

HUNTER ETHICS

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY GORDON ALLEN

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

This essay was essentially written, in large measure, in 1992 and circulated to many of my urban professional colleagues. It was met with interest and some sympathy. However, a non-hunter will never understand the difference between an individual and a species. Then I was surprised and gratified when I found an essay in Boone and Crockett by Jack Ward Thomas, who thoroughly analyzed "Just What is Fair Chase." (*Fair Chase*, Winter 2002 and Spring 2003.)

Aldo Leopold pioneered "land ethics" in the first half of the 20th century. Inspired by Leopold, his fellow professor at the University of Wisconsin, Van Rensselaer Potter coined the term "bioethics" in the second half of the 20th century (1970). Both terms have a powerful social and personal component. Both terms connote an integration of values and the environment. So, too, do "hunt ethics," an integration of values and action based upon biology and the land.

The hunter has affection and awe for all of nature's creations, perhaps more so than any other human observer, for the hunter must read the most subtle signs of his quarry—its behavior and its habitat—to be successful. If he succeeds, respect and regret are dominant sensibilities. The hunter's moral responsibility is linked to the purpose for which the quarry is killed. Is it for food, for the human joy of the chase, or to build a tangible repository of memories? Or, is it to test the civilized human self against an amoral and harsh natural world? Buried within us, too deep for memory but underneath only a few layers of civilization, lie the ancient instincts which make no distinction between the artificial and the natural; the hunter-gatherer is entirely focused on the chase.¹ Our Paleolithic era was millions of years, our Neolithic just a few millennia.²

The image of the hunter as a morally responsible human was seriously vitiated in the public consciousness in the mid 20th century by the Bambi saga.³ Written by Felix Salten in 1923 and animated by Walt Disney in 1942, it featured a "depraved male" murdering "doe-eyed innocence."

The trope projected nothing more than a sentimental and romantic anthropomorphism, crying out against man's very nature and condemning the human products of scientific materialism, one of which is the gun. Bambi was a falsification of man and his place in nature, forgetting that man himself is part of nature. Yet, it was a very lucrative perversion for Disney and a damning defamation of the honest hunter.

In fact, such a hunter has a love affair with nature and his quarry. Such a hunter reawakens, even recreates his biological center—all five senses fully and sublimely engaged.

Yet, one must acknowledge that the trophy, the score, and the adulation by fellow hunters and fellow travelers represent for many trophy hunters the primary, even the only reason to hunt. If so, then the hunt is transformed into an act of "collecting."

It must be asked, can this residue, the trophy, satisfy a sport hunter's innermost needs? The answer is, yes, of course, providing the trophy is a byproduct and not the prime reason for the hunt. Trophy quality should connote a challenging hunt where we stay in the field longer and hunt harder for a larger old male in his last year or two of life. In the end, however, every animal we kill is a trophy; that is to say, a cherished reality brought to fruition by our honest effort.

Fair chase hunting is meaningful only in the broad domain of recreational or non-subsistence hunting. However, "hunt ethics" may be a better term, since hunting is more than just the chase. It is the preparation, anticipation, finding, stalking, and legal killing of the prey. This is a complex drama and requires perseverance, intelligence, and courage. The latter virtue is essential since death or great harm to the hunter is not a negligible risk. Consider the number of deaths and injuries each year to hunters across the globe: Africa's dangerous game animals, tropical diseases, snakebites, the North American bear, light plane crashes, falls from mountain peaks and other dangerous variables of weather, terrain, air travel, and physical collapse.

Hunt ethics also means understanding, protecting, and building the environment that sustains the quarry. The projects and publications of the Boone and Crockett Club, the Wild Sheep Foundation, and World Conservation Force exemplify these values.

When hunting—whether for survival, for the fur, food, tools from bone, to control predators, aid the survival of game species, or to protect human and domestic animal populations—one necessarily kills by any humane means. In destroying a man-eating tiger or leopard in Asia, a rogue elephant in Africa, the deadly red wolf of the Pamirs and Altai, or the voracious magpies and foxes in the game-bird coverts of the British Isles, success is essential and many means are acceptable, provided that they do not inflict gratuitous pain or produce asymmetrical collateral damage to the surrounding countryside, e.g. poison. Jim



Conservation Force was started by John J. Jackson, III in 1997, a former president of Safari Club International from 1995 to 1996, a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. It has become perhaps the most powerful legal force in the United States and the world on behalf of hunters, hunting, and sustainable harvest in the context of wildlife conservation. Boone and Crockett Club had been a major political and legal force in wildlife conservation in the latter quarter of the 19th century and the first third of the 20th century. Its founders and members, beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, were responsible for the establishment of many national parks and forests for the protection of large game animals from extermination by market hunters. However, after World War II, the Club refocused on the “book” and the scoring system. It fomented a competitive ethos, brought to its apogee by Safari Club International and Grand Slam Club/Ovis. This ethos is a mixed blessing; often diluting the inherent joy and self-satisfaction of the hunt by the hunter, yet upgrading the health and trophy size of the species. In the early 1990s, Boone and Crockett Club increased their efforts in the arena of wildlife conservation with a 3 million dollar establishment of a Boone and Crockett Professorship of Wildlife Conservation at the University of Montana (*Fair Chase*, Winter 2005, p 10). In the last 20 years, it has recaptured its original mission, best illustrated and chronicled by the Club’s *Fair Chase* magazine documenting the many conservation projects it is espousing and executing.

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Parenthetically,
it is widely
recognized by
behavioral pediatric psychologists
that one of the best ways to inculcate
the values of responsible and
compassionate behavior is
to expose the juvenile delinquent
to hunting and survival skills in the
wilderness, a very effective antidote
to the evils of city streets.

Corbett understood this and acted accordingly in his many trials against the Asian man-eating beast. It is worth considering that the only right the animal has is not to experience unnecessary pain by human hands.⁴

The ethics of sport hunting implies sportsmanship, a quality sadly lacking in modern athletics at both the professional and amateur levels. This is a quality that connotes honesty, absence of subterfuge, playing by the rules, and not attempting to injure an opponent while giving the process, the game or the stalk itself, the highest priority, regardless of outcome. A sportsman does not take undue advantage of an opponent; he maintains that bond of shared endeavor and due friendship. A corked bat or a sniper-honed rifle defeats the notion of sport.

Yes, in sport hunting the hunter seeks to kill the prey, but only to complete the stalk as the predator becomes one with the prey. The stalk and the kill satisfy the atavistic impulse in all humans. But this impulse is not one of annihilation, rather one of humanely sacrificing an individual while spending time and treasure to help the species flourish. The hunter is responsible for, and the most important factor in, maintaining and enhancing game species and their coverts. The desired result is that all game species thrive. In terms of knowledge, motive, action, time, and funds, the hunter is the ultimate ecologist; the hunter promotes the healthiest symbiosis between man and the rest of nature. Much of nature is now a product of human culture and man's footpath girdles nearly every acre of the globe.

Recognize the conservation done by eight hundred thousand hunters of Ducks Unlimited and their reconstitution of twelve million acres of natural flora and fauna; the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and its over 6 million acres of habitat restitution and its elk repopulation throughout much of its original North American habitat; Wild Sheep Foundation and its sister satellites restoring wild sheep populations and their habitat; the remarkable legal work of World Conservation Force in North America, Asia, and Africa. Recognize other hunting organizations and outfitters such as Kern's Hunting Consortium and Stark's Safari Outfitters. Bighorn sheep have increased fourfold from 25,000 in 1900 to one hundred thousand in the year 2000. White-tailed deer have increased thirty-fold from less than one-half million to over 15 million in the same time span, and antelope fifty-fold, from 20,000 to more than 1 million over the last 100 years.

All of these entities have ushered in a worldwide golden age of game and its

habitat with help from enlightened modern governments, but precious little help has come from professional environmentalists and animal rights extremists. There are now over eight hundred million acres of national forest and grasslands. This revolution, which began in earnest with the establishment in 1905 of the United States Forest Service, was the progeny of founders and important personalities of Boone and Crockett Club including Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. Theodore Roosevelt said in 1905, "The wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so we must, and we will."

G. Evelyn Hutchinson, the father of the ecologists' use of the scientific method and long ago my teacher at Yale, said, "Scratch a hunter and you find under this predator's cloak and gun nature's greatest friend."

In recent times, terms of war—enemy, duel, kill, destroy, crush, blitz, assault, combat, battle, trenches, offense, defense, platoon—have been applied to athletic contests, children and adults playing childish games. It is not surprising that modern athletics as a human activity has failed to implant those values necessary for the advance of civilization. True, such games have tamed, stylized, and redirected the hunting impulses. However, the ethos of late 20th-century athletics, though a pathetic mime of war, seeks the annihilation of the foe by any means, fair or foul. Breach the rules but escape detection.

Sport hunting, in its best sense, turns real war on its head. In war, the young are slaughtered. The wars of Europe (World War I and II), Burma, Russia, Germany, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and others of this last century, were ones of attrition and annihilation. Machiavelli murmured that a main purpose of war was to rid nations of excess and unruly young male creatures.

Sport hunting certainly ends in blood, but that of the single oldest beast on the mountain, and not, for such a hunter, wanton destruction by any means, however foul.

Modern athletics has ceased to be sportsmanlike and has become a passive multibillion-dollar entertainment forum, a "Roman Coliseum" for the spectator population, with success defined only by winning and revenue flow and not by "how you play the game." This latter concept has become a quaint notion, a relic of the past.

However, for the sportsman, winning is not everything, and it is not the only thing and certainly does not justify the use of any means, holy or unholy, to procure success. So should the quest for the sport hunter.

Not surprising, hunting is one of the last bastions of sportsmanship; a word that connotes an activity that is lawful, logical,



The tens of millions of hunters and their sympathizers and the tens of billions of dollars generated in the United States is a useful economic argument. So also is the hundreds of millions of dollars generated by African countries in their sport hunting programs, and far greater than all the moneys generated by the tourism and photography safaris to that benighted continent. Still, let us blame the old European colonial powers for its present tragic squalor and killing fields. But the economic argument, though important, is tangential to my analysis.

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loving, and regenerative. The laws of the land are obeyed and the

human uses his reason and only minimal technical advances (gun, bow, scopes, binoculars, horses) to find, stalk, and kill the quarry. It is done with sympathy and affection for the prey, devoting more resources to the conservation of the species than to the harvest of the individual of that species. "By pursuing the individual and worshipping the species, the hunter guarantees the internal recurrence of his prey." The death of the individual is the price paid to enhance the species.⁵

Sportsmanship, the essence of hunt ethics in sport hunting, has a strong cultural foundation in family, friends, and community, but ultimately it is a personal, deeply intimate sense of honor in having done the right thing in the right way at the right time. It becomes a part of one's personal history that is recollected with happiness and satisfaction. The trophies garnered are viewed then as of inestimable value; the quest is cherished.⁶

Was my fatigue deep enough? Were the natural elements harsh enough? And did my modern tools not open too widely the technical divide between prey and predator? The answers will vary from person to person, group to group, community to community, and hunt to hunt. Jeeps may be necessary in the Gobi Desert and the Pamirs but unacceptable in the Madison Range of Montana. Floatplanes in Alaska and helicopters in Russian Siberia may be necessary to reach base camp but unacceptable to find, stalk, or kill the beast. Dogs or baiting may be necessary in one venue but illegal or unfair in another. The challenge and use of a .410 shotgun on wing game or the bow and arrow on mammals does not absolve us from the mandate to kill quickly and cleanly to minimize suffering. The methods used to narrow the technical advantage between prey and predator allow us to say to ourselves, my effort was worthy of my quarry.

In addition to a preoccupation with the methodology of the chase and kill, we must also justify the very hunt itself. But can this be done in our artificial urban society that has lost touch with nature itself? Yes, but only if we reestablish a connection between man's deepest nature and his need to pursue wild creatures. Call it a DNA imperative. In this sense, not to hunt is the unnatural, the perversion. Indeed, the hunter will be the final protector of wildlife and its habitat.

With the bullet's impact, the gap between hunter and hunted is closed instantly and forever. What follows is elation sobered

by sadness for having silenced another living creature. Nevertheless, the kill concludes the hunt, though it is not the purpose of the sport hunter, as Ortega y Gasset said many decades ago.⁷

The kill, if it is to be honorable, does not permit needless or negligent suffering because of an overlong or running shot, poor or inadequate equipment for the task, or failure to track down a wounded beast. In fact, an excessively long-distance shot usually reflects a failed stalk. To close within 100 to 200 yards on the animal is essential for a robust satisfaction and indescribable communion never appreciated by the long-distance marksman.

In the final analysis, hunt ethics is both personal and communal. It is personal because we narrow the technological gap between prey and predator in a humane manner and communal because we obey the laws, both written and unwritten, of the community which sanctions this quest.

At the ultimate moment, only the hunter knows, as he squeezes the trigger, if his hunt has been driven by sportsmanship, a term of art as old as the sporting fields of Babylon and practiced long before the games of Egypt or the birth of the Grecian's Olympics or the subsequent games of skill of Christendom. ■

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- 6 An example for sportsmanship at its highest level is illustrated in *Sports Afield*, September/October 2011, pp 74-79.
- 7 Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *Meditations on Hunting*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1972.

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