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THE CASE FOR HUNTING¹

William L. Robinson²

There are serious ecological problems in the world today. Lead from the exhaust of California automobiles is found in the ice of Greenland, and sulfur from Ohio industries acidifies lakes in Michigan and New York and fish die. Toxic wastes once buried out of sight near the Great Lakes have unexpectedly returned from their graves, causing gulls and cormorants to be born with deformed bills. Tropical rainforests are being clearcut at a rate of 250,000 square kilometers per year, destroying entire species of animals before they are even described by scientists.

People who understand and care about the biosphere—its beauty and health (which I believe are closely related)—have joined together to oppose the crush of humanity which threatens to overwhelm this planet, manipulating its ecological functions with technologies whose effects are at best unknown, and at worst, harmful to the long-term interests of man and nearly all living things.

The greatest threats to wildlife on earth are widespread loss of habitat, chemical poisons, and uncontrolled or improperly regulated exploitation. Regulated hunting, as practiced in the United States, Canada, and most of Europe, is but a minor worry to nearly all ecologists.

Nevertheless, there are numerous local citizens' groups, and large organizations such as Friends of Animals, Fund for Animals, and The Humane Society of the United States, for whom opposition to hunting constitutes a major public relations, lobbying, and legislative activity. On the pro-hunting side are thousands of hunting-oriented local sportsmen's groups, and on a larger scale, the National Rifle Association, the Wildlife Management Institute, and the National Wildlife Federation. The National Audubon Society maintains a neutral stance on hunting. I believe that a common goal of all these groups is to maintain populations of wild animals, with individuals among those populations provided adequate opportunity for survival and reproduction. The hunting debate has had an unfortunate polarizing effect among people sharing this goal.

My purpose at this symposium is to present the case for hunting. I am a wildlife ecologist by training and profession, and I am also a hunter. As a hunter, I am sensitive to criticisms of this pursuit, as any hunter should be. Some people question how, with knowledge of the nature and functioning of ecological systems, I can go out with a gun and kill grouse, ducks, and deer. I respond that, indeed, my understanding of ecology and the nature of man enhances my enjoyment of hunting.

Human Attitudes Toward Wildlife

Significant progress in understanding attitudes of people toward animals has been made in the past decade, largely through the work of Steve Kellert (1978, 1980) of Yale University. After polling a cross-section of Americans, Kellert identified ten types of attitudes. These are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Attitudes toward animals (from Kellert 1976).

Attitude	Characteristics
Naturalistic	Desires personal contact with natural habitats, concern for wildlife
Ecologicistic	Intellectual understanding of interactions of wildlife and environment
Humanistic	Strong personal affection for animals, especially pets
Moralistic	Ethical concern; vigorous opposition to inflicting suffering or death in animals
Scientistic	Interest in animals as objects of study
Aesthetic	Interest in physical and symbolic attractiveness of animals
Utilitarian	Animals are valued for tangible usefulness to man
Dominionistic	Interest in mastery and control of animals
Negativistic	Desire to avoid animals; fear and alienation

Anti-hunters are most likely to exhibit humanistic and/or moralistic attitudes. The humanistic attitude attributes human qualities to animals, and possessors of that attitude are frequently interested in animals as pets, often treating them as they would other humans. While other animals share similarities in our basic senses, they are not human. In many ways, they are superior to us. A beaver, for example, can gnaw down an aspen tree 10 inches in diameter and live by eating its small branches. A lion can pursue and kill a zebra without the use of a rifle or a Land Rover, and my dog possesses such a sense of smell that she lives in a world so rich with odors it is unimaginable to me. But the beaver, the lion, and the dog are unable to comprehend the complex ideas that we are dealing with in this conference; and many mammals never comprehend the dangers of highways and frequently run into the front of an oncoming car rather than away from it. Unlike humans, the reproductive rates of birds and mammals, particularly game species, are high and keyed to a normally high rate of mortality. All this is not to imply that we should not respect other animals, only to show that they are not humans.

People with a moralistic attitude feel that causing pain or death to any animal capable of knowing pain is immoral and should not be done by

humans (Singer 1975). A difficulty that people espousing this view have is in determining what organisms “know pain,” that is, drawing a line between which animals may be killed morally, and those which cannot. I believe that wherever one draws this line is artificial and uncharacteristic of the physiological and behavioral inheritance of our own species. I should point out that I have no objection whatever to people choosing their own behavior toward animals and their own diets (which invariably involve killing something). What I do object to is their attempts to make their preferences and beliefs mandatory for all others.

Hunting as a Human Tradition

It is my contention that a propensity to hunt is a part of our humanity or “humaneness,” using my *Webster’s Dictionary* (Mish 1983) definition of humane as “characterized by or tending to broad humanistic culture,” and that while hunting may not be an entirely necessary component of modern human culture, it has value in keeping a perspective on man’s role as an active participant in the community of life.

Hunting, I claim, is part of our human inheritance. Our dentition and our digestive system, both unaffected by learning, tell us that we are adapted as omnivores, like bears, pigs, and raccoons. We have incisors, canines, and molars. Our digestive tract is relatively short without a compound stomach or a caecum typical of herbivores. We do not do well on a vegetarian diet unless we apply the most sophisticated nutritional information and select items grown in various parts of the continent and shipped to us. Our natural diet includes meat; the middens of our ancestors through the ages attest to this. And just as we have inherited a digestive system adapted partially for meat, we also have inherited behavioral traits that enhance our ability to capture and kill other animals.

On a summer day two years ago, I sat at a Toronto city park on the shore of Lake Ontario and watched a three-year-old boy try to catch gulls. As his parents spread the lunch, he chased the birds, took a lunch break, then went after them again, without success. I doubt very much that his gull chasing was a learned behavior. He simply wanted to catch a gull and probably wouldn’t have known what to do with one had he done so. His predatory drives were expressing themselves and he was having a good time.

Most ethologists recognize play as an inherent behavioral trait of many animals, especially those with more complex brains. Play behavior among young animals is frequently interpreted as a form of practice for catching prey and escaping predators. Kittens and puppies instinctively play, crouching behind the living room couch, pouncing upon a passing sibling, rolling about, then exchanging roles. Skills of hiding, escape, speed, and angles of approach are honed.

In these games there are three basic elements: prey, predator, and cover. A kitten can be the predator during one encounter and the prey for another. The couch or a chair serves either as cover to hide the predator or to protect

the prey from attack. I first encountered these views expressed by the British ecologist, Charles Elton (1939) in an article entitled "On the Nature of Cover." Elton also explained human athletic contests as expressions of our inherent interest in predator, prey, and cover relationships. In American-style football, for example, the object of the game is for one team to carry or throw the ball into the end zone despite the great physical efforts of the opposing team to prevent it. The end zone represents cover, the ball carrier represents a prey animal, and the defensive team a pack of predators. Players, even amateur players, strive mightily on both sides and frequently get hurt in the melee. We could civilize football a great deal through a gentlemen's agreement before the game. One team might decide to let the other team carry the ball untouched into the end zone, if the other team in turn will permit them to do the same. This would be humane football: no one would get hurt and the score would end in a tie. But who would play or watch such a game?

Baseball, hockey, basketball, soccer, and even tennis and golf can be explained by reference to the three basic elements of predator, prey, and cover. Why do millions of people play, and even watch and become emotionally involved in these games? This real and vicarious participation is a result of our inherent interest in predator-prey relationships.

Some people will argue that they themselves are not in the least interested either in hunting, fishing, or athletic events. Genetic variation as well as environmental influences operating among individuals explains this attitude, and we should not expect all humans to possess an interest in hunting any more than we expect all humans to look alike.

Whereas athletic competitions are extremely ritualized versions of predator-prey-cover relationships, with elaborate rules for scoring and exchange of predator-prey roles, hunting and fishing are merely more primitive expressions of human predatory nature. Instead of pretending we are predators, as hunters or fishermen we actually are predators. I agree that the tendency to hunt can be "civilized" out of us; and it has been done, to some extent. We have rules of the game; there are closed seasons, protected species, bag limits, and restrictions on the type of equipment permitted to protect animal populations from over-exploitation. Opponents of hunting argue that we should put hunting as a sport behind us. But is it necessary or desirable to prohibit hunting for "humane" reasons? Do humans have a right to kill an animal for sport and food? Is there something that gives the fox a right to kill and eat a rabbit but denies that right to humans? Do people who have little interest in hunting have the right to deprive those who do from pursuing their sport?

Attitudes of Hunters

As all who oppose hunting do not have the same reasons for doing so, hunters do not all hunt for the same reasons. Kellert (1978) found that there were three prevalent attitude types among hunters: utilitarian (making up 44% of hunters), dominionistic (38% of hunters), and naturalistic (18% of

hunters). The dominionistic or "sport hunter" views hunting primarily as a contest between the hunter and the game. This hunter sees the hunt as a challenge of skill in stalking or marksmanship, and is frequently interested in taking trophy animals. The utilitarian hunter or "meat hunter" hunts primarily for meat, and may be little concerned with ritual or method of attaining that meat. The naturalistic or "nature hunter" hunts primarily to participate in the community of life, viewing himself or herself as a predator in this community. Such hunters frequently hunt alone and often with primitive equipment such as bows and arrows or muskets. I classify myself among the nature hunters, with a secondary utilitarian interest.

Hunting and Genetics of Wildlife Populations

There are suggestions that hunters remove the strongest, and genetically superior individuals, while other predators ("natural" predators) remove the less genetically desirable individuals. While several studies do indicate that non-human predation does take the weaker individuals, in many cases these are simply young, sick, or old animals, of which none may be genetically inferior. I know of no research that supports the conclusion that hunting selects out the most fit individuals. In fact, theoretically speaking, a conclusion that hunters remove the most genetically fit animals by taking the largest individuals from the population and therefore weaken it, denies the very nature of selection. If these animals are being selectively removed they are then by definition less fit for survival against hunting. It remains to be shown that these animals are genetically superior to the less-sought-after smaller animals.

There is some evidence that hunting has selected against cottontail rabbits that run some distance above ground rather than dash into the nearest burrow. In such cases, survival against dogs and hunters of the hole-seeking rabbits is enhanced. There are also indications that ring-necked pheasants with a genetic propensity to run rather than fly have a higher survival rate, and are more likely to pass on their ground-hugging qualities to their offspring, thus more successfully avoiding hunters. Research needs to be done to determine whether holeseeking rabbits and running pheasants are less genetically adapted for surviving the impacts of other stresses such as malnutrition, diseases, and non-human predators.

Raveling (1978) found that increasing numbers of Canada geese are remaining in northern parts of their range rather than migrating farther south. Those which remain in the north, assisted in many cases by being fed in parks, have a higher survival rate than their counterparts that go south, primarily because they escape hunters. In this case, it appears that hunting is selecting for the less migratory geese. Whether this hunter-induced trait is bad for the geese remains unknown.

Geist (1986) reviewed the work of a German chemist named Vogt who showed quite convincingly that nutrition rather than genetics is primarily responsible for large body size and large antler growth. Vogt, by providing European and American deer from normal stock with high quality diets, was

able to produce stags with weights and antler growth equivalent to the largest trophy animals taken in Europe. Thus nutrition, rather than genetic capabilities, was shown to be the major factor in producing trophy animals. Nevertheless, there is room for further study of the effects of hunting on genetics and fitness of animal populations. Should trophy hunting be shown to have a detrimental effect on the genetics of big game populations, measures may be taken to protect larger members of the population without eliminating hunting entirely. Such regulations are now used in management of sport fisheries.

Hunting as a Sacred Ceremony

I feel more comfortable defending the nature hunter and the utilitarian hunter rather than the trophy hunter, although I am not suggesting outlawing the dominionistic hunter. Several years ago, Dennis Olson (1980), who was then teaching at the Environmental Learning Center in northern Minnesota, published a searching article superbly expressing his views as a hunter. He describes his thoughts and experiences as he hunts a deer with bow and arrow on an early October morning:

I recall discussions with friends, sensitive people. Preservation logic is one thing that binds us. Wilderness teaches us. My friends have expectations of a naturalist:

"We look to a teacher of the woods for inspiration, for a spirit of integration with plants, animals, and Earth. His sensitivity must be manifest in a deep humanity toward animals. Knowledge of nature's nuances must lead him to respect and preserve life."

But I am a hunter and they are not.

"A hunting naturalist is a contradictory creature," they argue. "With his own hand, he takes the very life he respects. Can respect be shown in making a corpse?"

"The gossamer of life, so tenuous and fragile," the poet says, "can scarcely withstand this violent betrayal. How can anyone kill except in need?"

Hunter. Like it or not, I belong to a group.

The arguments turn in my mind as I drive to the woods I know from childhood. I park and get out, slowly adjusting to the darkness...

A sharp-shinned hawk flashes between the trunks. A twist, and he continues his erratic maneuvering—toward me! Perhaps he caught a blink of my eye. Expecting a close fly-by, I watch in admiration. He lands on my bow! My excitement sends slight tremors through the bow limbs, but he perches and scrutinizes the leaf litter. Mouse movement spins his head and he is off again in wild flight. A predator. A killing efficiency honed by the millennia.

An hour passes and I still wait.

Humanity is a curious invention. The constraint of positive emotions, love and care, is placed upon human potential for carnage. The rest of nature is simply indifferent. Plants and other animals don't need moral control because they don't have our omnipotence. We feel we should be humane to other animals.

Fairness is humane. The bow and arrow I hold are more fair than cannons. A wolf would use every means it has to make the kill and, if it could, would think me too generous. It doesn't understand my power. Maybe I don't either.

A small buck approaches. I hold my breath.

He moves closer, weaving and stopping. Closer. My heart pounds. Closer. Shaking. Closer. Draw. Closer—broadside. Heart shot!

The string whips. The arrow is a resolute line, a decision made. To kill.

I feel I should have been here before. I speared the mastodon with chipped stone and seasoned maple, thrusting desperately at its heart. The last magnetic forces twitched violently from its muscles. I smelled warm blood, oozing between pebbles toward thirsty rootlets. A choked gasp, and life passed to scavenger, maggot, and me. Life unto life, only through death.

It isn't painless. The deer runs the hunched, tail-down death panic. In three seconds his brain is bloodless. He weaves, collapses, kicks, and is still. A brown eye peers, unseeing.

The twist of opposing emotions clenches my throat. This feels right to me.

Can I ever resolve the cardinal question? Is my euphoria from the "fun" of killing or the joy of participating in a natural system? I do feel sorrow, but never enough to quit hunting. Is it more humane to munch steak or soybeans and feel nothing at all? Where is the real insensitivity? Who feels more removed from the natural world—the participant or the watcher? I can't answer, because I am both . . .

One friend will eat meat, but only wild meat. She seeks honesty, wishing to escape the anonymity of meat counter, cellophane, and slaughterhouse. Our common world is respect for life-and-death poetry. There is little honesty in a fast-food hamburger. The styrofoam wrapper insulates the reality that it died for me. I know where my venison comes from. I watch and feel it die . . .

There are two kinds of kills: one dulls, one sensitizes. The former is tragedy. The latter is a sacred celebration, as old as time. Every living being kills life. Some firsthand.

Olson quoted his friends as seeking a spirit of integration with plants, animals, and Earth. Integration implies an intermingling—something that is impossible unless we consider ourselves a part of the ecosystem, and not apart from it.

Ecology and Economics of Hunting

Are there ecological arguments for prohibiting hunting? Where populations are endangered, hunting should unquestionably be stopped. But in North America, such situations in this century are rare. Hunters have for years shown their interest in maintaining game populations through license fees and taxes on sporting goods earmarked for game research and management, and by supporting legislation and regulations that are designed to protect against overharvest. The response has been quite gratifying. The wood duck, brought nearly to extinction in the early 1900s by overshooting and nesting habitat loss, now numbers in the millions, and sustains annual hunter harvests of hundreds of thousands. Wild turkeys, once reduced to small remnants of their original range, have in the past two decades been reestablished in nearly all of the suitable remaining turkey range. At the end of the nineteenth century, only about 40,000 elk remained in existence in North America. Now

there are over 400,000. In the United States, the white-tailed deer, the most popular big game animal in North America, increased, with properly managed hunting and habitat, from about 500,000 in 1900 to 12 million in 1980. Financial contributions of hunters, however, do not necessarily entitle them to ownership of the wildlife, nor even to any more say in its management than other citizens. In North America, resident wildlife belongs to the people.

I am not a great believer in economic arguments to justify the existence of anything. Hunting is unquestionably of great economic benefit to many people, but so is smuggling heroin. If something is morally or ecologically wrong, even if it generates a lot of money, it should not be done. I will therefore not present the arguments about how hunters pay for wildlife habitat management to favor the existence of hunting.

There are accusations that habitat management for game species may be carried out at the expense of other species. This is true in some cases. Research is being conducted on many national forests and refuges to determine whether non-game species are being neglected. New management plans must take these species into account, and much more work needs to be done in this area.

Can Wildlife Be Managed Without Hunting?

Despite the claims of some pro-hunters, it is possible to manage wildlife without shooting. We do so now for many species. But shooting animals does give wildlife managers another means for controlling numbers of some species that are no longer under control of natural predators and in places where natural predators cannot practically be reintroduced. An example of what must be considered neither sound management nor humane treatment of animals occurred within the past few years on Angel Island, California. On this small island park near San Francisco, blacktailed deer multiplied to a point where there was clearly not enough natural food to sustain them. Artificial feeding would only worsen the problems as fed deer would continue to reproduce. The California Department of Fish and Game proposed shooting deer to bring the population back within its carrying capacity. This was opposed by the San Francisco Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). A suggestion by wildlife ecologist Dale McCollough of the University of California Berkeley to release coyotes on the island to prey on the deer was also opposed by the SPCA. A plan was then developed under court order for the California Department of Fish and Game to live-trap and release 214 deer from Angel Island into a recently burned area on the California mainland which supposedly could sustain a growing number of deer. Radiotelemetry of released deer showed that within a year, 85% were dead, more than half within three months. The cost of this operation was \$20,000 (O'Bryan and McCollough 1985). While death by a bullet may not always be the best answer to overpopulations of deer and elk, suitable humane and practical alternatives have not been forthcoming.

As one trained in science, I have found it somewhat frustrating not to be able to express my humanity in terms of means, standard deviations, and statistical probabilities. Instead I must resort to describing my feelings as a hunter, and as a human being who differs genetically and by experience from all others, and also as one who shares many qualities with other humans. The pleasure I get from hunting is something that many do not understand. Likewise, others experience some pleasures that I do not understand. I have little interest in horseback riding, Disneyland, automobile racing, or grand opera, yet I am not advocating the abandonment of those pursuits. Anti-hunters have not come up with sufficient ecological, moral, or humane arguments to deprive me and millions of other citizens the opportunity to hunt—to participate actively and directly in the community of life of which we are all members.

I believe strongly that the welfare and survival of wild animals on the earth will depend not on protecting them from regulated hunting, but upon our success in defending them against broadscale destruction of their life-support systems. I am talking about the devastation of rainforests in Central and South America, wetlands in North America, savannas in Africa, and lakes in Scandinavia. Anti-hunters, non-hunters, and hunters would do well to join together in fighting the forces of human population growth and destructive exploitation of resources that affects not only ourselves, but also our fellow creatures.

Endnotes

¹ Paper presented at the national conference, "Animals and Humans: Ethical Perspectives," Moorhead State University, Moorhead, MN, April 21-23, 1986.

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