ROBERT D. BROWN

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
HUNTER AND CONSERVATION ETHICS
SUB-COMMITTEE

IF THERE'S NO CHASE, IS THE HUNT STILL FAIR?

Log into the Associate's Community to read Robert D. Brown's article, as well as archived articles dating back to 1994.

A few years ago I published an article in *Fair Chase* titled, "I've Walked the Line...Have You?" (Summer 2007). In that article, I provided figures on the slippery slope of gravitating from being a true hunter to being just a shooter, giving the animal little or no chance of escape. I also talked about the domestication of wild animals, comparing the domestication of sheep and cattle to what some often now call "wild" deer, but which are raised on deer farms. Well, it's time for a recap.

Times have changed a bit, and we now have some new technology. But have our ethics changed? Not long ago I was talking with some non-hunting—but not anti-hunting —friends, and one of them decried hunting from blinds and tree stands. They said that was just "ambush hunting" and required no skill. I thought about that afterward, and to some extent, I had to agree. Yes, you have to know where to place the stand or blind, and in all honesty, it's not that different from the still-hunting I did as a kid in northern California. But, after hunting for many years from a ground blind near a corn feeder in Texas, I'd gotten bored with the lack of challenge and the predictability of success. I took my sons with me at times, but tried to explain this really wasn't real "hunting." Was I right or wrong? There was no chase, but was ambushing "fair"?

Later I was invited on a moose hunt in British Columbia with my 75-year-old uncle. Over the years, he had taken 30 moose in that area and as many elk. My three-day hunt with two teenage guides (their first guided hunt), backpacking in, living in pup tents, wading through a muskeg swamp at night, and the challenges of getting the head and meat out and back to base camp would make a story in itself. To me, that was a real "hunt." But were my earlier hunts from stands and blinds not real hunts?

As a caveat to this article on hunting ethics, I have to admit that, at times I've hunted behind high fences (though they were 10,000 acres or more), over bait, and with a dog. Like most of you, I learned to hunt from my dad, and my fondest memories of my youth are from hunting deer, ducks and pheasants with my father, grandfather and uncle in northern California. The Coastal Range and the Sierras can both be rugged country, and we used a dog for tracking our harvested deer. In fact, my first buck at an age of about 14-15 was a B&C book-quality blacktail.

I TALK A GOOD BIT ABOUT OUR DIFFERENT HUNTING CULTURES. WE FIND ACCEPTABLE WHAT WE WERE RAISED WITH, OR WHAT WE'VE BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO.

FIGURE 1. ASPECTS GIVING HUNTERS THE ADVANTAGE OVER THE HUNTED

Baiting with salt or molasses
Bows with laser sights
Camouflage clothes
Compound bows
Corn feeders
Food plots
Doe urine
Drones for scouting
Grunts/Calls
High-powered rifles
Hunting inside high fences
Hunting with dogs
Listening devices
Range finders
Remote live TV
Telescopic sights
Trail cameras
Tree stands/Blinds

I remember years ago when I was head of the Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences Department at Texas A&M, I would give lectures to the freshmen wildlife majors. They were about half men and half women, and about half hunters and half non-hunters. Some of the boys did not hunt, while some of the girls did. I found no anti-hunters, but again, this was Texas A&M! As part of my lecture, I made a graph like in Figure 1, listing the potential advantages hunters could have over their prey. I prioritized the techniques, as I did in my 2007 article, and which I don't do here. I asked their opinions about each technique, and none of the students seemed to have a problem with wearing camo or using high-powered rifles, or bow hunting. But as we got into scopes, range finders and other electronics, a surprising majority opposed their use—even the hunters among them. When I listed the factors used in domesticating animals like cattle and sheep and compared those to what some are doing with farmed deer, it was all but unanimous against the procedures. Only one boy favored it all, and his dad owned a deer farm.

This reminded me of an earlier meeting I attended of the Southeast Deer Study Group (SEDSG). This is an organization of 200–400 federal, state and private deer biologists from Texas through the south up to Maryland. At each annual meeting they have an evening "Shootin' from the Hip" session, where the floor is open for discussion of controversial topics (usually after imbibing some adult beverages). At this meeting, in Jackson, Mississippi, the Texans berated the Mississippi deer managers over the fact that they allowed hunting with dogs. The Bulldogs countered that the Aggies were unethical because they allowed hunting over bait (Mississippi now allows that too). My thought was, are either of these techniques wrong, or both—or neither?

A few years later, after I'd moved to North Carolina, I was asked to debate the issue of high fences and deer farming at another annual meeting of the SEDSG in San Antonio. Since I was facing old friends, and wanting to get back out of Texas alive, I tried to make my arguments against high fences humorous. I even came up with "The 12 Step Program to Lose the Trophy Hunting Addiction." I talked a good bit about our different hunting cultures. We find acceptable what we were raised with, or what we've become accustomed to. I used the analogy of the term Bar-B-Que to make my point. In California, where I was raised, BBQ is anything you do on an outdoor grill, whether it be hamburgers, fish or steaks. In Texas, it always refers to beef brisket, and BBQ can grammatically be a noun, verb or adjective. In North Carolina, BBQ means pulled pork, and the sauce can be tomato-based or vinegar, depending on the locale. So we clearly have culinary cultures in the country.

We also have hunting cultures. My dad and I used a dog for tracking, but never would have thought to use dogs for flushing deer, much less a blind or stand of any sort. When I moved to Texas I was dumbfounded to find that just about everyone, including my money-challenged students, paid for

hunting leases. I'd never heard of such a thing in California, or while hunting while in college in Colorado or Pennsylvania. In my youth, we looked down on those who "posted" their land, and we always hunted free with the landowner's permission. But once I adapted to the hunting culture of Texas, I could see the value in providing hunting income to landowners, limiting the number of hunters (deer hunting in Pennsylvania reminded me of my days as a Marine in Vietnam), and providing income to enhance habitat.

Likewise the issue of high fences and the techniques that go with them (Figure 2) have always been controversial, both inside and outside the Boone and Crockett Club. While the fences restrict the movement of deer and other game and predators, and in some states can restrict animal migration, they can have advantages. In Texas, many landowners feel they need to fence their property to allow them to manage the age structure and buck/doe ratios in their herds and to keep the herd within carrying capacity. The fences keep deer from other ranches out and can protect habitat. Unfortunately, this then can lead to a bunch of mischief, as listed in Figure 2. I've seen exceptionally well-managed deer on high-fenced ranches. But where I've seen year-round feeding, breeding and the plethora of other animal husbandry techniques, I've seen degraded habitat and the so called "Frankendeer."

So what is ethical and what is not? Clearly, we need to adhere to game laws, which differ from state to state and from Mexico to Canada. But is that enough? Our fair chase doctrine states that we need to provide the game with a reasonable chance to escape. Are the use of muzzleloaders or bow and arrow while stalking our game on the ground the only way to achieve that? As discussed in the last issue of this magazine, how do we ensure that, "The 'no guarantees' nature of hunting is one of its most appealing attributes" (*Fair Chase*, Spring 2018, pages 12–13) Or, as discussed in the same issue, are we dividing hunters against each other by even discussing these issues (pages 54–56).

I don't believe so. Times change, equipment changes, cultures change and public opinion changes. We need to adapt to all of those, within reason. Keeping the discussion open allows for hunters to communicate and interact with each other. It allows us to examine our own and others' cultures, and search our own consciousness. Just because I refuse to utilize some legal hunting technique doesn't mean that you are wrong in using it. It doesn't make you right either, but that's for you to decide. As Ted Vitali said in the Spring 2018 issue, we need to ensure that we are hunting and not just killing, and the public needs to understand the difference.

No wildlife biologist can write an article like this without quoting Aldo Leopold, the father of game management in this country. He said, "The ethics of sportsmanship is not a fixed code, but must be formulated by the individual, with no referee but the Almighty." As in my last article, here I again disagree with Aldo. Although Aldo is right for the individual hunter on his/her hunt, we as a hunting community must keep this dialogue open and be able to set and adapt to changing standards, or else someone else will do it for us. ■

FIGURE 2. ASPECTS OF DOMESTICATION OF ANIMALS

- Artificial insemination
- Artificial waterers
- Breeding
- Brush/tree clearing
- Cloning
- Counting deer
- Culling
- Drugs/hormones for antler growth
- Fencing
- Food Plantings
- Marking/Branding
- Predator elimination
- Private ownership
- Supplemental feeding
- Translocating animals
- Vaccination
- Worming through feed
- Year-round feeding