or a spear point. Indeed, our hunting heritage may have brought about altered tooth structure, bipedalism, stereoscopic vision, language development, social behavior, tool-use and even sex roles. We embrace these aspects of humanity with aplomb but it raises an important question—what relict behaviors and instincts do we share with our ancestors and how do we fit them into city life full of parking lots, mortgage payments, canned food, and movie theaters?

Most of us have seen the lashing tail and flicking ears of a house cat eyeing an unreachable birdfeeder; it requires little imagination to link tabby to a leopard stalking an impala. So why should we hesitate to acknowledge as instinct the quickened pulse and urgent whispers of hikers happening onto a herd of deer? It

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The author's hunting partner, Mike Sullivan, crossing a frozen lake.

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follows that those who hunt and think about their actions may be finding authentic outlets in which to exercise their instinctive drives. Hunting is shoulder to shoulder with territorial defense, food gathering, and reproduction as primary human drives. This is seen in the depths of commitment and intensities of satisfaction that hunters find in their pursuits. These are things we draw from our deep senses but as modern creatures we need to go one step further. To absorb and process the meaning embedded in the act of hunting also requires we mesh it well with our newly found civilized culture. After all, we spend relatively few of our waking hours engaged in the hunt each year. The remainder we are expected to be gentle and civil citizens.

IS HUNTING AN AUTHENTIC NEED IN PEOPLE?

Our instincts bombard us with messages. We unthinkingly munch South American nuts coated with German chocolate wrapped in aluminum foil from African bauxite mines and sold in North America. We twitch like that window-watching cat as we sit in front of a big screen and vicariously live the panic of a tailback in full flight from a predaceous linebacker. Are these sensations authentic? . . . Undoubtedly yes, because perception is reality in regard to interpreting our senses. We

have all the tools, however deeply buried in our brain stems, to relish the fatty, oily richness of cocoa oils just as distant relatives relished the kidney fat of a mastodon calf. Our instincts are engaged and some flickering primal sense gratifies us with a small endorphin rush for passing that Brazil nut over our taste buds. Elation awaits us for reaching the virtual cover of the end zone uncaptured. But let's give credit for these instincts where credit is due—to the survivors who cut that mastodon calf from the herd and the fleet-footed hunters who outran the short-faced cave bears long ago. Nor are we alone in our vicarious pursuits—what hunter hasn't pondered the dreams of dogs in their whimpering, leg-twitching sleep. Those canine practice chases must be just as real as a young boy's dreams of a Gretsky slapshot or Jordan jumpshot. But that is where it ends. Right in our heads. That is no place to live, no rabbit fur in the canines, no hat trick, no overtime three-point shot, no safari. Hunting moves us from vicarious to reality. We hunt not only to take life, but to give authenticity to our lives.

SEEKING AUTHENTICITY OF EXPERIENCE - IS HUNTING A "SPORT"?

We need to spend time in pursuits in which our instinctual tools allow us to immerse ourselves deeply, but also those where both our physical and intellectual tools can be fully exercised. This is important for us to make sense of our actions. Neither of these tasks is easy, but the rewards are commensurate with the effort. This is the thinking person's endeavor of hunting with intent.

Hunting is the focused intention to find, interact with and try to kill a chosen animal, to sense the well-earned elation, use it to fuel our bodies, share the symbolism and absolutism of meat, tell and retell the events to others. Dwelling upon and learning from the experience brings us full circle. There may well be other activities that can do this too. Bird watching, like baseball, gets one part way to this goal. Active participation

in most sports reaches these steps to some degree; observe, physically act, learn and grow. Elemental physical sports with great doses of anticipation, uncertainty and interaction with other identified forces come to mind—boxing, sailboat racing, whitewater paddling. However, the differences between the meaning of a hunt and the meaning of team sports seem profound in their subtlety.

Sports games are defined by rules concocted by humans to provide a challenge. An arbitrary bar height, a ticking clock, a chalk-delineated area of field. As we are engaged in sports games there is no abandonment of culture to move back in time to ancestral preparations of body, mind and equipment. Quite the opposite, we must use a fair proportion of our senses simply staying within the bounds of the rules because any lapse and we forfeit our goal. Hunters share some of the rule-minding but with hunting, there is an absolute touchstone goal that cuts across the entire activity—killing one's quarry. The finality of killing is an absolute consideration in hunting that is not duplicated elsewhere in sport with the possible exception of bullfighting. Though ethics and social norms are woven into the selection and methods of killing, there is an absolute finality and gravity in deliberately bringing down a game animal.

FAIR CHASE AND TECHNOLOGY

A culture has developed around most forms of hunting but as late as the beginning of the 20th century culture, rules of the chase were still a minor consideration. Passenger pigeons were taken with dynamite, ducks with rock-laden punt cannons, bears with snares, and bison shot to rot from trains. Few objected to any means used in achieving an animal's demise. After all, a cat is not denied its mouse for the certain means of taking it in an enclosed dustbin. Rules have tightened about hunting as a way of prolonging the opportunity to hunt in the face of swelling human populations and more efficient technology. Even today where technology and population lag, Inuit hunters may harpoon seals,



INSET: The author with a fine whitetail taken in Alberta.

RIGHT: A bighorn sheep taken by the author's hunting partner, Mike Sullivan, in the Willmore Provincial Wilderness in Alberta in 2000.

noose rabbits, and collect eggs from goose nests. Canada's Woodland Cree may set snares for moose, and shoot sharptailed grouse on their leks. A Dene' hunter may shoot swimming caribou at a good crossing and tow them from his motorboat's transom back to camp for dog food. These are honorable, utilitarian takings to fill predatory needs. However, as human populations increase, these activities will, of necessity, diminish. Laws, band rulings or taboos will likely crop up pragmatically to prevent their recurrence. To most people geographically or generationally isolated from eating wild-killed meat these activities seem barbaric, heartless and . . . *uncivilized*. When "uncivilized" becomes a pejorative it speaks volumes about how far cultures have drifted from a natural way of living.

By way of contrast, when a young, ethical, sophisticated and very civilized dentist wade-fishes a stream with an expensive fly rod to catch and release several dozen trout there are few emotive ripples from people who have lost their nature connection. Point of fact, however, his unintentional hooking mortality (about 10% usually) will likely kill two of his trout. Fifteen-inch trout in the north are probably 10+ years old; three times



as old as those caribou that were shot while swimming. The trout were not used and he accepted no responsibility for their death. He has behaved in a far less defensible (some would say honorable) manner than a Tuktoyuktuk girl who eats eider eggs for supper. Her hunting, her eggs, her pride, her nutrition, and she remembers where she got them! To the raided goose she is no different, no less natural, than the grizzly bear whose tracks she crossed as she searched the river's edge. They are both hunters driven by and gratified by the same exact events, killing and eating an egg. She has maintained a clear behavioral connection all the way back into the inky depths of our evolution and she has helped carry it forward one more generation.

Balancing our needs to hunt, our abundance of resources and our amazing technological abilities to kill animals is no easy feat. Finding this balance is strong justification for self-limitation *via* rules of fair chase and culturally mediated methods of taking game. Approached this way, we can have the best of both worlds; conservation and the privilege of pursuit, of en-

tering into the dance of mortality with a respected quarry. We also bring the most satisfaction, credibility and honor from our hunts.

UNIQUE AND IRREPLACEABLE ASPECTS OF HUNTING

All this natural interplay aside, are there other compelling reasons for hunting in a modern era? For modern hunters there seems to be no clear link to evolutionary fitness; or is there? What does it mean for someone to say "I am happy" or "I am content"? For most, hearing a family member say that is deeply pleasing, especially if both have played a part in the state of being happy. However, ultimately people must look within themselves to recognize happiness. They give themselves permission to be happy, then they have the sense to reflect on this condition enough to say "I am happy." Often the distractions of living in a bustling crowded environment that is divided into quarter or half-hour time blocks doesn't allow people to ascend to the total happiness plane. Even if they manage to get there, distractions rarely allow them to settle down enough to relish the condition and roll it around in their mind. Some people

learn that getting well away from other humans is the first step toward being able to hang onto their happiness and actually enjoy the privilege of being.

I, like many, am most uniformly, unconditionally, and purely happy when I am actively hunting. I am also most acutely aware of it because there are almost always long quiet pauses built into the process. The setting is not devoid of distractions; it is only devoid of the demanding sort that can't be ignored. These are natural reflection periods. For one thing, there is a pure escape from the sociocultural material world. There is no discrimination between hunters based on the weight of their wallet, the expense of their wristwatch or the kind of vehicle that transported them to the field. Those commonly used economic measures of happiness are stripped away and afield we are all equal. There is elegance to sampling the nuances of the surroundings, and the process of getting outside of one's body, area and epoch to try on different perspectives like one tries on clothing. It is a way of being in the world and feeling connected to the elemental attributes of heat, cold, muscle contractions, precise hearing, deep hunger and the exercising of very primal parts of the brain that hearken back to dark and pure urges. Whatever endorphins or internal gratification feedback loops are at work here, they seem to be hardwired, but it takes some peeling back of the urban cultural layers to get to their honest core.

LOSING ONE'S SELF IN THE HUNT

The complete absorption in some fully occupying task is fulfilling. All but the most jaded, unthinking, vicarious individuals know the satisfaction of being fully engaged in some demanding task, be it casting a fly precisely while balancing in cold water, racing through moguls on a snowboard, gluing up a tedious 900-piece model airplane, devouring a challenging book, or stalking on red-alert through an Acacia woodland. Activities of

The author after a successful bird hunt with his Labradors.



total absorption. These are what psychologists call “flow-experiences” and they share certain attributes, including a complete *unawareness* of one’s feelings, a loss of the sense of time (My god! Where did the last three hours go?), a deep sense of calm, a peacefulness, and maybe exhilarated exhaustion after the activity is over. These flow-experiences may be so valued by adults because they are so rare. We are fortunate if we have 50 hours of fully engaged flow experiences out of the 8,760 hours available each year—less than 1% of our time.

Children seem much more capable of being fully in the moment and often are so deeply preoccupied with a game, contest or a painting that when they finally look up they are overly tired and famished with hunger. Some behaviorists contend that play during adolescence is preparation for life’s more serious endeavors as an adult, particularly related to physically procuring food and competing for mates. So, have we prepared ourselves during childhood for something we never get around to as adults? Maybe we love the involvements that let us return to the blissful carefree *unawareness* of childhood. Through hunting we can re-enter the zone of engagement that we carry instinctively in our bones, that we practiced as children and now reconnect and implement as adults.

Hunting is one of the most honest behaviors we can access and even then, it is not always possible to reach the full-out screaming immersion of the six-year-olds’ Ferris wheel experience. Sometimes our adult baggage creeps in and ruins the experience, or more tragically, we never get around to participating in the core activities.

There is one overriding reason hunting provides a better, more dependable passage into being fully connected, leading to a better chance of entering flow-experiences. In hunting there is an intended quarry; another entity as fully and honestly engaged in the activity of pursuit/evasion as the hunter. When hunting with commitment, one is lured or channeled into the most complete level of

engagement. It is the difference between waltzing alone or with a partner. If one is hunting with a dog, falcon or even a close cooperative companion, there is a second cooperative spirit that pulls one in demanding the effort to participate fully.

However, it is primarily the purity and completeness of the hunted animal’s drive to elude, deceive, escape, or even attack the hunter that is the lovely expression of millennia of evolution preparing it to survive. This evolutionary response is what makes clear the steps the hunter must make to keep the dance from being a mockery. We must follow through with our best effort to kill our quarry and this for the sake of the evolutionary process that brought us both to this point. These flow-experiences are not independent of the final milliseconds of subduing quarry. In the long pageantry of anticipation, preparation, practice, apprenticeship, travel, pursuit, killing, possessing, processing, sharing, consuming, telling, retelling, analyzing, speculating, and appreciating, the actual kill is one step on a long winding staircase. Without it though, things would be quite different and some subsequent steps would not be reached. Hunting without the intent to kill is not hunting in the same sense that dress rehearsal is not theater. Without an appreciator there is no art appreciation. Without prey there is no predator. Without predators, grouse become chickens, deer become goats, wildfowl become barnyard dabblers and mice become small hamsters.

HUNTING WITH REVERENCE

On a hot September fencerow with dozens of doves streaking past and a very warm shotgun barrel I am sure to be reeling with the euphoria and pure engagement of a predator. I am so very, very alive and I relish the sway between periods of calm quiet and the subsequent crouching, spinning and shooting. This teeter-totter of being fully engaged interspersed with introspective boredom can make the hands on my watch spin frantically until I look up and realize the sun has set and my stomach is

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rumbling. It is time to return to the ordered and clock-metered life with three-squares and a foam pillow. The bumpy ride back from pasture to gravel to pavement completes my transition back to the civilized realm and is accomplished with a grin and some satisfaction, not because I may have brought eight ounces of bird to earth but because I succeeded in leaving my routine role, my common sphere. I stepped out and back in time to exercise instincts long dormant. The sense of satisfaction, all bag aside, was in seeing life and death in a very different way for a few hours and the fact that I will carry this rejuvenation with me in reliving and anticipating my next experience. The hunt is primal, timeless, elemental and irreducible. Hunting continues to renew us, give us humbling mortality insights, and providing hope for our next role escape. There are so very few things in our lives that yield these most precious of gifts: renewal, humility, insight, and hope. We must treat hunting with the same reverence we hold for our religions, our children, and the world’s greatest works of art. ▲▲▲