

THE ORIGINS OF FAIR CHASE

As the Club's outreach campaign, Hunt Right; Hunt Fair Chase gathers steam this fall it is usually best to start such efforts at the beginning. The following is a post on the campaign's website, and just the tip of the iceberg. The site is loaded with relevant information, forums and discussions, and is worth the time to join the conversation. We hope you will.

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An ethical code of conduct, that which was viewed as the right way to approach hunting, was a concept that originally developed in Europe. This did not, however, carry over with the settlers to the New World. America was the land of abundance and opportunity. A life of independence, free from servitude and filled with promise, was there for the taking. All one had to do is be resourceful and take. How we hunted did not matter back then. There was no need or room for an ethical approach to hunting. Game was plentiful and hunting was not for sport, but for survival and profit.

In time, when enough land was cleared for reliable food crops and domesticated livestock, food security became less of an issue for those living in more populated areas. These same human developments and decades of overharvesting had left wildlife population in scarce supply. Hunters had to venture further and further into the wilderness to bag their game.

appear, and along with it an ethical approach to hunting that showed restraint.

By the late 1800s, unregulated sport and commercial market hunting had taken its toll. Wildlife was no longer abundant or even present in all but the furthest reaches of remaining wilderness. Sportsmen already knew what was happening, but the broader public was just beginning to take notice of the extinction of some species and the near extinction of others. The logical solution was preservation and protection, which included an end to hunting. Those closest to the situation had a different idea.

Influential sportsmen who valued the game they sought and the spirit of the chase stepped forward; most notably Theodore Roosevelt. He formed a group of his friends into the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887 to address the rapid decline of big game populations on a national scale. Their solution was to promote a new system of natural

The concept of hunting for sport began to develop at this time, as did the need to restrict the amount of game taken so it could replenish and there would be game to hunt tomorrow. This is when the notion of conservation first began to

resource use they called “conservation,” and they promoted regulated hunting as the foundation for this new system.

The earliest recorded usage of the term “Fair Chase” is in the fifth article of the Boone and Crockett Club’s constitution, adopted in February of 1888. At this time in history there were no laws governing the taking of game for food or for sport. Water-killing deer (driving deer with hounds or pushers into lakes where shooters waited in boats to either shoot, club or cut the throats of deer) was a widespread practice, especially in the Adirondacks.

Another article of the Club’s constitution declared that the killing of game while swimming was an “offense” for which a member may be suspended or expelled from the Club. Later writings by Club members Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, and Aldo Leopold articulated the term “fair chase” to the public through books and magazine articles. Most notable of these were the Club’s Acorn book series on hunting (1893 – 1933), Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac*, and Grinnell’s *Forest and Stream* magazine—now *Field & Stream*.

Conservation was based on the fact that people need and will use natural resources, including wildlife, but this use would now have to be regulated and guided by science. For society to accept

this new idea over complete protection, Roosevelt and the Club began to promote another new concept: one called fair chase.

If hunting was going to be allowed to continue, how it was being conducted and the character of the hunter now mattered. Fair chase became a matter of pride and status. It separated those who hunted for personal reasons from those who hunted for profit, ie., the commercial market hunters who had no code of honor.

Fair chase became a part of an overall conservation ethic. It defined a true sportsman as one who could kill game, yet use self-restraint and stand guard to ensure that wildlife populations would never be threatened again. It didn’t mean hunting was a sport like other contests, but rather its participants used a “sporting” approach. Fair chase defined the rules of engagement that elevated sportsmen to being highly respected members of the community, both for their skill as woodsman and providers, but also for their commitment to something greater than themselves. ■

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