

COMMUNICATING THE HUNT

It was the next-to-last day of black powder rifle season this past December, and I was supposed to hunt whitetails with my friend Tom Decker, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Tom and I have hunted many times together over the decades. The plan was for Tom to drive down from his home in northern Vermont to my farm in the hills of western Massachusetts, and we would hunt my land. Tom knows my property well. As fate would have it, I had a family obligation come up and couldn't hunt that day, but Tom came down anyway. Being the last week of December, there was ample snow on the ground, ideal for still-hunting. When I got home later that day, Tom was somewhere up in the woods. I was working on my tractor around 4 p.m. when I heard a shot. Several minutes later I heard Tom's voice asking if I could hear him—he had left a two-way radio in my garage. Turns out Tom had been still-hunting all day and had seen several deer. As he was working his way back down the ridge, he came out into a high pasture and glassed down to my house, several hundred yards away, to see if there was smoke coming from the chimney—a sign that I was home. What he saw between him and my house was a mature buck following a doe. Ducking down, he used the land as cover to stalk closer. Looking up at about 100 paces, the buck was broadside, and he dropped it with one shot from his Thompson Center in-line.

My closest neighbor, downriver about a third of a mile, is a veterinarian and avid hunter. He heard the shot and came over, and the two of us climbed up the pasture to help Tom drag a nice 11-pointer back to my house. We checked the deer online, and the next morning Tom brought it back to his house in Vermont and processed it. The next week he brought venison for my neighbor and me, which was welcomed since the meat from the buck I shot in November had been mostly consumed by my family, especially my nephews!

What does this hunting story have to do with science? Tom and I are both charter members of the Sustainable Use of Wildlife Committee of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the non-profit organization that represents all state and provincial fish and wildlife agencies. Since the early 1990s we have invested effort in the discipline known as Human Dimensions of Wildlife, the application of social science to wildlife management. In particular, we are interested in what messages and information about hunting, trapping, and other consumptive wildlife uses will resonate positively with the non-hunting public. Our colleague, Club Professional Member and founder of Conservation Visions, Shane Mahoney, understands that food is a unifying force across all cultures, and has established a wild harvest initiative to gain greater knowledge of the enormous

importance wild harvested food has on humanity. . He recognizes that translating our conservation efforts into humanistic terms, such as food, will affect how society views hunting and hunters.

Similarly, my colleague, Professor Shawn Riley of Michigan State University, believes that wild-harvested meat, more importantly the sharing of wild-harvested meat, can help connect people who do not hunt with an appreciation of nature and the role of hunters. Currently, Shawn and I, with the assistance of doctoral student Amber Goguen, are involved in research comparing how wild-harvested meat moves from the field to fork throughout communities in Sweden and Michigan (see *Science*

Blast, Fall 2015). In Sweden, hunters can bring their game to a variety of formalized markets. A non-hunter can buy, for example, moose roasts legally over the counter or from informal local markets. Shawn and I recently spent three weeks in Sweden and ate game of some sort ranging from black grouse and roe deer to moose and reindeer nearly every day, whether it was at a friend's house in the Arctic mountains or at a restaurant in Stockholm.

SCIENCE BLASTS



JOHN F. ORGAN
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Director Emeritus of the Cooperative
Fish and Wildlife Research Units

B&C Associate Tom Decker with the 11-point whitetail he took during black powder season on the author's property in Massachusetts.



Learn more about the wild harvest initiative at <http://conservationvisions.com/wild-harvest-initiative>

Back in the US, Tom and I were discussing the role of wild foods, and Tom posed a notion to me about how agencies report results of hunting seasons to the public. We talk about number of animals killed or harvested. What does that mean to the non-hunting public? Survey data from the organization Responsive Management overwhelmingly show non-hunters support hunting for meat, while expressing much less support for hunting for “sport.” Those of us who hunt recognize there is no difference, but the attitudes of those who do not hunt can be very different based on their perception of the motives of a hunter. Tom asked me what I thought about reporting deer harvests to the public, for example, not in terms of animals killed, but in terms of estimated meals provided. This is an interesting notion. Let’s see what we have learned from Amber Goguen’s research in Michigan.

In a paper we published in 2017, we estimated 28-33 million pounds of edible venison were procured during a normal Michigan hunting season. That’s enough to serve every man, woman and child in Michigan four USDA-recommended quarter pound portions of meat protein. Of hunters who harvested a deer, 85 percent shared their venison. Those roughly 385,000 hunters who harvested at least one deer distributed venison to more than 1.7 million people. Hunters who shared did so with an average

of 5.6 people, however, sharing occurred mostly within tight social networks: members of hunters’ households (69 percent), relatives (52 percent), and friends, neighbors, or coworkers (50 percent). In other published research Shawn and his Swedish colleagues revealed a correlation between frequency of consumption and positive attitudes toward hunters and hunting by non-hunters in that country.

It is clear that results of a hunting season are much more than the number of dead animals. Benefits of the hunt go well beyond the hunter and his or her immediate family. Why not take advantage of these scientific findings to popularize and add relevancy to the roles that hunters and our conservation programs have on society? Tom’s generosity in sharing the harvest with my neighbor and me is just one small example of a larger phenomenon that has been ongoing for generations. Public recognition and appreciation of this can help ensure it will persist for many more generations to come. One mechanism for doing so is to spread the harvest beyond our close circles of friends and family. That is something every hunter can do! ■



ABOVE: A Sunday picnic on the shore of the Baltic Sea in Sweden, cooking reindeer. BELOW: A meal of black grouse and hazel grouse at a friend’s house in Sweden



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