

WHY WE HUNT

The Ethics of Sport Hunting

Sport hunting differs from subsistence and sustenance hunting because sport hunting is practiced for the sake of the human experience/human flourishing; not solely or simply for sustaining and enhancing the biotic community (Aldo Leopold) or food or game management. The fundamental object and justifying reason for sport hunting is the exercise of precisely human virtues and the radical reconnection of the hunter to the life-death continuum of the natural, wild community.

In 1992, while attending a conference on hunting ethics, a video was shown to the participants in which a man was shown getting out of a car, dressed in street clothes, approaching and shooting a tiger lying beneath a tree. The chair of the conference asked about the morality of such hunting? I responded that this was not hunting. This was simply killing. It may have been moral or immoral, but it had nothing to do with hunting. The reason? There was no relationship between the hunter, the tiger and the land—understood as Aldo Leopold understood it.

Hunting is a human enterprise in which the human hunter intentionally engages the continuum of life and death within the context of the biotic community in which both are members, both sharers of the land. The hunter, especially the modern urbanized hunter, hunts precisely to engage the wildness of the land, engaging in its mystery, its unpredictability, its intimacy. The hunter approaches the wild animal on the wild animal's own terms within the predator-prey relationship, taking not only the life and flesh of the animal, but also accepting the animal's spirit given to him through the act of killing. The animal gives him or herself to the hunter who has earned it through the intimacy and integrity of the chase—the spiritual and physical pursuit. Is it any wonder that the hunter truly loves the animal he/she hunts? In fact, without such love, the hunter is not a hunter at all but only and merely a killer.

We hunt in order to be human. We seek to recover within ourselves our primordial relationship to the wildness of the land and its inhabitants. We hunt to recover our relationship to all living things that exist in the continuum of life and death that is the biotic world. We are not killers nor do we intend to be killers. We are simply and solely active and passive members, participants, in the spiritual life of the living and dying world.

The morality and thus the ethics of hunting rests ultimately on this basic truth: we exist to foster the well-being of the biotic community by being engaged in that community as integral members as if it were of the living world. We hunt morally when we hunt as active contributors to and as intimate and loving members of this community. ■