I had occasion recently to reexamine my views on the subject of sport hunting. Between seven and ten million Americans kill animals in the pursuit of pleasure each year. The number does not appear to be on the increase—if anything, statistics would indicate the ranks of hunters may be declining slightly. Nonetheless, those who trudge through the woods each year in pursuit of Bambi, Bumper, and their friends cling fiercely to their right to engage in the time-honored tradition of killing for sport.

We are not talking subsistence hunting here, though many hunters are quick to point out they eat the animals they kill. (This justification is designed to quickly categorize as a hypocrite anyone who eats meat and dares to criticize hunting. That the subsistence-hunting argument often works in deflecting criticism of hunting always amazes me. People who eat meat do not take pleasure in tormenting animals before consuming them. It is doubtful that people who work in slaughterhouses develop the sense of kinship and eager anticipation shared by the hunting fraternity. The ethical debate over the eating of a worthy issue for discussion, but it has no bearing on the right or wrongness of killing for sport. Hunting represents an active, premeditated intention to seek out and destroy, meat-eating, the result of cultural conditioning, embodies a less clear intention. It is doubtful whether most people truly comprehend that the consequence of eating meat is the death of an animal. There are no arguments to support the claim that the glorification of the hunt by the hunter has its parallel in what is going on when a person sits down to dinner.)

The biological arguments hunters have traditionally advanced to support their position have been exposed as specious. Manipulation of habitat (through clear-cutting and artificial feeding) and harvest practices (prohibiting the taking of females to ensure unusually high herd reproductive rates, for example) ensure bumper crops of many species (e.g., deer) highly desired as game animals. Game-management rationale has been: the more deer there are, the more likely it is that the hunter will be successful in his quest for a kill and, therefore, the higher the probability that he will return next year to hunt and spend. In truth, when left alone, nature seeks a balance and man’s intervention is seldom, if ever, needed.

Hunters tend to be preoccupied with “the species.” Their position seems to be that by killing individuals the health of “the species” is guaranteed. Categorizations, as Plato observed, are man-made constructions that help us organize our world. They are abstractions. There is, ontologically speaking, no species, no forest, no “mankind,” outside the realm of the human mind. “Mankind,” for example, is just our term for a collection of individual people. A species is just a group of like individuals. The moral impact of this is that actions are judged as right or wrong based upon their effect on individuals. To say we harm mankind is to affirm the harming of a finite number of individuals, each of whom suffers and experiences distress personally. This is a critical point with respect to hunting. Because a species is an abstraction, it does not—cannot—feel, suffer, or enjoy life. Only individuals have those capabilities. A species cannot die—although a species may cease to be if all of its members die—but dying, like living, is reserved for individuals. The sport hunter’s claim that he is concerned with the well-being of the species is a hollow one: what the sport hunter is concerned with is the proliferation of individuals as targets.

I will not address the hunter’s arguments that because of hunting there are more and healthier animals than in the past. These biological arguments have been shown to be invalid. However, there is one issue I shall address. Hunters often argue they are filling the niche as predator of game populations, that somehow they are fulfilling a natural role. Predators take the old, the weak, and the infirm. Sport hunters take the best, the healthiest, the prime contributors to the genetic pool of the group. Hunting, therefore, is an inverse form of natural predation and the antithesis of natural selection.

I have a friend who hunts and, in particular, enjoys hunting with a compound bow. Now, if ever any invention was more effectively designed to cause pain than a broadhead arrow (with the possible exception of a steel-jaw trap), I, for one, don’t wish to know of it. Imagine a razor-edged projectile penetrating through your skin and flesh and stopping lodged deep in the vital organs that keep you alive. The excruciating pain causes you to run blindly, trying to get away from the agony that has engulfed your body. The arrow, which sends a violent reminder of its presence each time you move, is causing you to hemorrhage so that, finally weakened by bleeding and tortured by a pain no mind can grasp nor any words describe, you die—a testament to another being’s skill with this diabolical weapon.

Most states have laws that make it a crime to cause an animal to be tormented and tortured or to suffer needlessly. Most civilized people recoil in horror at descriptions of cruelties individuals perpetrate on animals. How hypocritical that we exempt sport hunting from our list of unacceptable activities of tormenting and torturing animals! No arguments, based on tradition, economy, or biology can justify the premeditated, intentional, and flagrant abuse of a living creature with a falsified intent to kill it in the act of creation. Sport hunting is the epitome of an activity that intentionally causes suffering.

Why then do millions of people engage in this brutal and indefensible practice? Albert Schweitzer once remarked that the roots of cruelty are not so much deep as widespread. I would seldom dare to disagree with Dr. Schweitzer, but I am afraid that, after reexamining sport hunting, I believe here, at least, the roots of cruelty are deep. Sport hunting is the murder of another being. A by-product that is not less repulsive because being is of another species. It is murder because it is undertaken with not only an awareness of the consequences of the action, but also the intention of killing a living creature.

That any rational person would or could enjoy inflicting pain and causing suffering to another creature is repugnant. Even more offensive is that adult human beings can—and do—rationalize and glory in murder. Both of these observations become more disturbing when we recognize that this behavior is intentional and those who engage in sport hunting will put forth every effort to justify their actions. Many will scoff at the suggestion that sport hunting is murder, arguing that murder can only be defined as killing a member of our species. It is this type of semantic confusion that can no longer be allowed to cloak this morally indefensible tradition.

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ONE MAN'S VIEW OF SPORT HUNTING

By David K. Wills

Opposite: "If ever any invention was more effectively designed to cause pain and suffering than a broadhead arrow, I don't wish to know of it." Hunters often argue they fill the niche of predators of game populations.