

# CAN THE ANTIS LEARN ANYTHING FROM FAIR CHASE?

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**Good question. For the sake of this column, the word “antis” refers to those who are vocally opposed to hunting. Some may also be animal rights advocates, although not all.**

If the concept of fair chase is the moral compass that has guided responsible hunting in support of the conservation and management of game species, can it teach others who care about wildlife—or claim to—a thing or two? If actions are based on decisions, and decisions are based on past experiences, a sense of right and wrong, and in the case of wildlife and ecosystems, science, then the answer is, yes. If you're putting your money where your mouth is and you genuinely care about wildlife—and not just casually or part-time when the mood moves you—then the answer is definitely, yes.

Our fair-chase principles are a shining example of what putting the needs of something else (wildlife and the game we hunt) ahead of ourselves looks like. They rest upon a deeply rooted sense of fairness that places a concern for the hunted above the objective, success. This is where self-discipline and self-restraint come into play. This real concern or advocacy is the antithesis of where the end justifies the means, which is rare. In hunting, how we hunt matters, but not just the how. The game itself and the environment should matter 24-7-365.

Advocacy for something is just that, advocacy. It's not a part-time thing. Sportsmen directly benefit from healthy game populations. Our advocacy may be self-serving, but history has proven the model of public benefit is the only thing that saved wildlife in North America from complete destruction in the past, and it keeps wildlife with us in healthy abundance today.

There are all forms of advocates for wildlife. Some are the real deal and put their back and their wallet into it. Others are in it to make a buck off the under-informed. Then there are those that have gone vocal anti-hunter, using animal welfare as a backdrop. They must believe they are doing right, but at the end of the day, they are doing more harm than good by trying to end the one activity that actually does something for game species, and by a measurable extension, many other species of wildlife. What drives them? If it truly is a concern for wildlife, they will find like-minded people operating under the principles of fair chase if they look.

What drives them is an important part of this conversation. There is such a thing as moral self-licensing. This is a mouthful, but it means people do things out of guilt over something else. As James Swan writes in a recent piece for the NRA Leadership Forum titled, “Understanding Anti-Hunters”:

*Just what causes a person to ignore science and behave based on moral outrage? According to Bowdoin psychology*



professor Zachary Rothschild and University of Southern Mississippi psychology professor Lucas A. Keefer, people who show anger over moral issues not directly affecting them may actually be emoting in an effort to quell their own guilt about something completely unrelated, as feelings of guilt are a direct threat to one's self-image that they are a moral person. They found that increased guilt "predicted increased punitiveness toward a third-party harm-doer," who becomes a target. And, another study found that women today are more likely to feel guilt than men. Rothchild and Keefer conclude that moral outrage is self-serving as much or more than helping a third party—in this case, animals. This is an example of what University of

Kansas social psychologist C. Daniel Bateson calls "moral hypocrisy."

A degree in psychology aside, some people will have emotional qualms over the killing of wildlife under any rules for any purpose or any reason, no matter if for the betterment of a species or people and backed by science. These outliers will likely never come around, which means the antis are more likely to shun fair chase than accept and learn from it. Regardless, we are justified in making the case that sportsmen should be admired and emulated, not vilified for our commitments under the rules of fair chase. The place for this then is not with the antis, but with the 78-percent of the people who still support, or are neutral

toward hunting. In truth, their concerns are our concerns—clean air, clean water, healthy ecosystems, wild places with healthy populations of wild critters—and a system up and running that keeps it this way as much as possible. They can learn from fair chase.

As for the moral supremacists and their moral outrage, fair chase undermines their platform. I don't see them running around proclaiming anytime soon that hunters are principled men and women holding themselves accountable to an ethical standard that extends beyond the law. Moral self-licensing is powerful. All we can do is put our best foot forward and fly the fair chase flag for the broader public to see. ■

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