

ETHICAL HUNTING

My 81-year old father sometimes records the important events of our hunts on a stick. He smooths one side for notes. Then he notches the edge, one for each day of the hunt. He made such a stick for a moose hunt that he, my 29-year old veterinarian son (his grandfather's namesake), and I made with Alberta outfitter, Clayton Grosso, last fall. At trip's end, he noted on the stick, "Three generations, three moose, one shot each." He also noted for day one of the hunt, moose - Steve; for day 3, moose - Granddad; and for the 8th and last day, moose - Robert.

With a bull the first day, I had lots of time on my hands. Time to absorb the incomparable grandeur of the Canadian Rockies and fly fish the pristine Wapiabi River for bull trout and cutthroat. Time to enjoy the fine hospitality of Clayton's camp. Time to anxiously anticipate the results of my father's and son's hunts; and finally, time to reflect on over 40 years of hunting, part of that as an outfitter and guide in Idaho's Salmon River country. I should add, that I also reflected with love and appreciation on the patience of my wife, Marty, who for thirty years has shared my hunting passion, even as an outfitter's wife with three small children.

Against that quiet, beautiful, and reflective backdrop, I reached some major conclusions about ethical hunting and the future of hunting and wildlife conservation in America. Let me share the first one, and an explanation - *Hunting is a privilege that is ours to lose; and if we do, it will be primarily because our behavior as hunters was judged unethical and unacceptable.*

The American public strongly supports the legality of hunting. A 1992 USA Today nationwide survey of public opinion on hunting found that 80% of Americans feel hunting should remain legal, while only 17% said hunting should be illegal. Even the majority of non-hunters, 58%, feel hunting should remain legal. The animal rights crusade, likely the greatest identifiable opponent of hunting, probably would not list hunting among its top three targets for elimination. That list would likely include:

1. use of animals for medical and consumer product research
2. use of fur in clothing
3. use of farm animals for food

These three targets, involving commercial uses of animals, would likely be followed by:

4. hunting
5. use of animals as performers

These two targets relate to recreation.

Although there has been little or no increase nationally in recent years in the number of hunters, and hunter participation appears to be declining slightly as a percent of total population, most Americans appear to have little or no objection to hunting so long as animals are pursued, killed and used properly.

This generally strong public support for hunting is no accident. It is political capital built on more than a century of success by us and our fathers and grandfathers, in wildlife restoration, through ethical hunting practices and conservation.

The period of 1870-1900 saw the height of the American Industrial Revolution. There was rapid growth, facilitated by great stores of natural resources whose use was unconstrained by protective laws or regulations. There was a vast public domain in the West to dispose of. Natural resources were used as incentives for settlement. Major vehicles for change included:

- the Homestead Act of 1862, with resulting land claims;
- the Mining Act of 1872, with resulting mineral claims;
- extensive rail access in the West by 1885;
- improved guns and ammunition by the 1860's that facilitated effective market hunting.

The result was a speedy and dramatic alteration of the natural environment, and a rapid decline in game animal populations. During the 50-year period between 1860 and 1910, the American pronghorn population declined from 30-40 million to under 15,000. Unregulated killing was the problem.

This was the challenge: America's resources were being high-graded and depleted. The problem was to refine the laissez-faire system to provide for the protection of resources being romanticized as the 'Vanishing Wilderness'.

Sportsmen had an answer. It was the Conservation Movement based on a 'Code of Sportsmen's Ethics,' imported from England, fused with dissatisfaction over

dwindling game and habitat. The values of the movement were expressed most clearly in national sporting journals. By the 1870's, several journals focused on discrediting market hunting, and other unethical hunting practices, such as shooting game animals in water from boats, and poaching in Yellowstone Park. In 1887, Theodore Roosevelt and his friend, George Bird Grinnell, along with others, founded the Boone and Crockett Club to preserve big game and sport hunting. This first-of-its-kind organization was the forerunner of today's hundreds of such groups who seek improved conditions for wildlife and their habitats.

By 1915, the 'Conservation Movement' led by the Boone and Crockett Club and the American Forestry Association had achieved major landmarks in American conservation, including:

- general acceptance of game laws based on 'fair chase' ethics.
- establishment of the forest reserves (forerunners of the National Forests).
- protection of Yellowstone Park's wildlife.
- growing acceptance of the idea of wise and managed use of forests and wildlife.

As a result of these and other accomplishments, big game populations are estimated to be at recent historic highs. (See Figures A and B)

Ethical codes that underscored hunting thought and action during this great period of wildlife recovery, emphasized primarily appropriate hunting methods or practices. Such as those in the Boone and Crockett Club's 'fair chase' code that precludes for example, hunting game confined by artificial barriers, and use of electronic devices for attracting, locating or observing game.

This was an appropriate response to conditions that gave hunters overwhelming advantages over their prey and placed wildlife populations at risk. The great wildlife population decimation in the late 1800's and early 1900's caused by over killing, re-

UPDATING AN OLD HERITAGE FOR AMERICA'S HUNTING AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION FUTURE

Keynote Address for the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep Conference.

San Antonio, Texas.

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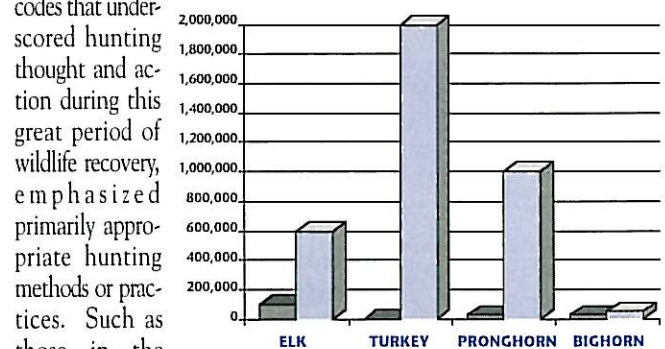


FIGURE A
AN OUTSTANDING INCREASE IN GAME POPULATIONS BETWEEN 1920, GRAY, AND 1992, BLUE, IS DUE TO THE CONSERVATION EFFORTS OF THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB, AS WELL AS THE AMERICAN FORESTRY ASSOCIATION.

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us make necessary changes in our thought and behavior as hunters.

My second major conclusion then is this - *Our hunting and wildlife conservation future will heavily depend on an updated code of ethics that helps justify killing animals as part of hunting.*

The deliberate infliction of suffering and death on animals by hunters must be morally justified. It must be shown to serve a more urgent goal, or higher value than the animals' lives. Development of a necessary and sufficient hunter ethics code is an exercise dealing primarily in values, not facts. Acres of habitat enhanced by hunter fees, and game population increases through management are irrelevant. What is most important is that ethical, moral or value debates, unlike their factual counterparts, are won with convincing logic and beliefs, not facts; objectively in such debates, there are no 'correct' answers. To prevail, hunters must clearly and convincingly articulate a moral justification of killing animals while hunting, and that justification must be based primarily on solid values and clear logic.

On the banks of the Wapiabi, I concluded that my infliction of suffering and death on animals I hunt can be justified, but only under limited conditions. Hunting for me has become a ritual or ceremony of reconnection to one of earth's oldest and most fundamental processes, 'Life unto life, only through death.' This ritual allows me to participate directly in the life and death cycles on which all natural systems depend. It allows a humbling, spiritual communion with stone-age ancestors who sought survival rather than dominion, and who had to find and kill animals as they, themselves, might be hunted and killed. It links me back to a fundamental and ancient respect, and magical or religious appreciation for animals stemming from dependence, which is foun-

dated for a broader ethical relationship between humans and earth.

In the ceremony of reconnecting, I have the opportunity to physically, spiritually, and psychologically renew myself by rediscovering nature's beauty, natural environments and processes, and associated challenges, skills, and feelings. I also have the opportunity to relearn that the hunt is so much more than the kill, which is only the hunt's climax.

But what of killing, the awesome act of ending another's life and existence. Clearly it is legally and culturally acceptable under many conditions, as our beef, pork, chicken and supermarket industries attest. Life and death are fundamental engines in our world. But when is it justifiable to kill a free and wild creature when the need is not materially compelling? And how can such killing be more than mere sport, amusement, recreation, or entertainment for the killer? Sport, amusement, recreation, or entertainment are, for me, reasons far too trivial for ending the existence of wild creatures.

I believe killing wildlife, as part of hunting, is acceptable only when it is the true and artful climax of the hunting ritual, practiced as the timeless art of self sustenance, with reconnection to, and participation in, the natural process of 'life unto life, only through death.' Full appreciation of this most fundamental and bittersweet process comes with full participation, and this cannot occur without experiencing, first-hand, the kill.

All ceremonies have rules. The ceremonial rules for the hunting ritual are hunter ethics. They describe the moral bounds within which hunting should occur. I am certain that America's 10.7 million big game hunters lack a common understanding, acceptance, and support for a code of hunter ethics, which leaves hunting morally ungrounded and increases the opportunity for unacceptable hunter conduct.

In response to this vulnerability, I offer an updated Code of Hunter Ethics based on an ancient human legacy that values animals as the wellspring of physical and spiritual life, who are to be used, and killed, while being respected and revered. The exclusive concept of the code is a set of promises or commitments each hunter

sulted in a hunter practice, or method-based ethic that was right for its time, and it worked. I believe, however, that such ethics and associated behavior will not be sufficient for present, and likely future challenges of hunting.

In the past, the principal ethical concern with hunting was establishing proper methods for the hunt and kill. The ethical focus now appears to be shifting from method of kill, to whether it is morally acceptable for hunters to kill under any conditions. This shift from the 'how' question to the 'if' question is fundamental.

Although currently strong, public support for hunting appears vulnerable. Less than 5% of Americans hunt big game, and as noted, the proportion is dropping. Demographic factors unfavorable to hunting, such as urbanization and nuclear family breakup, increase. Most past and current hunter ethics and behavior, are based on the assumption that death and suffering of animals through hunting is justifiable if the method is right. This assumption appears weak in light of

increasing numbers of Americans, especially urban residents, and others detached from rural life, who oppose hunting for recreational purposes because they believe it morally wrong to kill animals for recreation. More and more hunting opponents assert, "How can sport hunting be justified, since it inflicts grave suffering and death for the sake of amusement?" or "One consequence of hunting is the infliction of pain and death for no very urgent reason."

Method-based hunter ethics and behavior do not clearly address these concerns. I strongly believe that the American public, increasingly, will demand that death and suffering of animals through hunting, be justified, regardless of method. The critical question broadens from how to hunt and kill fairly, to how to justify the hunt and kill under any circumstances.

To return to my first major conclusion, if the hunting privilege is lost, I believe the cause will be our failure as hunters to think and act in ways that justify, in the public's mind, the pain and death we cause the animals we hunt and kill. I also believe an updated ethical code is required to help

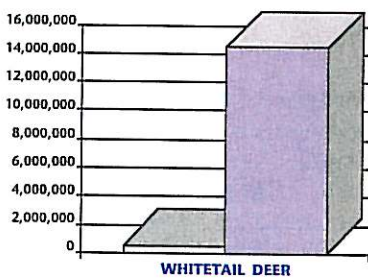


FIGURE B
NOTE THE DRAMATIC INCREASE IN THE WHITETAIL POPULATIONS BETWEEN 1920, GRAY, AND 1992, BLUE.

makes to the animals he or she hunts. If kept, these promises can justify the hunt and kill together, as a high form of direct, ceremonial participation in nature's essential life and death cycle. The code is not original, rather it is a synthesis and summary of old and new thought. It draws heavily from the wisdom of Native American hunters, and from the work of modern conservationists, including the Boone and Crockett Club's 'Fair Chase' code, and the Izaak Walton League's 'A Code of Conduct for Hunters'. It is not intended to replace existing ethical codes, rather I hope it would complement and supplement them.

The code is in the form of a 'Voluntary Hunter Ethics Pledge', which could be printed on, or attached to hunting licenses. I firmly believe this approach would elevate the importance of high ethical conduct among hunters, and move the current focus on hunter ethics from discussion and debate, to changed and improved ethical behavior in the field.

With the endorsement of this code by outstanding private conservation organizations, such as the Boone and Crockett Club, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, National Wild Turkey Federation, Orion Institute, Izaak Walton League, and state and federal agencies, including state wildlife management organizations, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, a new ethical consensus among hunters is possible - a consensus that provides updated, relevant, and ethical basis for hunting and killing animals, and wildlife conservation in America.

VOLUNTARY HUNTER ETHICS PLEDGE

I, _____, pledge my highest ethical conduct while hunting on National Forest, State, Bureau of Land Management, and private land in the State of _____, in 1994. To go beyond obeying laws and regulations, I will be guided by the following commitments to the animals I hunt:

1. I will honor and respect them.
2. I will learn their habits and habitat.
3. I will help provide for their needs as they provide for mine.
4. I will hunt them fairly, always as-

sureing they have a reasonable and natural chance to escape.

5. I will attempt to kill them only if I am reasonably sure they will die immediately.

Signature

Date

Ethics are personal. Each hunter must interpret the pledge to make it personally satisfying and meaningful. My interpretations have evolved over many years and will continue to change.

My honor and respect extends to the animals I hunt when they are alive and when they are dead. When I see them alive, I feel awe and excitement; when they are dead, I feel quiet remorse and solemn gratitude, and a resolve to use the meat well, tough or tender, bitter or sweet.

The price of the hunting privilege is the pleasant task of learning well, the ways of those I hunt.

As a wildlife biologist and natural resources professional, I have committed a good part of my life to the conservation of the animals I hunt and all other wildlife.

My view of a reasonable and natural chance for the animals I hunt to escape does not permit me to kill a treed lion, or a baited bear.

Immediate death for hunted animals means death in seconds, not minutes.

These are my interpretations of the pledge, and they are very personal. I would not impose them on anyone else. I only hope that each hunter's journey is discovering his or her own interpretation is guided by honesty and caring.

This ethical pledge is an important step toward a broader and equally necessary ethical bond between humans and their environment. In *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949, Aldo Leopold described what he called, 'The Land Ethic'. "A thing is right," he wrote, "when it preserves the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." In this context, hunting and associated wildlife conservation in most of this century has been "right." To continue this "right" tradition, hunters must be guided by an updated ethic that sees humans not as conquerors of the land and its inhabitants, but as plain members and citi-



DURING THEIR RECENT MOOSE HUNT, FROM THE LEFT, STEVE MEALEY'S FATHER, SON, ROBERT AND HIMSELF, PACK OUT A MOOSE.

zens of it; or participants. We now have the opportunity as partners to advocate and share such an ethic with America's hunters. I hope we seize this opportunity.

The human hunting stick is long, with many notches. The first notch notes the emergence of man as hunter, about 1 million years ago. There is a notch for the Neanderthal people of 100,000 years ago, who killed and worshipped cave bears, and one for Cro-Magnon, or modern man, who, 35,000 ago, celebrated the animals they hunted with paintings and stone engravings. There is a notch at 10,000 years ago, noting the end of man as exclusively a hunter and gatherer. Other notches note the origin of hunting in North America and hunting as the exclusive domain of nobility in Europe. For the late 19th century, a notch identifies hunters as the first conservationists in America, and another notch, for the mid-20th Century, notes successful restoration of many wildlife species through the efforts of these same hunters.

And now, finally, we are at present. There will be another notch. It could be the last, and symbolize the beginning of the end of a million year old, human hunting legacy; or it could be only another mark of progress, one that symbolizes the beginning of a new ethic for hunting - one based on a resurrected, respectful and honoring relationship between man, and animals and land, where man becomes a 'participant' hunter, no longer a hunter and killer for sport, amusement, recreation, or entertainment. With all my heart, and with great urgency for my hunting spirit to continue to renew, I trust it will be the latter, with many more notches on the hunting stick to follow - for fathers, sons, and grandfathers, and, yes, for mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, and for all future generations.