

JUST EAT IT

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Recently my wife and I attended a documentary on the disturbing amount of food waste in our country and the world, titled, “Just Eat It.” I didn’t see a connection with hunting ethics until I was in a discussion at our recent annual meeting of the Boone and Crockett Club in Nashville. Many members were lamenting the bad press that hunters get, i.e., “Cecil the lion,” and the fact that study after study has shown that only about 20 percent of the non-hunting public approves of trophy hunting, whereas 70-80 percent or more approve of legal hunting if its purpose is to produce food and/or to enhance wildlife management.

We need to think about this. I assume most trophy hunters eat their game or give it to someone who does. Personally, I’ve mostly been a meat hunter. I take care not to waste any part of the carcass. I make sure to take the meat between the ribs and off the neck for hamburger, and even the foreleg meat, which has a lot of tendons in it. If it’s possible, and the landowner agrees, I return what’s left of the carcass to the woods so that scavengers can have a meal or two as well.

In some years I’ve even had steak knives and serving implements made with antler handles. Since eons ago much of my academic research was on antler growth in deer, I had scads of shed antlers from captive deer. I had beautiful candleholders made from them and gave one to each of my students as they graduated. Once I had gloves made from deer hide. I’ve also put skulls and antlers in my backyard. Something, I assume squirrels, chews on them to get a bit of calcium.

We can’t always do all of that. But my point is to waste as little as possible of what you’ve harvested. We have an opportunity for others to utilize game with the new Paleo diet trend. According to Wikipedia, “The Paleolithic diet—aka Paleo diet, caveman diet, or stone-age diet—is a modern fad requiring the sole or predominant consumption of foods to be only those available to or consumed by humans during the Paleolithic era.” That era was between

2.5 million and about 10,000 years ago—before agriculture. Things like pasta, bread, cereal grains, legumes and dairy products are excluded or very limited. Sounds like not a bad idea. In fact, people wanting fresh, organic, antibiotic-free meat can’t do much better than venison. But few non-hunters can afford that or find it in their grocery stores, so many Paleo dieters will have to be satisfied with free-range chicken.

But continuing on the theme of not wasting food and the need to manage our exploding deer populations, we have a means of harvesting excess deer and providing nutritious food for those who need it most—orphans, homeless people and other disadvantaged groups.

Nearly every state has some form of Hunters for the Hungry program. In my state of North Carolina, we have Hunters for the Hungry, Farmers and Communities Manage Deer, and Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry. These organizations raise funds to provide cold storage drop-off stations for deer carcasses around the state and to reimburse the processors. All processing facilities are inspected by our state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. There is no cost to the hunter. Farmers who get depredation permits can invite hunters who have already met their tag limits to harvest the excess deer if the deer are given to one of these charities. The venison is usually all processed into hamburger, providing 160 to 200 high-protein meals per deer. Roughly 2,000 deer were donated to these three organizations last year, producing about 400,000 meals in our state alone.

The point is, we can reduce waste of our harvested deer by utilizing as much of it as possible. We can improve the public perception of the hunting community by advertising that all we kill is eaten. And, we can both enhance our image and do a very good deed for wildlife populations, farmers and the disadvantaged public by providing deer to Hunters for the Hungry programs. So next time someone asks you why you hunt, tell them “We just eat it!” ■