Why Hunt?

By JAN DIZARD

Before I try to answer the question, Why hunt?, there’s a prior question that needs to be dealt with: Should anyone hunt? Hunting has aroused ambivalence and outright opposition for a very long time. Indeed, anthropologists are right to assert that wherever rituals arise there is bound to be anxiety and ambivalence. Certainly the rich tapestry of rituals surrounding the hunt in hunting-gathering cultures suggests that even then, when hunting was a necessity, there were qualms. It’s impossible to say if the anxiety was over regard for the animals whose lives were taken or over worries lest the passion of the hunt and the killing would somehow make the hunter prone to violence, a less reliable and safe member of the village or band. The rituals, while varied from one culture to another, shared certain features—fasting, refraining from intercourse, decorative body painting that served to vividly mark the transition from quotidian village life to the hunt. And upon return, there were rituals that marked the reverse—the transition from blood lust and the excitement of the hunt to the daily routines of village life.

Violence is unnerving. It is no accident that hunting and war are frequently conjoined and, as with hunting, there are rituals separating the soldier from the norms and values of civilian life in order to make it honorable to kill a fellow human. And there are rituals welcoming the returning soldier back to civilian life—parades and the like. That said, we also have to admit that beneath the veneer of honoring our soldiers for their sacrifice, there is more than a lingering worry that what they saw and did might have lasting effects that make a smooth return to civilian life problematic.

Acknowledging this courts being unpatriotic, and so this particular anxiety goes largely unsaid. But suspicions about the moral character of hunters are not silenced by any worry of being thought disloyal or ungrateful. Thus critics of hunting and hunters feel free to draw analogies between hunting and rape and various anti-social behaviors with vanishingly little regard for empirical evidence justifying such claims.

More than rituals have emerged from the anxieties aroused by war and hunting. The anxieties also have given rise to the codification of ethics and, in the case of war, theories of just war and rules of engagement. As for hunting, the ethic of “fair chase,” about which more later, emerged in parallel to just war theories and rules of engagement: regulations governing the taking of game (closed seasons, bag limits, and limits on weapons and ammunition) were promulgated in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These early game laws and the ethic of fair chase arguably were the first expression of an ethical relationship between humans and nature. In their day, just war theory and fair chase made ethical sense of war and hunting, justifying both under specific conditions.

Leaving the analogy to war aside, the game laws were enacted a hundred plus years ago—most notably the Lacey Act (1900), which forbade interstate commerce in wildlife. The Act spelled the death knell for market hunting and, with bag limits and closed seasons, the recovery of both game and non-game...
species began. Although many hunters initially resisted these constraints on their hunting, the results—the recovery of game—were clear and welcomed. Along with recovering game populations, added emphasis on hunter safety and, ultimately, formal training in hunter safety as a condition for being issued a hunting license dramatically reduced hunting accidents and increased public acceptance of hunting.

The American response to the prospects of a sharp decline in game, and thus, of hunting, contrasted to the European response to the same challenge. Europe responded to the pressures on game by arrogating to the landed aristocracy exclusive rights to hunt and exporting that regime to their colonies. In recent decades, Western European countries have opened access but with licensing restrictions that are daunting, to say the least, to all but the most determined and affluent. Neither the European nor the American “models” have quelled critiques of hunting but each, for now, answered the deep fears that hunting breeds violence and anti-social behavior in civil society. While participation in hunting hovers around historic lows, a majority of Americans (more men than women) approve of hunting.

Admittedly, this doesn’t fully answer the question, “Should anyone hunt?” But it does allow us to consider why some 10 percent of adults in the United States (a much lower percentage in Europe because of the much higher bar to licensing) choose to hunt. I will return to the “Should anyone hunt?” question at the conclusion of this essay.

WHY HUNT?

There are probably as many reasons to hunt as there are hunters, but the core reasons can be reduced to four: to experience nature as a participant; to feel an intimate, sensuous connection to place; to take responsibility for one’s food; and to acknowledge our kinship with wildlife. It should not be surprising that these four themes echo through the extensive literature of the hunt. Let’s look briefly at these four themes—the personal reasons people are drawn to the hunt.

Almost all hunters say, in one way or another, that they hunt in order to experience nature directly as a participant, not simply a spectator. To be sure, hunters are spectators, but the fact that they are carrying a gun or a bow gives an edge, no pun intended, to hunters’ observations. It is a cliché among hunters to tell of how the scurrying of a chipmunk on autumn leaves brings the hunter to full alert: does the rustling of leaves signal the cautious approach of a deer? Whether or not, on a given outing, a hunter kills a deer or rabbit or pheasant, going afield prepared to kill changes—intensifies—everything.

Interestingly, even hunting dogs, especially bird dogs, know the difference between a walk in the woods and hunting. Dogs are close students of the behavior of their human companions. When my German shorthaired pointer and I go out for exercise, she runs not quite aimlessly but for the pure joy of unconfined running. But when I put my shotgun in the car, she knows that she’s not going to be running for the hell of it. Right out of the car her movements are purposeful. Instead of running in straight lines, she quarters back and forth ahead of me, head up to catch the slightest whiff of a game bird. A gun makes a difference.

Closely related to the desire to be immersed in nature is the pleasure of getting to know places intimately. It’s not NATURE in the abstract that draws hunters afield so much as it is the nature of particular places that hunters return to year after year. These places are given names that evoke a memorable hunt or a memorable folly (“Remember the time when George lost his boot and kept hunting with a bare foot?”) The topography, the forest cover, the smells of decaying leaves—a stand of beech smells different than a stand of aspen—and, of course the memories of the spot where three grouse flushed with their heart-stopping, thunderous take-off and all three were missed (or, more memorably, felled): all this and more gets embedded in what can only be described as rootedness. Hunters will return to a hallowed place even when it has gone past its prime as habitat for game. The decline, though never welcomed, is nevertheless accepted as an inescapable feature of nature—everything, even the rocks, is cyclical (though with our short life spans, rocks seem permanent features). Becoming intimately familiar with places, from first discovery to decline, is an essential feature of being immersed in nature and a reminder of our own temporality.

The decline of a favorite cover is one thing. It’s quite another to witness the loss of a favorite hunting ground to surveyor flags that do not mark the end of a cycle but THE END. Witnessing the steady march of suburban sprawl and the “ma(u)lling” of the American
countryside is one of the reasons hunters as a group have been among the strongest supporters of habitat protection, a topic to which I shall return in a moment.

Recent surveys have revealed a slight up-tick in the sale of hunting licenses largely attributed to what Tovar Cerulli and others have called “adult onset hunters.” These hunters, like Tovar himself, are being drawn to hunting out of a desire to take charge of their food. A number of recent cultural shifts have fueled this interest in hunting: growing d i s c o m f o r t with industrial farming and food safety (growth hormones, antibiotics); the locavore and organic farm movement; and a desire to take a direct hand in putting food on the table. No doubt there are many more consumers who recoil at food that does not come wrapped in plastic film than there are people who prefer to shoot or catch at least a portion of their annual consumption of meat and fish. But the latter group is not to be ignored, not least because they are bolstering the ranks of hunters.

Finally, another personal reason that draws men and women to hunting is the need to acknowledge that we are, after all, also animals with a long history of predation, a history long enough to have been encoded in our genes. To be sure, our capacity to create cultures with rituals, norms, and ethical restraints makes us distinct from the other creatures with whom we share the planet, but to deny that part of us that is wild is, as Florence Shepard insists, to deny what it is to be fully human.

ECOLOGICAL REASONS FOR HUNTING

Just as it is important for us to be reminded of the wildness we share with animals, it is also equally important to keep the Wild wild. Until recently, the challenge was to protect wildlife and the habitats it depends upon from unsustainable exploitation. Habitat protection turned out to be the more difficult challenge. The game laws mentioned above have resulted in remarkable recoveries of most game species. But we have been steadily encroaching upon the habitats of wildlife—converting land to crops and pasture and, worse, carving out subdivisions connected by spider webs of highways that have brought humans and wild animals in close proximity. Jim Sterba suggests that more of us live in close proximity to deer, bear, turkeys, and geese, not to mention moose and mountain lions, than at any other time in history (not least because there are many more of us, but also because there are lots more wild animals, and we are sharing steadily shrinking lebensraum).

The problem is that wild animals can quickly become habituated to living in close proximity to humans—and some humans encourage habituation by feeding wildlife deliberately or inadvertently (improperly contained household waste, pet food left on the deck, etc.). The result in recent decades has been the semi-domestication of suburban deer, coyotes, geese, turkeys, and black bears. Some (especially the active enablers of habituation) find this charming, an Edenic lions lying with lambs, but in fact it is not good for either the animals or people. Living in close proximity to humans exposes animals to all sorts of risks, the worst of which is the automobile. Deer and geese also wreak havoc on the heavily modified habitat of suburban back yards, parks, and natural or man-made ponds.

For our part, we have to contend with the risks of collision, too. Deer have brought tick-borne diseases to even the closely cropped suburban yard. In some areas with large deer populations, some residents have contracted Lyme disease several times. Parks, playgrounds, and golf courses covered in goose excrement make it all but impossible to enjoy these amenities.

Hunted wildlife is wary of humans—that’s what makes it “wild.” The problem, of course, is that once deer settle in to a suburb or a city park, it is hard to hunt them—safety, of course, is a serious concern, but proposals to thin a deer herd or a flock of geese invariably become embroiled in controversy. The problem is intractable, which is why Allen Rutberg’s work on controlling suburban deer with birth control is important, even though it does not solve the problem of domestication. Indeed, in a sense it advances domestication. In the long run, we will have to figure out ways of making human settlements less inviting to wildlife, and we must do more than we have done to date to expand good habitats for wildlife that are a reasonable distance from population centers.

Hunters have been a major force in preserving and maintaining habitats for wildlife. Organizations like Ducks Unlimited have protected thousands of acres of breeding habitat for waterfowl (which is also important for many non-game species). The purchase of hunting (and fishing) licenses has supported the
work of state wildlife and fisheries agencies. Over the course of the last one hundred years, these agencies have developed scientifically based wildlife and habitat management policies that are responsible for the quite remarkable recovery of a wide range of species, game and non-game. Wild turkeys, absent from much of their former range for over a hundred years, are now solidly established. In the 1930s, a small tax was levied on all guns and ammunition (and later expanded to include fishing gear and fishing and hunting-related accessories). This revenue enabled the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service to augment state wildlife agencies’ habitat studies and management programs. In addition, at the depths of the Great Depression, a wildlife refuge system was initiated, funded by the sale of what is commonly referred to as the “Duck Stamp.” Each year the stamp features a painting of a migratory waterfowl, and artists vie avidly for the honor of having their painting chosen for the stamp. The stamp is required of all hunters of waterfowl. Finally, many states have added a small fee on top of the fishing and hunting license fee in order to fund land acquisition to enhance conservation and hunting opportunities.

All this is commendable but it has not been enough. There are not enough hunters to fund what needs to be done to address the looming conflicts between humans and at least some species of wildlife. A shift in the way we think about wildlife and habitat is clearly in order. We need to be prepared to keep wild animals wild, and this means hunting them when and where it is appropriate. And it means a willingness to put resources into land acquisition for the purpose of creating ample habitat for wildlife. Collectively, hunters have set an example of supporting enlightened ecological management, and this example is renewed each time a hunter buys a license, purchases a gun, or renews membership in one of the many organizations that promote conservation. If only the general population could begin to appreciate the value of investing in habitat and supporting the active management of those habitats to keep them capable of supporting stable wildlife populations. This brings us to the third reason why hunting is important.

THE CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF HUNTING

Just as it is important to keep wildlife wild for its own sake, it is also important to keep it wild for our sake. Without a clear distinction between wild and tame and between humans and wildlife, we would quickly lose our bearings. Human culture, even at its most rudimentary level, has always rested on the distinction between “us” and “them.” To be sure, “them” included not only other species but also humans who lived across the river or over the hill on the horizon. Our species has a long and sorry history of treating humans who don’t speak our language, or don’t look like us, or don’t believe what we believe, as though they were subhuman—i.e., like wild animals. But eliding the differences between the wild and the civilized as some animal advocates urge will not usher in an age of comity between humans any more than it will usher in an age of lions and lambs living in harmony. That’s not the way things work. The wild—the other—is necessary for us to understand our place in the world and our ethical obligation to preserve and protect the wild. This is no doubt at least part of what Thoreau meant when he famously claimed “in Wildness is the preservation of the World.”

Hunting, as Florence Shepard reminds us, compels us to acknowledge our participation in the food web. To think that being a vegetarian or vegan removes us from the killing of animals is, as Tovar Cerulli makes abundantly clear, an illusion that conveniently avoids acknowledging the multiple ways we are locked in a struggle with nature, a struggle that has defined and continues to define who we are. We are not only shaping ourselves, we have had—and continue to have—a huge impact on our environment. Indeed, it could be fairly said that we have won countless battles against nature but we are losing the war. In our desire to dominate and bend nature to our purposes, we have forgotten our own wildness and our indebtedness to the wild. Interestingly, an advocate for an expansive sense of our relationship to our pets, David Grimm, concludes his meditation the subject, Citizen Canine: Our Evolving Relationship With Cats and Dogs, by rejecting the temptation to regard our pets as “persons.” Animals, including our pet dogs and cats, he writes, “should remind us of who we are and where we came from: when we turn cats and dogs into people, we lose the animal part of ourselves.”

Hunting stands as a brake against this. As paradoxical as it may seem, over the course of the past century, hunters have collectively embraced an ethic that decidedly emphasizes sustainability. Hunters
have supported restraints on the taking of game in order to insure that healthy game populations will be available to generations to come. And as I’ve already mentioned, hunters directly (through licenses and contributions to Ducks Unlimited, etc.) and indirectly (through taxes on guns and ammunition) have made clear their commitment to an ethic of sustainability that has no equal. Imagine what our environment would be if farmers, the forestry industry, commercial fisheries, the fossil fuel industry, to name only a handful of the “special interests” that have led us to the brink of an environmental catastrophe, had behaved as hunters have. Critics of hunters have often condemned hunters for being “dominionistic.” There no doubt are individual hunters who fit this bill, but collectively, hunters have been models of self-restraint seriously invested in passing on to coming generations the opportunity to enjoy the thrill—and the responsibilities—of the hunt. Aldo Leopold urged us to regard ourselves not as conquerors but as “plain citizens” in the biotic community. Not accidentally, Leopold was an avid hunter.

This said, hunters face challenges not so much from the “antis” as from the subtle and not-so-subtle influences of the market that may, if not checked, weaken their claim to the high ground of sustainability.

THE THREAT TO THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF HUNTING

As we’ve seen, the ethical basis of modern hunting rested on its removal from commercial (“market”) hunting and the establishment of the principle that wildlife was held in public trust not to be reduced to private property. Requiring licenses, imposing bag limits and closed seasons, and, after World War II, requiring hunter education courses for new hunters firmly established norms of self-restraint. Of course, these measures did not end poaching or violations of game laws any more than laws against driving under the influence ended driving under the influence. But they changed the culture of hunting and, by all indications, created the framework that directly led to dramatic recoveries of many game and non-game populations. Hunting participation peaked in the 1950s, largely as a result of easy access to good habitat, the beginnings of rebounding game, and rising affluence, which meant not only higher incomes but also paid vacations.

This “sweet spot,” did not last long. Affluence led to suburbanization, which made access to good habitat more remote (and, ultimately, unintentionally “invited” deer into the suburbs where hunting was, to say the least, problematic). This in turn meant that hunting opportunities involved travel, making hunters interlopers in countrysides that more and more required intermediaries—i.e., hired outfitters and guides—who were locals and could arrange for landowner permissions (for a fee) and provide local knowledge that the neo-local hunters could not easily acquire themselves. Attachments to place inevitably weakened, not least because places to which hunters would happily return were themselves being steadily transformed by second homes, ranchettes, and locals hostile to invading “hordes” of hunters from remote urban and suburban areas.

From the hunter’s point of view, this all put an increasing price tag on hunting. Those who could not afford the price of a trip to pursue deer, elk, geese, Dakota pheasants, or upper Midwest grouse, began to settle for local commercial hunting “preserves” where pheasants were purchased and released while the hunters filled out the paperwork. Interest in “canned” hunts for exotic animals and white-tailed deer bred for heavy racks of antlers increased. Needless to say, the doctrine of public trust has been compromised and the commercialization of hunting has crept in the backdoor, subtly eroding notions of fair chase and self-restraint. If you’ve hired a guide, traveled a thousand miles, bought out-of-state licenses and permits, and booked motels along the way, you and your guide expect “results.” I don’t mean to impugn the character of either the guide or the hunter, but it doesn’t take rocket science to recognize the difference between driving an hour or two to a place where you’ve been repeatedly over many years and are, however casually, acquainted with the locals—enough to know the boundaries of the land and acceptable behavior and driving (flying) one thousand miles to arrive in the hands of an outfitter/guide who is dependent upon making your trip a success (and making you a return customer). Not to put too fine a point on this, the situation presents what can only be called an “ethical slippery slope.”

Paying to hunt not only undermines the bedrock principle of public trust, it also competes for hunter dollars that go to guides and landowners rather than to organizations that promote habitat conservation, fair chase, and public access. It bears recalling that
public access was one of the key differences between Europe and North America.

Many of these organizations have taken the lead to caution against another threat to ethical, fair chase hunting: technology. It’s a well-established fact that the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have generated all sorts of scientific, medical, and technological breakthroughs—from rocketry to nuclear power, from mood altering drugs to amazing surgical advances, and, of course, weaponry. If one is so inclined, the contemporary hunter can scarcely be distinguished from the contemporary soldier in Afghanistan: relieved of body armor but equipped with night vision scope, GPS, lasers, and a semi-automatic rifle, a hunter can choose to radically alter the fair chase notion of a level playing field.

And, as even casually turning the pages in a hunting magazine or a catalogue catering to hunters will reveal, manufacturers have become quite adept at pedaling these products with appeals like “you only get one chance at a trophy: make it count with our laser sight or whatever.”

Pressed for free time that makes pre-season scouting, even on home turf, hard, hunters increasingly rely on field cameras to “scout” the movement of game. Unless state agencies take action, there is little doubt that drones will be deployed to tell the hunter or the hunter’s guide where the trophy animal can be found. The “militarization” of big game hunting and the associated emphasis on trophies can only erode the ethic of fair chase.

**SO, WHY HUNT?**

Humans have an incredibly broad repertoire, cultivated over millennia of evolution and the concurrent shaping of culture. I can’t dance or jump worth a damn but I can thrill to a ballet performance or an NBA basketball game. Before ballet and basketball, our ancestors performed all sorts of performances that got refined, degree by degree, into our collective repertoire. It provides us with an expansive sense of what it means to be a human being. Hunting is an indelible part of our repertoire and like stunning athleticism, astonishing scientific discoveries, and sobering ethical reflection on what it means to be human, hunting has its place in teaching us who we are.

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