



TALKING ABOUT ETHICS ONLY DIVIDES HUNTERS?

Using what's legal or not legal in different states as pushback against a discussion about ethics misses the bigger picture: our game laws are not solely based on ethics, which would dismiss the fact that wildlife sciences and management is involved.

“Thank you for these thoughtful essays. I support open, robust, ongoing conversations about hunting ethics. And I know there will forever be lots of gray areas for the reasons you mention. But we should always try.”

-Facebook Comment
from HuntFairChase.com

When the Club chose to lead a conversation about hunting ethics and fair chase, our end goal was to improve the image of hunters and hunting by helping sportsmen become better brand ambassadors for hunting. To do this, we first needed to make the case that our public image is not what it once was. This was an easy case to make for those who had been paying attention to what has been making the news the past several years.

We also expected to confirm a few assumptions from this effort. One was that not everyone was in agreement that our image is tarnished and instead believed that the future of hunting is secure because we can still hunt. There were also signs that a fair number of people were convinced that whatever poor image hunting might have, animal rights and anti-hunting groups were to blame. This is essentially saying the hunting community is not responsible at all, or only slightly, for the image we are projecting.

The one thing we suspected but did not anticipate would be as strong or disturbing is the point of this article: A significant number of people have expressed their opinion that *any* talk about hunting ethics or hunter behavior only divides hunters when hunters should be united.

As a counter, we have heard from an equally significant number who believe the hunting community does have a responsibility to talk more about ethics in order to get more people pointed on the right path to protect the image of hunting. This divide in the debate warrants a closer look.

A conversation about ethics in any human activity can spark controversy because someone inevitably is going to be offended if they find themselves swimming against the current. Others will be offended by those acting inappropriately, giving everyone a bad rap.

The most common viewpoints in opposition to a conversation on ethics, hunter behavior, and fair chase have been:

- hunters are too few to be divided amongst ourselves over something as trivial as how someone else chooses to hunt;
- that such debates provide anti-hunters with ammunition to use against hunters and hunting;
- all this talk of fair chase is nothing more than making apologies, and we should never apologize for hunting, and,
- if it's legal, why should anyone care who is doing what?

It's true, hunters are in the minority, and we do live in a country where the opinion of the majority matters. Those concerned over hunters being divided shows they have already accepted the fact that the majority is watching what we do and can have influence on the future of hunting, good and bad. This is a good thing because it accepts a reality that is one of the primary purposes of the Hunt Right, Hunt Fair Chase effort—that our image matters, and there are things that are tarnishing this image. Since we are concerned with what others think about hunting and the influence

they can have, an obvious question is, what's the better approach? Is it better to keep our heads down and look the other way, or talk about our ethics and proactively police our image and ourselves?

The next question is, are we really leaving any ammunition behind for anti-hunters to use against us by talking about our ethics and what guides hunting beyond the laws? The anti-hunter establishment already has a full magazine of ammo to choose from with the headlines some hunters are making—from social media and some depictions of hunting shows on outdoor television, neither of which is very flattering toward hunting in general. Why wouldn't we want to get more of our own people on board with a positive image

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and putting our best foot forward? Nobody likes to be judged, unless you're on the winning end, but that's the nature of ethics. Once you get out of your lane, people will let you know about it. If anything, the ammunition we should not be leaving behind is proof of hunters behaving poorly, which unfortunately in today's world of instant access and social media is not hard to find. Hunters following the law and a code of ethics and policing themselves is not something the '1 are running around putting on billboards to make their case against hunters.

But maybe we should.

There is something to be said for standing our ground over an activity that has done so much for wildlife, conservation, and so many people. But ethics and fair chase as some sort of an apology, guilt trip, or cave-in? It's hard to imagine anyone viewing what the NFL is doing about domestic violence among its players as being an apology, guilt trip, or cave-in. It's just the right thing to do, even if they are protecting their brand in the process.

We know that something may be legal in one state and not another, but that's not the argument behind, "as long as it's legal, why should anyone care who is doing what?" What is and isn't legal is determined by local traditions, the type of game being hunted and

under what conditions. This is also determined by state wildlife officials needing to increase success rates or limit harvest. Using what's legal or not legal in different states as pushback against a discussion about ethics misses the bigger picture: our game laws are not solely based on ethics, which would dismiss the fact that wildlife sciences and management is involved. Case in point: it has been made illegal to hunt mountain lions in California, but that does not mean ethically hunting them in another state is now impossible or should be illegal as well. This was a decision not based on science or what was necessarily the best for lions, their prey base, and the people of California living with lions. The majority of voters in this state considered hunters being allowed to kill mountain lions as socially unacceptable, and they voted it away. What we should be more concerned with is how others are intentionally misrepresenting illegal (as always about ethics, not about science or management goals) to sway public opinion. In other words, "If lion hunting in California is illegal, it should be illegal everywhere, right?"

"All you're doing is dividing hunters when hunters should be united" is an interesting position, but one that doesn't hold much water, especially if

you understand the reasons for having ethics in the first place. In any human activity, ethics are the guiding principles people agree upon as the right and responsible approach. Talking about them actually does the exact opposite—it unites like-minded people behind a common belief or practice. Our ethics and principles like fair chase are what makes hunting a fulfilling, honorable, credible, and defensible experience, which also makes hunting acceptable and good for everyone, even to those who might question its legitimacy.

The answer to the thought behind this position might just lie elsewhere. Either people don't believe the image of hunters, and therefore, hunting is at risk, or it's a cover for unethical behavior itself. Another option if the majority of hunters do not believe that what you are doing or offering is not fair chase, it would make sense you would kick dirt on anyone making noise about fair chase. This is likely why we're hearing from the deer breeding and canned-shoot industry. Granted, they are not declaring who they are on the website forums or on Facebook, just that the Club should be "ashamed for dividing hunters" when all should be united. Interesting. There are many ways to measure success. ■

"The ethics of hunting carries a lot of personal choice bias but for a good many of us it is not about the equipment used as much as it is about the respect for the game and the environment that we hunt in. We can broaden that to the respect of the property owners who allow us to hunt, to our fellow hunters in their pursuit of the hunt, and yes even the non-hunter who may not share our interests in the hunt. Oh, we have our share of slob, disrespectful folks that would claim to hunt but we lessen the name hunter to include them and honestly they don't change no matter what equipment they use. I'm not for divisions among us but we should call out the slob and disrespectful, they hurt us much more than they help us."

-Facebook Comment from HuntFairChase.com

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