DOES MOTIVE MATTER?

Game animals can't know why we hunt, or why after finding them we decide to shoot them. Only our behavior counts. But hunter motives can influence the way people think about hunting.

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Some people who oppose hunting summarily dismiss it all as barbarism. Motive simply doesn't matter. To those who condone hunting, many reject the notion of killing for fun or to bolster egos. The only "worthy" motive is hunting in order to eat. Motives don't come in neat packages, however. What if someone shooting game to eat has fun doing it? Does this make the killing less acceptable? Even if it were possible to assess relative worthiness, motives are not easy to determine. Many hunters are unable to give you honest answers about their motives. Sometimes they don't know why they hunt. They just want to.

A few years ago I surveyed a state's Hunter Education instructors.

Of 82 respondents, 52 said the "most valued aspect of hunting" for them was seeing wildlife and being outdoors in a natural setting. Only fifteen said that finding and shooting game was most important. Now, many people (not just hunting's opponents) would claim that reply is disingenuous – the right thing to say, but not really the truth. These skeptics would point out what many hunting outfitters believe to be true: "hunters are happiest when they kill."

Many hunters say they kill for meat, but I suspect few really do. The effort doesn't pencil out. For most urbanites, hunting is expensive. Transportation, gear, licenses, and incidental costs soon pay for half a beef – even if there's no charge for time away from home or office.

The Inuit are among the two dozen or so tribes worldwide that still subsist largely on game. I experienced this kind of hunting some years ago while helping a group of Inuit hunters snake freighter canoes through a dense ice pack on Hudson Bay. After an exhausting day of jumping from one block of ice to the next, towing hundreds of pounds of gear on canoes, an Inuit boy looking through the one good barrel on his binocular spied a seal's head poking through a sliver of black water amid the jumble of ice. He shouldered a Marlin lever action rifle and fired. The next instant he was launching a canoe to retrieve the seal. Seals, if they have even a little fat, can sink quickly.

Luck was with the boy, and he snagged the head-shot seal with a gaff. Two older Inuits unzipped the creature in seconds. Deftly they diced the meat and threw it in the pot. Then they emptied the intestines by stripping them between pinched fingers, and handed a section to me. I gulped it like a robin might a worm. This was, I decided later, one of the few times I've eaten an animal shot just for food. Nothing was left of the seal when we resumed our struggle through the ice.

Some hunters will tell you that killing game is an evolutionary trait that has ensured human survival by increasing fitness. Anthropologists can counter that argument by saying hunters are products of our culture, and if we were genetically programmed to hunt everyone would want to. I've met hunters who claim they hunt because it is in their blood and because their eyes are set to the front. To distance themselves from other predators, like wolves or panthers, hunters say they are sensitive and introspective, sometimes reluctant to kill, but always respectful of the game. Indeed, "respect" pops up in every defense of hunting. It is still unclear to me whether respect for the animal justifies the killing, atones for it, or makes the hunter worthy of the deed. I'm not sure that game animals, given the choice between life and a hunter's respect, would take the latter.

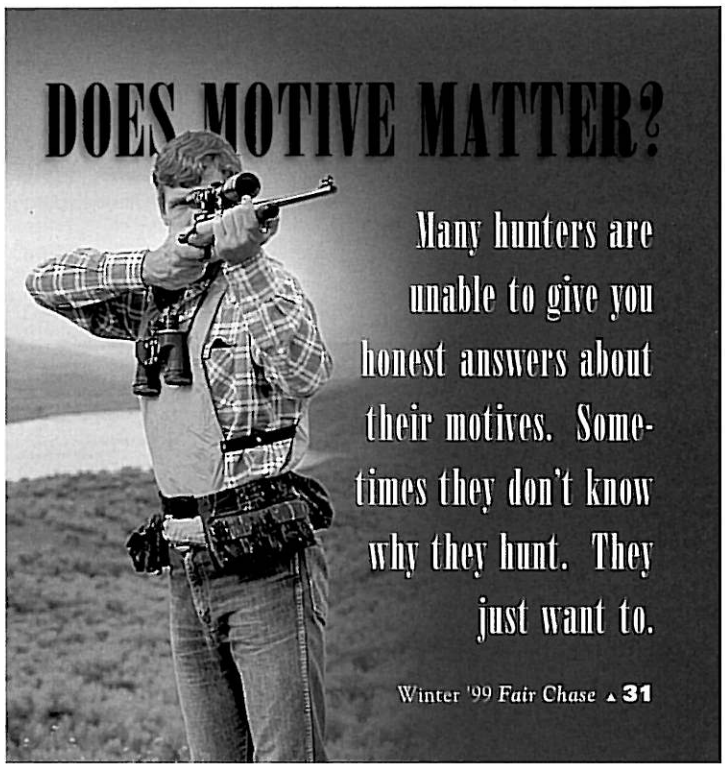
The litany of respect began with Aldo Leopold, who wrote early in his career that "man's intellect has developed much faster than his morals . . . conservation can never succeed merely through repressive laws. It must be founded on a respect for living things." For a long time Leopold's ideas circulated mainly in academia; they're common currency now. But taken as a doctrine, respect bears an eerie similarity to slow-motion video images of bullets blowing dew off animal ribs. Both are doctored representations of what really goes on afield.

One problem with respect as justification is that it is not a motive. It is either present or absent but never causal. We don't shoot game animals because we respect them – just as we don't necessarily shoot them to control their numbers. The other problem with respect is that you cannot measure it. It's even less tangible than love. "I love you" is easier to say than to prove. Called upon to prove it you will, over time, plainly succeed or fail. But you can't demonstrate love to someone who is dead. Ditto for respect. The German ritual of putting a twig in the mouth of dead game seems more a bow to tradition than a heartfelt show of respect.

Not long ago a friend invited me to watch amateur video clips of an Alaskan hunt. In one, hunters spy a moose hip-deep in colorful willows far away. Urgent whispers follow, then the set-up and the shot. The bull collapses. The hunters slap shoulders, march forward, grin at the camera over the antlers. Suddenly one of the fellows pulls a chain saw from the boot of a four-wheeler that has ground its way to the kill site. Revving the saw, he slides the bar into the moose's skull. Brain crawls out in ivory ribbons as he bends with enthusiasm to the task, while kibitzing loudly with his companions. In a trice, skull plate and antlers sag free, and the hunters line up for one more pose, grinning again behind the broad, bleached palms.

At first I thought such gruesome detail unfit for the camera. It occurred to me quickly, though, that the moose was dead before the saw came to life. A band saw behind the butcher counter does the same thing. Perhaps it was the incongruity of a wilderness hunt, with whispered tensions and the rifle's echo – the primitive package – against the sudden snarl of a gasoline engine that brought me up short. Or maybe it was the cleaving of the head, which most people think of as a unit that is properly left intact.

A lot of people who disapprove of hunting would find in that moose vignette the essence of all that is wrong with field sports: a marvelous animal shot dead from far away by someone unable to get close. Congratulations all around for a kill preordained by the reach and explosive bite of a 7mm magnum. Grins, gore and ghoulish laughter. Destruction of the skull in a sawdust shower of bloody bone and brain. Golly, it's all so uncivilized. There's no re-



deeming behavior, no apology here. Nobody steps to the camera and concedes a pang of regret. Nobody even bothers to tell why the shooting occurred. Everyone is too busy carving up game and celebrating to respect or disrespect anything.

Who can fault them? Respect is like religion; awkward to bring up in moments of revelry but not necessarily absent as an influence. How do you best show respect? And where should it go? Is respect due the animal or the antlers? Is it perhaps the animal's capacity to live long enough to ensure a high score? It's a muddle. We respect people who have shown themselves in some way exceptional as achievers, philanthropists, or merely good neighbors. An animal that does nothing but eat, sleep, grow, and run away from rifle bullets isn't in the same league. It is just being an animal. It merits respect only as it demands a hunter's best efforts. Celebration over a carcass may be for some hunters tacit praise of a worthy opponent. Call it respect, if you will.

Some people say that hunters aren't even close to respectful, that in killing and handling game they fail to meet the most rudimentary standards of decency. But standards vary. Dicing a moose with a chain saw is not indecent to people who grew up around moose and have struggled though thick skulls with folding camp saws. Standards also change. Draping deer carcasses over fenders used to be accepted as good-natured boasting. (A Wyoming rancher pointed out to me that modern automobiles don't pack deer very well because of sloping hoods and integral headlamps - in earlier times, lamps stuck on pedestals on big flat fenders far from engine heat were handy anchors for big game.) This practice is now considered disrespectful because most people these days grow up in cities where they rarely see dead animals and where television brings them a sanitized version of animal life in the wild. For this sequestered but critical public, hunters must hide their deer and train youth to use discretion in speaking of events afield.

If you're up to date on what I call "Respect Literature," you'll have read wisdom from many contemporary writers yearning for the limelight accorded to eminent conservationists such as Leopold. Everyone who isn't dressing game with chain saws or trying to stop hunting altogether has something to say about why hunters hunt and how they feel about it. Those who defend hunting and killing aren't good at separating the two – perhaps because a shot seems less criminal if you connect it to the chase. People who oppose hunting, on the other hand, think of hunting and killing as one.

It is fashionable to say we are motivated to hunt by the bird songs of the eastern woods, the grandeur of western landscapes, the sight of a bounding deer, and the kinship we feel with the land. It is not so fashionable to say we're going hunting to kill something. But in many cases, that could be closer to the truth. One outfitter of long experience told me that "hunters want game, not just time in the woods, no matter what they say." He added that hunters are often disillusioned when they don't get the animals they'd hoped to kill or had planned on killing. They expect better shooting than they're likely to get because the outdoor press has deluded them with glossy photos of trophy-class antlers. "On good hunts, only one hunter in four will shoot a big animal. Two will have mediocre success and one will strike out."

Among the most powerful forces influencing hunter behavior is the perceived expectations of peers. Some hunters feel compelled to prove themselves. I've been among hunters who evidenced no personal interest in the chase but whose only mission on the hill was to get something to show other people. In fact, a few have seemed even to dislike hunting, though they had paid handsomely to hunt where they might find trophy-class game.

"Bagging a big animal is a lot like buying a powerful bass boat," said an acquaintance who edits an outdoors magazine in the south. "Some fellows don't even look at a new boat before they get out the checkbook." He regularly attends boat shows to keep readers up to date on outboards with enough snap to turn the screws of an aircraft carrier. "They glance at the cowling, then collar the salesman and ask how fast it will go. If it is really fast, they buy. They won't find many places to wind it out, but just knowing that they own the meanest boat on the lake makes them stand a little taller on the dock."

Extraordinary performance is what sport is all about. Besting an opponent or breaking a record makes someone a winner. We all like to be winners. More impor-

tantly, we all like our peers to think that we are winners.

It's logical to argue that in hunting there can be no winner because the playing field is not level. Hunters with lots of money can buy more opportunity. However, data collected from the most widely read outdoor magazines, dating back to 1932, suggests that competition among hunters for trophies is increasing. My interviews with longtime hunters indicates that, too. The Safari Club International awards program, for example, venerates a hunter not so much for bagging an exceptional animal but for methodically racking up kills in categories. The trophy then, is no longer the animal, but the award brought a little closer by each animal's death.

During the last three decades, trophy scores have become a shorthand way of measuring success. If an elk scores 341-7/8 or a whitetail buck 157-2/8, the numbers are sufficient proof of the hunter's prowess. The hunt itself becomes subordinate to its outcome. The process matters less than the product.

Big game guides commonly get this question from clients as they contemplate a shot: "How big is he?" (Answer: "Bigger than he'll look on the ground.") If the hunter shoots, he will ask that again on the walk toward the carcass. (Answer this time: "It doesn't matter because this animal is dead and the bone won't grow anymore.") The hunter who doesn't ask any questions but kneels next to the animal and strokes an antler and says "what a beauty!" is rare these days.

Hunters who doctor antlers or poach or claim as their own animals taken by other hunters are enslaved by scores. So driven are they to impress their peers that they accept score as the sole measure of their prowess as hunters, or even of their worth as humans. Preoccupation with score surely seems at odds with the leading role of respect in contemporary tales of killing.

Not that scoring is wrong, or that to appreciate fine country or pleasant conversation you must forget about antler dimensions. In fact, by using score as a standard for the shot, you add challenge to a hunt and meaning to a trophy. When it rules out the killing of lesser animals, a numerical standard makes the going tougher – just as harsh weather and rough terrain test your resolve. But a numerical definition of "trophy" can be problematic. Records-book minimums suffice as hurdles in the best hunting areas but may be too severe for other units that are unlikely to yield any book-class game. A hunter fortunate enough to have killed several records-book animals may hold himself to a higher standard. Regardless of score, a particularly elusive local buck can be a trophy if you focus your hunt only on him.

A few years ago, a fellow accompanied me into a canyon after an elk we'd spotted there. We lost lots of elevation and worked hard going up the other side. We made a difficult sneak and managed to come upon the animal in its bed. The hunter raised his rifle. I put my hand on his shoulder and shook my head. It was an enormous bull by most standards, but this man had already shot one bigger and I had been with him. What was the point of killing this elk? He read all that in my eyes, stuck the crosswire once more on the animal, whispered "bang," then lowered his .338 and shrugged. It wasn't an if-you-say-so shrug, but one that told me he had reached the same conclusion: this elk had already lost the contest. A pull of the trigger meant we couldn't hunt any more. Having antlers to prove a kill wasn't necessary.

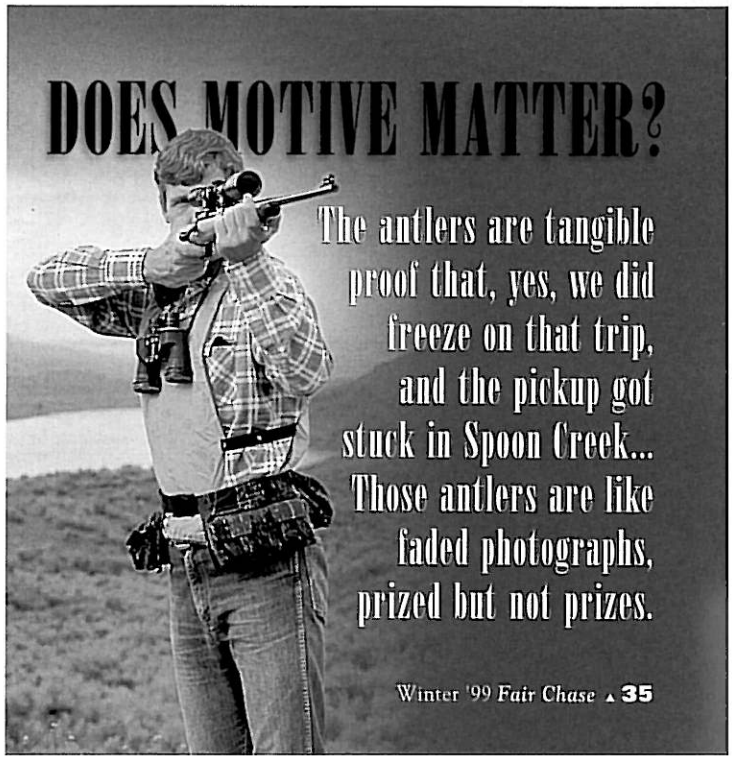
He didn't shoot an elk at all that trip, and the hunt cost him plenty. Most hunters would have gently removed my hand from their arm and hammered that bull because it was sure to earn them the plaudits of their peers at home. As a bass boat, it had enough horsepower.

It's hard to say why a hunter will kill sometimes when he doesn't take the opportunity to kill all the time. He can say an animal isn't big enough. But that begs the question: big enough for what? Big for the hunting unit, or as big as the hunter has seen in ten days, or bigger than the hunter has ever shot? The answer can change with the circumstances – opportunity has a lot to do with motive. It's easy to say we're not looking for a trophy when we want to shoot a deer and see only little ones. It's easy to say we were trophy hunting when a big deer pops out of the bushes by chance. Announcing that we're trophy hunting before we've found that big deer is risky because most of us will fail most of the time. Failure is hard to accept.

A set of antlers can be a prize, a memento, or a symbol of the hunter's prowess. Trophies, like fast cars and expensive boats and powerful rifles, can cross that thin line separating possession and persona. The extraordinary lengths to which some hunters go to kill exceptional game animals suggests more is at stake than a wall decoration or a good hunting story.

People who oppose trophy hunting argue that it is blatant self-aggrandizement at the animal's expense. This claim may seem well out in left field to hunters who tack small deer antlers up inside the garage, and over the years collect a wealth of memories. The antlers are tangible proof that, yes, we did freeze on that trip, and the pickup got stuck in Spoon Creek, and Joe shot a buck the day before the season because nobody told him that it didn't open on Saturday anymore like it used to. Those antlers are like faded photographs, prized but not prizes.

I chatted not long ago with a fellow born during the Great War



and whose first job was in a blacksmith's shop in northern Wisconsin. He learned early on how to shrink steel wheels onto wood-spoked rims and "once shoed a team of Clydesdales in 28 minutes." He salvaged lumber from wrecked wagons to build "strip" boats for duck hunting. He hunted with live decoys the last year they were legal, tethering hens in front of the blind and pinching his captive drake "so he'd talk." In 1938 he bought a DCM Springfield for five dollars, later a Pope-barreled Winchester High Wall for another five dollars. He sold the High Wall for $35. "A real killing," he told me.

With a .30-40 Krag and 180-grain Bronze Points he shot at five whitetails running across a clearing and killed three. With a .35 Remington 81 autoloader he once dropped five deer "in one pile" to feed a local farmer. He and some friends drove to South Dakota to hunt pheasants when they were so plentiful that hunters killed them from cars. He pulled out a photograph of a 1934 Plymouth draped with 150 ringnecks, the harvest of one hunt.

His memory for times long past was incredibly keen. But in the many hours we talked I didn't hear him mention ethics or respect or speak the other buzzwords that mark hunting chatter in mixed company these days. Maybe he didn't consider me mixed company. But I think instead that the good times for him were times of taking, and that the count didn't really matter. I didn't bring up motive, because the term seemed out of place - or maybe superfluous. The motive for hunting, if he were to assign one, was to have a good time. There was no motive for killing. The killing followed the shooting if you shot well, and shooting was what you got when you hunted well. When you got game you had a better time than when you didn't, but even if shooting was lean, hunting was fun. The talk those days, I suspect, was of Labradors and Weaver Chokes (he owned one of the first, in 1939) and the new Model 70 Winchester. Not ethics. Game shot dead was dead game. You could sit on a deer for a photograph, or show the belly slit.

The way some hunters egg-walk around killing now, they can't possibly enjoy it very much. Many act as if they'd hunted on bad advice, perhaps to atone for the killing and show they really meant no harm. It seems hypocritical to apologize in public for things done with enthusiasm in private.

There's merit in being decent. That we kill animals humanely, legally and with due restraint goes without saying if we are decent people. Hunters shouldn't have to convince others of their ethical behavior. They can't. Aldo Leopold said that "we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in." That relationship is hard to demonstrate. You might as easily try to prove to a bystander watching you spank your child that you also love your child.

Discerning motive in hunting is a hard thing. Assessing the worthiness of motive is at least as difficult and certainly subjective. But animals dead at the hands of people with presumably base or selfish motives are no more dead than those killed by a long winter, feral dogs, a dump truck, or a subsistence hunter on starvation's doorstep. ▲▲▲