

COMMON GROUND

We all know that sometimes the words we use mean different things to different people. This happens because we have diverse backgrounds and experiences that shape our perceptions, and in the case of language, this difference can be stark. Two intelligent people engaged in an honest conversation can and often do leave with vastly divergent impressions of the conclusion. The point here is that it is important that we take this into account when we are trying to talk about stuff that really matters. I've come to realize that most folks that I might otherwise disagree with aren't taking a position contrary to mine just for the sport. Usually, they actually believe in their version of the issue. Until I recognize this, I am just being as arbitrary as they are and we will get nowhere except, into an argument.

Recently, I was talking with some of my compatriots about the sudden realization that the phrase "trophy hunting" is offensive to a lot of people. At first, I simply couldn't grasp the notion that this term could be construed as bad. To me, the point of taking a trophy animal was that it symbolized my time, skill, and effort spent in pursuit of the most adept, most experienced, most difficult challenge, and therefore the most worthy quarry. The "athletics" analogy is perfectly suited to this scenario. I consider the antlers or horns of my trophy as a reminder of the

time afield, the skills and knowledge I brought to bear, and my success as a hunter. Of course, this is best enjoyed with a perfectly prepared plate full of the protein that came with the antlers. Personally, how big mine is as compared to yours is very, very secondary the role of the trophy as a reminder of the journey, the camp, the complete immersion in nature, and the rigors of the hunt. That said, it is not a "participation trophy." It is a symbol that prods me from time to time to relive the experience and revel in the wonder of it all.

To others outside our hunting community, there is a belief that we just want the horns or antlers. This is made even worse when this person sees this as all about the hollow pursuit of bragging rights at all cost. The fact that we have such a high regard and respect for wild animals is dismissed, often with a visual of a pen-raised deer with some "pseudo hunter" sitting on its back, raising its bloody head for a camera shot. What is interesting here is that both the anti-hunting community and fair chase hunters would agree that this dollar and ego driven, "antler inches at all cost" caricature is egregiously offensive and has no place in our community.

Other practices we hold near and dear are also dismissed in their view of trophy hunting. The fact that we eat what we kill is often lost completely because trophy hunting is seen as all about the hardware (antler inches),

not the organic, naturally healthy protein. Add to this the slick TV portrayal of extreme long range shooting, put-and-take shooting preserves, and the various "monster buck" shows, and it is no wonder the phrase "trophy hunter" evokes such a negative reaction among the uninitiated. Those that would otherwise be somewhere between tolerant and supportive are being dealt a bad hand and we are the ones that lose.

All the while, we are really not very different given the basis for their view of us. So, what are we to do about it?

Over the long haul, we need to engage in a conversation whenever we can with those that might not understand our culture and our language. I submit that the best start is to find common values and beliefs. By example, no one that opposes hunting doesn't also believe they have the animals' best interest at heart. We agree completely that what is best for the animal is best for all. Additionally, those that are merely tolerant of hunting are generally supportive if they believe you eat what you kill. Again, I/we agree completely. There are more common beliefs and we need to find them and bring them into the conversation.

On another tangent, we know that active, science-based management of wild herds and wild places is better for the animals than passive preservation. Current wildlife populations confirm this beyond a shadow of a doubt.

THE ETHICS OF FAIR CHASE



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However, in the absence of bona fide conversation, it is easy for anti-hunting zealots to publish photos and evocative captions that seem to refute this notion. This is a more fundamental problem, which we as a community need to work to resolve. Remember, the folks that are "merely tolerant" to "anti-hunting leanings" want the same things we want when it concerns the welfare of wild animals.

We can sit around and share stories with folks that see everything the same as we do or we can look for opportunities to preach the good word. In preparation, we need to find the common ground so we have an opener to the conversations necessary to share the more accurate and detailed substance underlying our commitment to the hunting community and the welfare of the wild animals and wild places. Each of us talking to folks that see things differently than we do will do more good than posting in the comment section of Facebook or ranting about it in a column. Who knows, if you take this upon yourself, you might even get a chance to explain trophy hunting in a way "they" can appreciate it. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Pedrotti, Jr.", written in a cursive style.