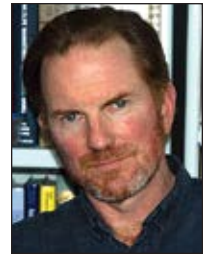


# FAIR CHASE HUNTING EQUALS HAPPINESS

SCIENCE BLASTS



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**In the last issue of *Fair Chase*, I wrote about how we may transform the way we communicate the results of hunting seasons to better resonate with the public who do not hunt. Herein, I want to share a very thoughtful discourse from my colleague Gordon Batcheller, former chief wildlife biologist of the New York Bureau of Wildlife, current executive secretary of the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and a hunting companion of mine. The theme is how we discuss why we choose to hunt.**

Research by organizations such as Responsive Management and D.J. Case and Associates demonstrates that many of the traditional arguments put forth to support hunting, such as economic ones (hunting funds conservation) do not resonate with a substantial portion of the public. Rather, more humanistic reasons—such as local, organic, healthy food—do trigger positive reactions. I will venture to state, though, that many or most of us do not need to hunt for food. We hunt for the sheer enjoyment of it—happiness that comes from time spent outdoors testing our skills, sharing a unique meal with family and friends, admiring a trophy, and telling stories. These things are what memories are made of. A colleague once told me “hunting makes me feel more alive than any other times in my life,” a feeling I’m sure most of us can agree with. Should we be reluctant to admit that we hunt because it brings us happiness? No. In fact, we should build on this in our personal and professional communica-

tions on hunting.

David G. Allan of CNN recently published an article online exploring why Norway, Finland, and Denmark—countries noted for long, cold, dark winters—lead the list of happiest counties in the world. A common theme is a connection to nature. Seemingly simple things such as being off the phone or computer for long stretches of time and taking walks in nature lower stress hormones, reduce repetitive negative thoughts, and have beneficial effects on blood pressure, anxiety, and depression. The cardiovascular benefits that come with the physical exertion involved with hunting speak for themselves.

With these facts in mind, consider Gordon Batcheller’s story below and the lesson he gleaned from it.



When John Organ called me one July day in my office, he made an offer I could not refuse. “Would you be my sub-permittee on the Vermont moose license I won today?” (In Vermont, the sub-permittee is the second hunter on the same permit.)

John and I, along with Tom Decker, began our plans for an October hunt in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. In 2010, Vermont’s moose population was doing well. Preseason scouting showed that our hunt unit held great promise with opportunities for several nice bulls. With John’s either-sex permit, however, the agreed hunting objective was to harvest any adult moose, cow or bull. Our hunt began on a Saturday, and John

nearly got a shot at a nice bull. The cover was too thick; the bull too close for a rifle with a scope. As soon as we started hunting, John had made it clear to me: “If you have a shot at a moose, take it.” I appreciated John’s generosity, but I wanted John to take a moose. After all, he was the permittee, not me. I enjoyed hunting, but I considered my rifle more of an accessory than a tool.

By the middle of the second day, the three of us (Tom, acting as our “guide” without a firearm) began to dial in several effective field skills: sign language to indicate moose sign (e.g., a bed, tree rubbings or droppings), and even a signal to indicate someone had smelled a moose. We also refined our techniques for still-hunting through the dense cover in this hunt unit, where commercial logging was the prevailing land use. On the third morning, we were a finely tuned trio, and our confidence had soared. Once again, John reminded me that he wanted me to take a shot if I could. I reluctantly agreed, but once again, I said to myself, “I want John to take a moose, not me.”

After two hours of intense still-hunting, we took a break, even napping a bit, and snacked. Once we resumed, we were tightly wound and ready. I was on the right wing,

Tom in the middle, John on the left, each about 50 yards from the other, always maintaining visual and voice contact. I found moose sign, a tree rubbing. Then, I jumped a moose. As it ran off, drifting to my right, it slowed and circled, hooking to the right. By then, I was braced against a tree, my rifle leveled. The moose stepped into an opening and came to a stop 80 yards off, quartering with its left shoulder in the clear. At that moment, I faced a decision: Do I take the shot? In my heart, I wanted John to take a moose. I did not want to end his hunt, his opportunity. I appreciated John’s assurances that he wanted me to shoot if I could, but I wondered whether John was just being the gentleman he is. My mind raced. I had to decide. I wasn’t sure how much longer the moose would stand there, shoulder exposed. I ran the analysis every which way, trying hard to come to the right conclusion, one that would both be in the spirit of Fair Chase, and in the spirit of

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friendship. Finally, after an emotionally draining assessment, I took the shot.

At least a quarter-second elapsed between the time the moose stopped and I pressed the trigger home. After the burning of powder and flight of bullet, the moose disappeared. I fixed my eyes on that spot, awaiting Tom and John. As they walked the 80 yards, I directed them to the place where the moose had last stood. Our search for hair and blood began. John was the first to find sign that my bullet had flown true. I'll never forget his words, "Blood—good blood!" Just a few moments later, we found the moose, a yearling bull. If I still had any doubt about John's generosity, it was soon erased by the smiles and celebration that ensued. Indeed, this wasn't my moose. It was our moose. It belonged to the three of us; three people who cherish Fair Chase, and the happiness that comes with friendship,

spending time in nature, and with the practice and honing of primitive and powerful human instincts.

As we reflect on Fair Chase hunting, we experience happiness and joy. It reminds us of our freedom; the freedom that comes in nature, the freedom that comes from physicality, the freedom of liberated people.

In 1785, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his 15-year-old nephew, Peter Carr, regarding what he considered the best form of exercise: "... I advise the gun. While this gives a moderate exercise to the body, it gives boldness, enterprize [*sic*], and independance [*sic*] to the mind. Games played with the ball and others of that nature are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind. Let your gun therefore be the constant companion of your walks."

Isaac Jefferson, in his *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave*, gives a clear picture of

Jefferson the hunter. He recalls that Jefferson hunted "squirrels & partridges; kept five or six guns ... old master would'nt shoot partridges settin': said 'he wouldn't take advantage of em' – would give 'em a chance for thar life: would'nt shoot a hare settin', nuther; skeer him up fust. [*sic*]"

Indeed, many of our Colonial revolutionaries practiced Fair Chase. As Jefferson reflected on the essence of independence and the rights of citizens, I believe that the happiness he gained in hunting was a component of his intellectual journey, his doctrine.


The words of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted

among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

Within our culture and our professional community, the assertion is made that hunting is a privilege, not a right. Notably, this doctrine is taught to new hunters in the typical hunter education course. Indeed, it is a core question on our hunter education exams. The implication is that hunting is conditional, something to be earned via good behavior.

I disagree. Citizens of this country have a fundamental right to happiness. This is a promise embedded in our most sacred of institutions. Happiness is a right and governments are instituted to preserve that right, along with the promise of "Life and Liberty." Fair Chase hunting is not a privilege; it is a right.

Today, the monumental dialogue we embrace is how to ensure the future of hunting. To that end, specialists



Gordon Batcheller still hunting for moose in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom

and practitioners in the recruitment, retention, and reactivation of hunters are hard at work. R3 [Recruitment, Retention, Reactivation] is an appropriately dominant focus for state and federal officials, along with our conservation partners. We have established committees, work groups, task forces and hired coordinators and managers.

I do not know what the successful formula will look like. Indeed, I do not know if there is a successful formula. However, as I survey the landscape, I am reminded of the myriad “alphabet soup” agencies of the Great Depression as the federal government worked to restore our economic health, exploring one solution after another. What is the successful balance of programs that will restore our conservation health? Though I do not have an answer, I am heartened by the sense of urgency throughout our profession as we seek to sustain the fuel that fires our powerful conservation engine.

As I contemplate the future of hunting in the R3

context, however, my mind drifts to a young couple who were curious about my hunting lifestyle. Relatively young, affluent, highly educated, and raised in a liberal, West Coast culture, they, like us, treasure life, liberty, and the pursuits of happiness. One of their great joys is fine wines and fine foods. And they are curious. Very curious.

Knowing of my passion for hunting, one summer day, they began questioning me about turkeys and deer. (I typically bring venison and wild turkey to summer barbecues.) Their questions were specific, logical and thoughtful. They have only a rudimentary understanding of firearms and ballistics, but they wanted to know every detail about their use on game. It grew uncomfortable—for me. I attempted to gloss over a description of the response of tissue to a high velocity bullet, but they would have none of it. They expected, and alas, they deserved to know the full truth of the hunting experience. Every detail.

Indeed, as I spoke, they were exploring the ethics of

hunting in their personal frame of reference, including questions of predator and prey, the question of life and death, questions of ethics and humaneness. I disciplined myself to provide the facts without judgment or the imposition of my values. Before much time had passed, I had downloaded the good; the bad; and the ugly of hunting. I omitted no detail.

In retrospect, the honesty of our dialogue was essential. They asked questions without boundaries. I spoke truth. They reached their own conclusions. The outcome? Today, they are exploring hunting, and I hope to be a mentor; and they have already taken up angling.

But what about us—you and I, our community of conservation professionals? What are our obligations? What are our obligations to the R1s of our world (those we seek to recruit)?

I offer this for your consideration: Focus on lifestyle and personal choices. Hunting is a way of life. Hunting brings joy and happiness.

Game species give us great satisfaction at the table as we partake in the purity of wild game harvested in a sustainable manner. Hunting is an expression of liberty and freedom, both essential to the human spirit. Hunting enriches our relationship with family and friends. It connects us with nature. It revives our spirit. The role of hunting in wildlife management is frankly irrelevant to R1s. We must focus on happiness. On life. On liberty. We must speak for the happiness in Fair Chase hunting.

Speak the truth. Hunting is hard; it is sometimes ugly. We must always be willing to disclose and discuss the uncomfortable. R1s are smart, and they easily discern falsehoods. We must never shirk the truth.

My simple response to Gordon Batcheller’s lesson is “Amen! And thank you Gordon!” ■

LEFT: Gordon Batcheller and John with a yearling bull moose. RIGHT: Gordon Batcheller and John enjoying the first meal of moose tenderloin and wild chanterelles after packing out half the moose on foot.

