

The Four R's Of Hunter Education

BY JACK WARD THOMAS ■ BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB PROFESSOR OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION ■ UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

In June of 1999, I and the Boone and Crockett Club, were honored by my delivery of the keynote address to the International Hunter Education Conference, in Buffalo, New York. What follows is the text of that address.

WE SEEM TO BE approaching a watershed moment in the United States as related to the ownership and use of firearms and the future of hunting. What will evolve in our society related to these two concerns depends largely on how gun owners and hunters respond to the circumstances of the moment. In other words, to paraphrase Edward R. Murrow, "our destiny lies not in our stars but in ourselves."

**RIGHTS
RESPECT
RESPONSIBILITY
REVERENCE**

If we rely too much, harp too much and speak too sanctimoniously on what we perceive as our rights and do not assure by our every action that those rights are well-placed and well-deserved we will, most assuredly, see those cherished rights eroded over time. Such will be assured by a combination of current demographic trends – including population increase, increased urbanization, and diminution of hunters as a percentage of the population continue. The maintenance of the perceived right “to keep and bear arms” depends on how well, how consistently, and how universally we who hunt instill respect, responsibility, and reverence into the minds and actions of the hunters of today and tomorrow. That, most simply, is the challenge to and the reason for, hunter education. I believe that hunter education should be constructed on a platform called the “Four R’s of Hunter Education - Rights, Respect, Responsibility, and Reverence.”

THE FOUR R’S

RIGHTS

Those of us who own firearms are quick to speak of our “right” to do so. Too many of us are quick to use the term without much consideration of just what a “right” is – and is not. One dictionary definition of a “right” says “conforming with or conformable with justice, law, or morality.” It does not require a Ph.D. logician to discern that when a “right” is no longer conceived of being in conformance with justice or morality that it will be judged, sooner or later, as not being in conformance with law.

The “...right to keep and bear arms...” comes from the Second Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. But that right, as all other rights put forth in the Constitution, is subject to definition by the Federal Courts and the circumstances of obtaining, keeping, transferring ownership, and using firearms can and are defined in law at federal, state, and more local levels. And, it is always well to remember that the Constitution can be amended.

It is, then, essential that we in our democracy who cherish rights to the ownership and use of firearms – and wish to maintain those rights – continuously exhibit our

worthiness to such a right. It is my belief that such worthiness is best displayed through the consistent and obvious exhibition of a sense of respect, responsibility, and reverence. Hunter education is key to defining and meeting that test – certainly now and, perhaps, forever.

RESPECT

The first aspect of the respect of which I speak is for the Constitution of the United States that accords the common citizenry the right to possess arms. It is well to realize that this is a most uncommon situation among the world’s developed nations. We should recognize that in granting such right, our forefathers made an assumption of the worthiness of and a trust in the people that must be recognized anew in each generation. It is ancient wisdom “that to whom much is given much is expected.” Every owner of a firearm, and particularly every hunter, should understand and respect that trust. Such is key to hunter education.

The second aspect of respect is for the weapon itself. Some time ago, a critic took me to task over my use of the word “weapon” when speaking of “firearms.” He made the point that a firearm could be used exclusively for shooting at targets and never as a weapon. That may be a good point but one that is moot in the case of hunter education. We are speaking here of the education of hunters. Plain and simple, hunters use firearms to kill the animals they pursue. That, by any definition, makes a firearm a weapon. A weapon designed and used for the express purpose of producing the death of a targeted animal – preferably as nearly instantaneously as possible. Such a weapon’s sole function when used in hunting is to deliver a projectile on target with accuracy and force. The projectile (bullet or pellet) is designed to produce maximum shock and tissue damage so as to cause death in the targeted animal. I realize that such straight talk is usually softened with euphemisms. I believe that to be a mistake when speaking of hunter education. Every hunter should fully recognize that when a weapon is handled carelessly or inappropriately, it is exceedingly dangerous as it is an instrument designed to kill. Therefore, that weapon – in and of itself – deserves and demands the utmost respect. Such is key to hunter education.

The third aspect of respect is for the animal pursued. That respect is reflected in the study and understanding of the animal that will allow the hunter the ability to get close, shoot straight, and kill clean. That respect is shown in the care for the slain animal so that the animal’s dignity is preserved and the flesh is consumed with due appreciation. Such is key to hunter education.

The fourth aspect of respect is that for the land that produced the wildlife that the hunter both loves and pursues. That respect extends to rights and privileges of the owner of that land. No hunter should enter on to land without permission. And, no hunter should ever leave that land without expressing gratitude for what that land has produced – both in game and experience – and the recognition of the courtesy of the landowner and the contribution to conservation. Such is key to hunter education.

The fifth aspect of respect is for the feelings and opinions of others – both for those who share the

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hunting tradition and with those who are in disagreement over matters of hunting. These manifestations of civility are the mark of the mature hunter and are, most certainly, demanded of those who carry a weapon. Also involved, are matters of hunter etiquette. Such are key to hunter education.

My grandfather raised and trained fine bird dogs. On occasion, he would take a stranger

hunting at the request of a close friend or kinsman. On one such occasion, I trailed along to hold the "resting dogs" on leash. On the first covey rise one of the hunters downed a quail and shouted out, "My bird! My bird!" My grandfather called the dogs to heel and turned and started for the house. One of the hunters called to him, "Where are you going, is there anything wrong?"

He looked at the gentleman and said quietly, but firmly, "I am going home. I will hunt with no man who feels it either necessary

will continue to hunt at the sufferance of the increasing majority that has never hunted and never will.

So, if the culture of hunting is to be preserved in the United States, it is up to hunters themselves to make it so. The first step in that process is for hunters to conduct themselves, always, in a manner that justifies the continuation of hunting. First and foremost, hunters must – and most obviously – put more into conservation efforts than they remove. Hunters in North America have a proud history of leading the charge for wildlife conservation. These efforts began in the 1890s, with the Boone and Crockett Club playing a major part that has continued to this day. Yet, at least in my opinion, that is still not enough. Those who value the hunting tradition and a way of life that includes hunting must do still more – and not just for the species that we pursue both in reality and in dreams.

Every hunter has the responsibility to acquire the skills that are required to hunt successfully and in a socially acceptable fashion. That includes the ability to handle a weapon with absolute safety, shooting well, knowing and never exceeding one's limitations, moving across the terrain with certainty, acquiring knowledge of the animal pursued, possessing the ability to care for the kill, and being able to set up and maintain a good camp.

In addition to the fees paid for hunting – licenses and otherwise, each hunter should seek some avenue to contribute even more. That "something more" can include contributions – of time or money – to wildlife causes such as habitat acquisition, education, and research. These efforts can include being active in political matters involving conservation and hunting – this could involve testimony before regulatory bodies, supporting legislation, and otherwise being active in politics. Every hunter should be active in some wildlife support group that supports maintenance of wildlife and hunting such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Boone and Crockett Club, Ducks Unlimited, Wildlife Management Institute, or the Isaac Walton League among myriad others.

Every hunter has the responsibility to introduce and mentor a

beginning hunter of whatever age. The mentor must see that that novice receives proper instruction in hunter safety and is taught, by example, all that is good in the culture of hunting – what the hunter owes to the hunted, proper hunting etiquette, and the attributes of respect already mentioned. Those who believe that the culture of hunting has value beyond the present can assure the sustenance of that culture only by assuring that there are new hunters of proper stripe to replace the old. Only in that way is a culture sustained not only intact but enhanced from one generation to the next.

Every hunter has the responsibility to behave in accordance with law, with respect to applicable mores of the place or group, and – perhaps most important – in strict adherence with a personal moral code of fair chase. The first is the easiest to achieve. The laws and regulations are clearly spelled out. It is only necessary to comply.

Respect for local mores is a bit more difficult as these vary from region to region or even from one social group to another. For example, my grandfather, to whom I was apprenticed as a hunter, had a personal rule, much accepted in our local area, that one simply did not take more than four birds out of a covey of bobwhite quail. And, that local more was followed by most of the hunters of the area. Any hunter known to routinely ignore that custom was subjected to the scorn of other hunters. Such can be punishment enough.

The most difficult responsibility to adhere to consistently is one's own personal code or ethic. Aldo Leopold, known as the father of the profession of game management and a member of the Boone and Crockett Club, defined a hunter's ethic as what governed one's actions when no one else is watching. Coupled with laws and regulation and adherence to mores, these personal ethics are built on the personalization of the concept of what the oldest of America's organizations, the Boone and Crockett Club, deemed to be "fair chase." These are the personal sideboards that the individual, considering personal feelings and aptitudes, sets upon one's actions in the course of hunting. For example, an avid hunter that I know well will not shoot at a running animal and will not take a shot over 150 yards. She knows

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or appropriate to claim a bird." And, he did just that. I never forgot that lesson. For my grandfather hunting was an honored ritual to be executed with appropriate courtesy and etiquette.

The fifth aspect of respect is for the laws and regulations that govern hunting – and for those professionals who dedicate their lives to wildlife management. Such respect is not demonstrated solely by compliance with law and regulations but also by the intolerance of those who conduct themselves otherwise. Such is key to hunter education.

RESPONSIBILITY

If hunters wish to see hunting preserved in the United States they must take individual and collective responsibility to assure that result. Hunters should realize that they are, increasingly, a minority in the American population and that trend will continue as the overall population continues to grow. It is well to recognize that hunters

the limits within which she can deliver instant death to her prey and she will not, no matter what the circumstances, violate her own code of fair chase.

Clearly, humans evolved as hunter/gatherers. When humans hunted in order to sustain their lives, it seems unlikely that any consideration of "fairness" entered the picture. Humans, upon superficial examination seem unlikely predators lacking – compared to other large predators – in fangs and claws, speed of foot, and strength. What made humans a super predator was the human brain which could conceive of weapons, operate in organized hunts, store food, and accumulate and pass on knowledge from one person to another and from one generation to the next. In fact, as the millennia passed, weaponry improved step by slow step and, then, by leaps and bounds in the centuries following the discovery of gunpowder and the development of firearms.

By the 1890s in the United States, big game wildlife was in dire straits, having been extirpated from vast areas of their ranges and hanging on in small numbers and isolated pockets. Surely, if the United States had enacted the Endangered Species Act in the period 1895 to 1905 many currently plentiful game species would have been listed as "endangered" or, at least, as "threatened." Included would have been elk, whitetail deer, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and bison. By the 1930s, many species of waterfowl had plummeted to dangerously low numbers and would have been added to the list.

This crisis in wildlife extirpation produced a phenomenal reaction in a small subgroup of the American people that chose not to see America's wildlife driven to extinction. They said in many places and in many ways – "hold, enough!" By and large, this small cadre of Americans that began to band together to put wildlife on the road to recovery were, first and foremost, hunters. Many of today's critics of hunting disparage this group, and their successors of today, saying that their motivations were not to save wildlife *per se* but were, rather, to save hunting itself. Whatever their motivations, these dedicated few achieved their mission to save wildlife – and hunting – and with results that far exceeded their wildest dreams.

In the process of recovery of the big game species and game birds, the attitude toward how these animals were taken by hunters underwent a revolution. No longer was the primary purpose of hunting subsistence – the provision of meat for the table. The primary motivation of hunters had become the preservation and sustenance of hunting itself. That quickly lead to development of a hunting culture within which ethics defining "fair chase" were put forward in law and regulation, mores, and personal ethics.

Why the emphasis on "fair chase?" Obviously, when a skilled hunter and marksman sets out in pursuit of an animal, there is little that is "fair" about the matter. Only in the rare case of the pursuit of large predators in close cover lies any chance the pursued will kill the pursuer. The hunter does not have to close with the prey but can deliver a lethal blow at long range. The best that the prey can do is to avoid being killed by the hunter.

And, there lies all the difference – in the hunter's perception of his or her own actions and the public's opinion of hunting and hunters. Does the prey have a chance to escape the hunter? Does the pursuit take place within a framework that assures that neither the hunter nor the prey is disgraced? Does the hunt proceed within a code set by law and regulation, cultural mores, and personal codes of ethics – i.e., within the bounds of fair chase? If the answers are "yes" the hunting culture may survive and prosper. If the answer is "no" the hunting culture will wither and die – perhaps as it should.

An old time member of the Boone and Crockett Club wrote me a letter about an article about the concept of fair chase that I had written in a previous issue of *Fair Chase*. He said that he had struggled for over 60 years with his personal concept of fair chase. He had concluded that when he came to an animal that he had killed and knelt down and stoked its coat and felt that inevitable mixture of awe, sadness, wonder and joy – and no shame – he knew that his concept of fair chase had been satisfied. I could relate to that.

The ultimate responsibility of the hunter is to hunt safely within the letter of the law, to be cognizant and respectful of the mores of the area and the hunting group, and, in addition, to have and to fol-

low a fully developed code of fair chase.

REVERENCE

Perhaps a reverence for what builds in the heart of what I call the true hunter cannot be taught. Perhaps, among the fortunate, such reverence grows with time, mounting experience, and the time to reflect staring into the flames of a hundred campfires.

I can recall, as if it were yesterday, the day that my father placed a Remington single-shot .22 caliber rifle in my hands. After years of trailing my father, grandfather, and uncles on quail, squirrel, rabbit, dove and deer hunts, I was "knighted" on that day to

be one of them and with them. On that day, I was a man - in my mind at least. And, I remember even more vividly when my most treasured possession was locked away for a year when I broke a family hunting rule. So, I knew in quick succession, the joy of being considered worthy to be a hunter and the bitter gall of falling from grace.

I can recall, as if it were yesterday, the day that I knelt beside

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But, for Reverence

whatever reason, those of us who are hunters are, with pride and no apologies, what we are. Those of us who tend toward introspection ponder and, perhaps, conjure up other reasons for our passions. Most of us probably simply accept that hunting is a significant part of our lives that we treasure and wish to pass on to our children and friends.

the first animal – a swamp rabbit – stalked and killed all on my own. I was, at first, elated and, then, saddened as I watch the gray of death dull the bright eyes knowing that I had taken the life of this most beautiful of animals.

The animal was carefully dressed and placed gently in my hunting coat. When I arrived at the house, my grandmother saw the blood on my hands and my eyes still glistening with tears. She ignored the tears and asked me brightly, "what's that in your pocket? Show me." I laid the swamp rabbit on the porch railing. She picked it up and remarked on what a nice fat rabbit it was, how well-cared for was the meat, and the placement of the bullet. Granny allowed that it was to be rabbit tonight for din-

tenance of wildlife, in all its forms, and its habitats has occupied my working days - and many sleepless nights. Now, I teach budding wildlife biologists, foresters, and conservation biologists all that I can so that they may carry on that work.

I have been asked, even brusquely challenged, to explain how I can be so dedicated to the welfare of wildlife and still hunt some of those very same animals. It is a fair question - how indeed? It is a question each hunter must ultimately ask - and answer.

I hunt because of many reasons. First, because hunting was and is part of the culture in which I was raised and my soul and mind formed. Second, early on, I learned that food - meat and vegetables - did not originate in the grocery store. My experiences on my grandfather's farm made it clear that all sustenance for one animal evolves from the death of another life form - from death comes life. It is the eternal circle. Those who purchase their steaks or chickens at the store hire the farmer and the butcher as hunters in surrogate. Those who hunt know, up close and personal, about the eternal circle of life and death. But, just perhaps, as they mature as hunters they develop the understanding and reverence for the underlying mystery of the never-ending circle that lies beneath the surface.

Somewhere in the misty past of the origins of *Homo sapiens*, our species became among the most efficient of predators and that that way of life was maintained for most of the history of our species. If the entire existence of our species on earth is represented by a 24-hour day, it is only within the last few minutes, at best, of the last hour that some of our ancestors ceased to depend on hunting and turned to agriculture. Some few have not yet made the change.

For some of us, perhaps, those old racial memories run strong even today. Or, maybe, we only carry on traditions that we have been taught and have come to treasure.

But, for whatever reason, those of us who are hunters are, with pride and no apologies, what we are. Those of us who tend toward introspection ponder and, perhaps, conjure up other reasons for our passions. Most of us probably simply accept that hunting is a significant part of our lives that we treasure and wish to pass on to our children and friends. But, in each case, if we poke and prod for

feelings among mature hunters, a sense of reverence for the subtle nuances of the hunting mystique will become manifest.

For me, all I have to dredge from memory is one of hundreds of memories of hunters - whether kinsmen long departed or groups of kindred spirits gathered around the campfire - spinning yarns of the successful stalk or the one that got away. But there, somewhere in the darkness beyond the circle of light cast by the flickering fire, is the prey that was sought so avidly now safe in its secured habitat. They are there to be pursued another day, another year, and, perhaps, another century by these hunters and those who will follow them. But, where there is no reverence for the age-old mystery of what has taken place in the course of the hunt there will be no hunter's passion for the never-ending struggle to insure that the intricate dance between the prey and the human predator continues. And, when passion wanes for the insured future for wildlife - particularly those that are presently sought by hunters - the welfare of that wildlife will dim in synchrony.

Conclusion

The future of hunting, then, lies in the continued presence of the four R's of what I think should make up the fabric of both formal and informal hunter education - rights, respect, responsibility, and reverence. We must instill those four R's in all who hunt. Our fate as hunter rests in our hands and our hands alone. Our forefathers who treasured the hunting tradition did not fail us - and they did not fail wildlife. Surely, we can do no less. We must not now fail to pass on treasured hunting traditions and opportunities to those who will come after us.

Once, when I was Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, a reporter asked me what I would like to have for an epitaph. My response, I think, took him aback. I said something like this:

"He was a conservationist of some note. He did his best. And, he was a fine hunter."

The reporter looked at me without comprehension. He thought I was joking. I wasn't.

Effective hunter education, for hunters of all ages, is one most critical key to the future of hunting. We must not and will not fail that responsibility. ▲▲▲

Responsibility

Those who believe that the culture of hunting has value beyond the present can assure the sustenance of that culture only by assuring that there are new hunters of proper stripe to replace the old. Only in that way is a culture sustained not only intact but enhanced from one generation to the next.

ner and sent me to skin and cut the rabbit up for the pan.

That night at supper, she proudly remarked that the meat was courtesy of the family's newest hunter. All were complimentary of the repast, and, of course, the whole story had to be told. The eternal circle, now strictly on my terms, was complete - life to death and death to life.

Over the last 55 years, I have been part of that circle many times. Whether the prey was that first rabbit or one of many deer, elk, moose, pronghorn, turkeys, grouse, or quail. The feelings were always the same - but, somehow, always deepening in mystery, understanding, and appreciation. I came to understand what the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset meant when he said that the "true hunter does not hunt in order to kill, rather the true hunter kills in order to have hunted."

I have spent my entire adult life as a professional wildlife biologist and conservationist. The sus-