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SACRED



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Photographs courtesy of
George A. Bettas

Many years ago, a friend and I backpacked 10 miles into a wilderness for deer and elk. I'd planned to go alone, but when he asked if he could go I said sure, with one condition — he wouldn't tell other people about this particular spot. After all, I'd spent four hunting seasons, plus countless hours and money scouting, learning the area. Yes, it was public land, open to anybody, but my personal knowledge wasn't for public broadcast.

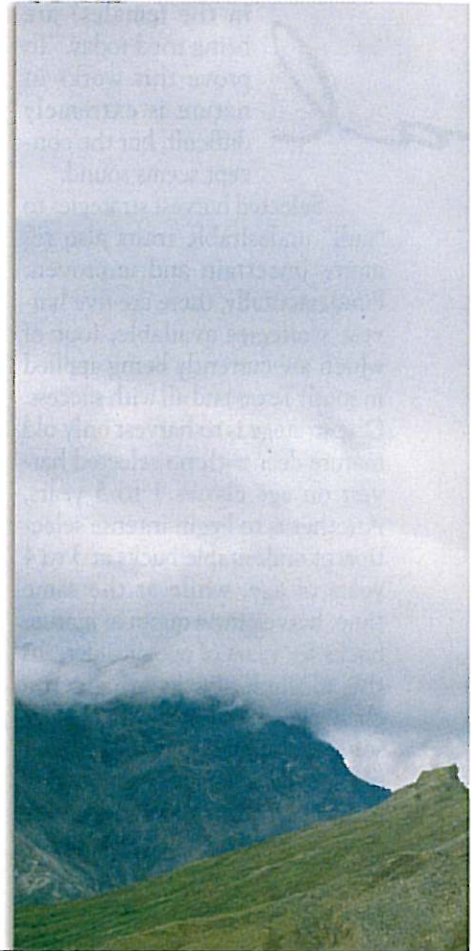
My friend said he wouldn't utter a word. That was good enough for me, and away we went. We saw lots of deer and elk and a few other hunters. Everything was sweet.

At least it was until the following winter when I learned that some hunters from our town had killed several big bucks during the rifle season — in the very spot where we had been. How did they learn about that spot? I wondered. The answer was not good. My friend had told them. Apparently he thought it was okay. After all, I wouldn't be there during the rifle season. Besides, I'd probably never find out. What would it hurt?

But it did hurt. It hurt because they'd taken the very animals that made this spot special to me, animals I'd worked

years to find. It hurt because those hunters, who'd invested none of themselves there, probably had less than full respect or appreciation for that place. It hurt most of all because my trust and confidence had been violated. I felt betrayed.

We all have our favorite spots, places where we've invested our time, our money, our experience, our feelings, our lives. These places can be diverse — a remote elk basin, a whitetail scrape line on the back 40, an antelope water hole, a ridge with some big mule deer — but they all have common qualities. They're places we've found with our own ingenuity, our sweat, our time, our study. We might cherish some spots because of their hunting quality, but we love others just because we discovered them on our own, or we never see anyone else there, or we have had special feelings or experiences there. Whatever the reasons, these spe-



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D GROUND



cial places often become more than just good hunting spots to us. They become sacred ground.

VIOLATION OF QUALITY

A friend of mine used to hunt a brushy little bowl in Washington where he could always see a couple of bears. Despite his best efforts, he never killed one of them, but just going there and seeing the bears gave him hope and good memories. Wanting to share his joy, he invited a buddy along. That was good. But later, the buddy took his brother, and the brother invited two of his pals, who killed two bears. In a very tangible sense, my friend had seen the

doesn't mind. But then that buddy shows up with a bunch of his friends, and things start snowballing, and the landowner gets angry and closes his land to everyone — including you.

"When that happens, you feel violated, because other people don't regard a place as special, when you do," James said.

On a similar theme, I've talked to hunters who've invited guests to hunt their favorite private property — only to have the guests later lease the hunting rights there and lock them out altogether. Violations of sacred ground can have some very obvious and negative effects on hunting quality.

longbow maker from Missoula.* I was incredulous, not just seeing someone there but someone I knew. "Monte, what in the world are you doing down here?"

"I've been hunting this canyon for 15 years," Monte said. You're the first person I've ever seen here. I didn't think anyone else was crazy enough to hunt here."

We laughed, and then Monte helped us finish skinning the elk, and together we all hiked out to the trail at midnight. It was a grand reunion, not only because we'd renewed a friendship, but because we found we shared a common bond. Sacred ground.

I've always believed that appreciation is proportionate to time and effort expended, and that's why I've never resented meeting someone like Monte in the field who has paid his dues and respects the place as much as I do. It's his sacred ground, too. But people who have invested none of themselves in a place have no foundation for respect. Did those rifle hunters who killed the deer truly appreciate and revere that place as much as I did? I don't know, but I doubt it because appreciation comes not from what you take out of a place but from what you invest into it — your time, effort and emotions. And I know those hunters invested nothing but a quick horse ride and a few bullets. From my point of view, they raped and ran.

Why does this bother me? I look at it this way. When someone (you consider) undeserving invades your area and kills a bunch of game there, or leases the place out from under you, you may be irritated or disappointed, but you might understand their motives and accept the loss, because those are outward offenses. They're strictly practical. Business.

In contrast, when someone fails to understand your feelings and tramples your reverence for the land, you feel hurt, because the issue goes beyond business. It becomes personal. Your feelings are made a mockery. That's



* THAT MEETING TURNED OUT TO HAVE A DOUBLY SPECIAL MEANING FOR ME, BECAUSE THAT'S THE LAST TIME I SAW MONTE. HE PASSED AWAY A COUPLE OF YEARS AFTER THAT.

quality of his spot erode — as a product of his own generosity. He felt very much as I did in the scenario described at the beginning. Trying to be good guys, we'd both got burned.

Hunting on public lands, my bear-hunting friend and I did not lose our right to hunt. We may have felt robbed or violated, but at least we could continue hunting our sacred grounds. But on private land, the result could be more devastating. M.R. James, editor and founder of *Bowhunter*, talked about a common scenario.

"You have permission to hunt a farm, a place you've hunted for years, and you invite a buddy to hunt with you. That's okay, because the landowner

VIOLATION OF RESPECT

A few years ago a friend and I were skinning a bull elk in the bottom of a canyon, a place I'd discovered on my own several years before. It was wild place, hard to reach, special to me in its loneliness. I'd never seen anyone else there and never expected to. But right at dark, as we worked on the elk, we spied a hunter climbing up toward us.

"Hi, Dwight," the hunter said, as casually as if we'd planned to meet right there for coffee.

"Do I know you?" I said. He was wearing a face mask, and the light was dim.

When he pulled off his mask, I recognized Monte Moravec, a

But the issue really goes far beyond honesty, to a deeper level called honor. Even if the subject of who can hunt where is never discussed, it's implicit in the relationship between hunters, one of the unwritten laws of hunting. When you invite someone to a hunting spot you've found, and they agree to go as an invited guest, they should respect that as your spot.

why it makes sense to protect sacred ground. You're protecting not only a piece of land, but your own heart.

VIOLATION OF HONOR

If you say to someone, "Listen, this place is special to me. I'm happy to share it with you, but please don't take in other people," the meaning is clear enough. If he's not willing to abide by that agreement, he should say so, and you can go on your separate ways, friendly or otherwise. But, if he agrees to hunt with you and not tell anyone, and then he breaks that agreement, he's lied to you. In this sense, the issue is honesty, and the question would be, who wants to hunt with someone who would lie to them?

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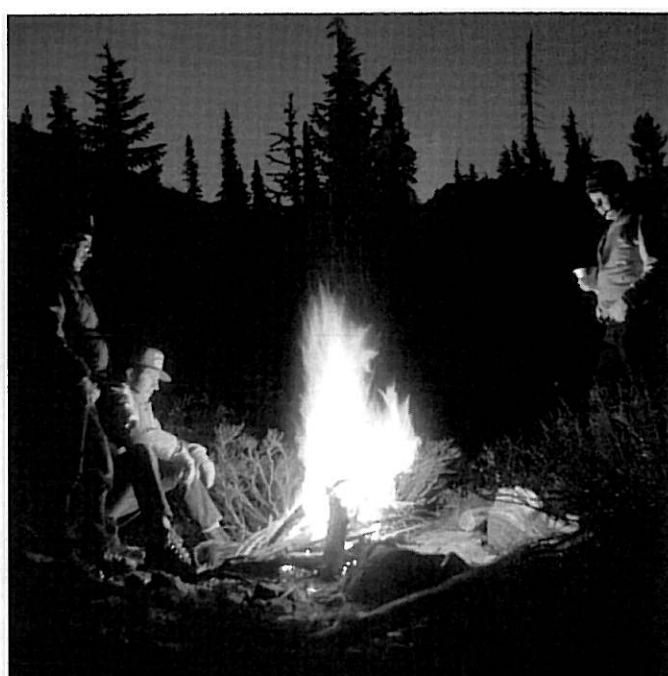
called honor. Even if the subject of who can hunt where is never discussed, it's implicit in the relationship between hunters, one of the unwritten laws of hunting. When you invite someone to a hunting spot you've found, and they agree to go as an invited guest, they should respect that as your spot. And unless they discuss it with you and get your okay, they should not even think about going back by themselves, let alone gratuitously telling someone else or invited other people there.

Of course, looking at the flip side of this, none of us has the right to try to tie up all the good hunting land for ourselves. Bowhunter Kevin Kennedy told me a friend of his had invited him to hunt a special little area, but in order to go, Kevin had to promise he'd not only never hunt that particular spot again, but that, essentially, he'd never set foot in the entire mountain range again.

"That's ridiculous," Kevin said. "I like the guy and want to hunt with him, but he's so proprietary I won't do it. If I followed his rules, I'd never be able to hunt on my own anywhere in the whole state."

I sometimes turn down hunting invitations for the same reason, especially when someone makes outrageous demands of secrecy. At the practical level, I don't want anyone's rules to limit my own freedom to explore and discover. At a deeper level, what if they take me some place that I really want to hunt again, a place I might have discovered on my own? Frankly, I'd rather not know where they hunt than to be tempted to violate their trust. So I just say, "No thanks."

Which may bring us to the very crux of this discussion. Indeed, it is a sad moment when another hunter violates your confidence and defiles your sacred ground. I can think of only one thing worse — doing it to someone else. It's a matter of honor. It's sacred ground.



SACRED DEFINITIONS

These definitions are taken from
The American Heritage Dictionary

APPRECIATION

Recognition of the quality, value, significance, or magnitude of people and things.

DESERVE

To be worthy of; merit.

HONOR

Personal integrity maintained without legal or other obligation. The quality of being honest. Integrity, rectitude, uprightness.

INVIOLEABLE

Secure from violation or profanation. Impregnable to assault or trespass.

SACRED

Protected from violation or abuse by custom, law or feelings of reverence. Inviolable.

VIOLATE

To break (a law, for example) intentionally or unintentionally.