

GEARING DOWN

THE ETHICS OF FAIR CHASE



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During a coffee break recently, I was thumbing through some outdoor magazines. Between the hunting stories and how-to pieces, I found myself really reading the advertisements and some product reviews. I was struck by the new products and updated old ones that represented technological advancements that, from all appearances, were designed to make hunting easier. I wondered how young hunters viewed such things—and then I got concerned. Does too much of what looks like a good thing detract from the hunting experience or challenge our notions of fair chase? Many of the products advertised seem to offer shortcuts to success. Are we robbing our kids of something special and sending the message that the end justifies the means?

Maybe I'm old fashioned, but to me, there is something about tradition that means some things are better off staying the same. I

hunt for the challenge and experience that I can't get doing anything else, and shortchanging this never feels good. I think that's why I'm such a big fan of fair chase. It sets the tone, and when faced with a choice, it's the little guy on my shoulder that says step or don't step.

Fair chase, as defined by the Boone and Crockett Club, is "the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, native North American big game animal that does not give the hunter an improper advantage over such animals." Fair chase is the spirit of the hunt. It is a personal code of conduct that defines our intent when we set out to engage in the activity of hunting. Fair chase is the contract that hunters make with themselves about pursuing the game animals they hunt.

Some of these new gadgets and gear do not honor this contract. Many, however, offer shortcuts to acquiring skill, knowledge and experience.

I've always maintained that hunting is personal, meaning it is up to individual hunters to choose what technologies we employ. The test for each of us is whether or not a particular product honors this contract and offers the hunting experience we seek. Put another way, if you believe fair chase is more a matter of the spirit of the hunt rather than a set of written rules, there is a line out there we don't cross. Where that line is, is up to us.

Words like "sportsmanlike" and "improper advantage" may be subject to interpretation, but I believe deep down most of us hunters know what this means and looks like. It's that gut feeling each of us carries with us because we know we have to live with the choices we make. I like earning it: a hard fought hunt, win, lose, or draw is among my most memorable experiences. If I cut a corner or take the easy route, I feel it. When walking up to an animal I have just taken, no regrets works best for me. I don't want

any doubts creeping into that special moment. Don't get me wrong, I like new stuff, but when it comes to the chase and that moment of truth, I prefer to keep it simple. I don't want to have to worry about a battery going dead or if I forgot to pack the instruction manual. I get the most satisfaction out of knowing it was me, my skill, my accumulated knowledge, my fair chase that won the day. I'm not much into things that take that away. I'm not in it for a guaranteed result. If I was, I'd just go to the grocery store and call it good. ■

TECHNOLOGY: WHERE THE CLUB STANDS

Hunting is a complex and deeply rooted tradition that is greater than the sum of its parts. It teaches, challenges, and connects us to the natural world. The animals we hunt are neither helpless nor helpful, which requires us to develop skills. Hunting also confronts us with many choices, including those things that test the tenets of fair chase. The use of new technologies is a choice. As with all choices there are options and consequences to consider.

On one hand good old fashioned American ingenuity and innovation is what built this country. Our

society normally embraces technology without question because it is seen as for the better, and to an extent is a symbol of status and progress. In hunting, new technology can be beneficial, such as those that help elderly or physically challenged people continue to enjoy the outdoors. Technologies that make hunting safer, help us bring game from field to table, and encourage youth participation are positive advancements.

On the other hand, the purpose of new technologies is never to make something harder, only easier.

There are some things that shouldn't become easier, and hunting is one of them. When hunting becomes too easy, too predictable, and less challenging, something very special is lost. Hunting is a deeply profound human activity that fosters every notion and instinct we have to be connected to and protect the natural world we live in. The overuse, or an over reliance on technology has the potential to place the goal of killing above all else. Hunting has always had deeper meanings and provided more benefits than just killing or obtaining food. If this were the case, not only would our modern

societies have done away with hunting long ago, but hunters themselves would have lost interest.

Our systems of conservation and management will not survive without the value we place on the game species we hunt and the advocacy provided by sportsmen. There is no form of technology that can replace this.

The Boone and Crockett Club encourages all sportsmen and sportswomen to use technology responsibly under the principles of fair chase.