

DEFINING *Modern* HUNTING



FOR MODERN HUNTING, THE HEART OF OUR MESSAGE MUST BE CONSERVATION—THE FIRST LOVE OF HUNTERS, AND EXPRESSED IN THE FAIR CHASE ETHIC.

When you are there, hunting, having prepared and traveled, and now standing silent in the sounds of the place, you are part of a tradition. And you are in some trouble. The trouble is often said to be that you are among the last of a tradition. The number of hunters is declining, and public opposition to hunting seems to be rising.

But the heart of the trouble is not in popularity. It is in wasting our strength as members of one of the greatest continuing movements in American history, which is conservation. Though we are few compared to players in other outdoor activities called sports, we are the foundation of the American experience of engaging with nature by our knowing it, caring for it and advancing it. But this is getting harder to see even among ourselves; harder still to explain to non-hunters.

MODERN HUNTING WAS CREATED BY THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

You cannot really say that you are living out an ancient ritual of survival, but you can say that you are part of a 20th-century sustainability movement.

By the turn of the 20th century, hunting in America was destroying wildlife. Colonists had rejected the European privilege that reserved wild game to nobility. Hunting was open to all. The few restrictions on hunting in colonial and post-revolutionary times had not been intended for conservation and had fallen away. Markets developed for wild meat, hides, and feathers and were supplied by taking wildlife practically, efficiently and without restraint.

Leading naturalists, foresters, geologists and other specialists of the time—hunters all—joined in forming the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887 to activate the nation's first program for wildlife laws, public lands, and professional, scientific management. They began with restrictions on killing, and by promoting the hunter's role in driving a movement. They reasoned that laws and agencies were necessary but not enough. There had to also be a constituency who knew wildlife deeper than sentiment, down to the ecological workings of reproduction and survival. And they needed a passionate base to pay for the work with time and money. Boone and Crockett Club members



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agreed that an ethical code was needed to represent this spirit and drive.

The creed of Fair Chase—“the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the game animals”—connected the passion for conservation with its discipline.

Fair Chase connected hunting and conservation and pledged hunters to all of it: stewardship of wildlife, founding forest preserves and refuges, enacting game laws. It explained why a personal, often solitary pursuit was good for society. It justified trusting hunters with the restoration of America’s wildlife—a harder sell than trusting us to sustain wildlife today.

This moment changed our language. Fair Chase meant legal hunting with the added commitment to self-restraint. With hunting laws in place, we then had an American meaning for “poaching” too. Soon after this, hunters reinforced Fair Chase by campaigning against what they called the “slob hunting” of littering, trespassing and game gluttons.

For modern hunting today, our language must continue to evolve. Fair Chase must overwhelm the misguided term “sport hunting.” That needless qualification is part of our trouble. Sport emphasizes recreation; Fair Chase is about restraint in pursuit of insight and sustainability—the essence of conservation.

Fair critics of hunting can say the essence of hunting is hard to see in its practice and promotion regardless of its name. The success of conservation has created an abundance of wildlife and a variety of hunts in which hunting looks more like sport than stewardship.

The basic pieces of any hunt are still the same, but the wildlife are in more varied settings; our means of approach are geared in multiple modes; shots can be taken with an industry-wide selection of weapons; and even the meat—which now is also available from game farms—can be donated or taken home to today’s more innovative kitchens.

To us, it is all hunting, except for a few cases easily discarded. Shooting confined animals (either wild or captive-reared) is called a “canned hunt,” but it is really no hunt at all—it is just a shoot. The opportunistic killing of feral hogs and coyotes is not called hunting even by those who do it, acknowledging its management objective. Discard these from “hunting.”

But even within the purposeful pursuit of wild animals, there are a multitude of hunts and just a few terms. The non-hunter who knows little to nothing about hunting may lump together poaching, slob hunting, canned shooting and Fair Chase. To some, hunting means whatever they think “trophy hunting” is. It may be too much to label separately the hunts to control invasive, damaging, deadly and over-abundant species versus those to provide opportunity for hunters without creating over-abundance. But we do use “management hunt” and “depredation permit” to indicate these.

To speak more effectively to others, we need to better

understand among ourselves where the limits are around Fair Chase, because it was and is our social license to hunt. There are enclosures too large for the animals to perceive, leaving room to argue they are “wild.” There are weapons accurate at distances greater than what an animal can scan for threats, making this target practice. There are technologies for concealment, scents, communication, and vision in darkness that supplant the skills of woodsmanship. Without laws and an ethic, these are simply means of being greedier. Some will be made legal because they are consistent with management. Some exceed the bounds of Fair Chase.

Novices and critics can sense the confusion in our terminology. Print and video present all conceivable types of hunting. Most media productions are intended for hunters, and so do not usually rehearse what hunters (should) know about where hunting came from and why it is now much more than a rustic pastime. For the non-hunter, what they see and hear can be bewildering or offensive. We are short—though trying to do more—on programming that would inform the interested non-hunter on where to join in or at least to understand and approve of what we are doing.

WHAT TO DO

We need better language and a clearer voice on Fair Chase because we must assume the expectation remains that hunting be appropriate—animals taken legitimately for food, attaining management goals, and mitigating property damage. We must be the first to insist that hunting is done sustainably and legally, and that hunters conduct themselves ethically by showing respect for the land and the animals they hunt. We must also reckon with the active, well-funded and professional opposition to hunting.

Hunters are struggling with this challenge through media campaigns. To accelerate our effect, we need a stronger strategy. We must not only defend but justify ourselves. We must speak not just to recruits and lapsed hunters but also to the rest of the conservation movement and the people indifferent to hunting but warm to conservation. These people must know why they should approve of or tolerate us.

The heart of that message is conservation—the first love of hunters, and expressed in the Fair Chase ethic. By reminding some of our own and spreading the word to others, we can remain in the mainstream of the powerful, shared American ethic of conservation that is released. If we prove (yet again) the connection between hunting and conservation, we will become more than an aging fad of personal thrills and economic benefits, a conservation sect of 10 or so million people.

As hunters, our greatest strength is not in numbers but in the recognition that we are conservationists as much as or more than the greater millions who are seen this way because they paddle, camp, bike, hike and watch. ■