

ON HUNTING AND HUNTERS
by Clarence A. Crawford

Most of us walk unseeing through the world, unaware alike of its beauties, its wonders, and the strange and sometimes terrible intensity of the lives that are being lived around us.

Rachel Carson

Hunting in America is represented in a number of powerful images. The oldest no doubt is that of the aboriginal North American, hunting mammoth across the ancient steppes, or bison on the plains, or deer in the green forest. More recently, the transplanted European learns the ways of the North American wilderness and becomes some version of the frontiersman: voyageur, leatherstocking, mountain man. His ruthless descendant is the market hunter who eliminated the passenger pigeon, reduced the herds of bison, and made deep inroads into our migratory bird species; or decimated the southern plume-bearing bird species. In our cultural memory, hunters embody much of what is wild, resourceful, and admirable in our past; the hunter also embodies much of what is ignoble and rapacious in our history.

The modern hunter—say, post-Second World War—is only distantly related to his noble/rapacious ancestors, though the hunting press certainly promotes mythological connections to the past. The modern hunter is, rather, a creature of industrialism, and approaches hunting from the standpoint of an industrial worker who uses industrial equipment.

Unlike hunting traditions in Europe, where hunting was a sport for the nobility – the commonality who hunted were poachers – in North America hunting was and is broadly democratic. This democratic foundation for hunting meant that the working man could embrace hunting enthusiastically and openly: it was not the sport of kings. The animals are property of the States, not the nobility; the land is often public; and where private land is open to hunting, it is often the land of smallholders, not estates.

The “working man” who hunted in post-World War II America was apt to be an industrial worker: a Pennsylvania steel worker, a Michigan auto worker, a West Virginia coal miner. If he was not directly involved in industry, he was probably connected to urban life: a schoolteacher, an insurance agent, a truck driver. Enclaves in Chesapeake Bay or Texas might be reserved for the rich, but the forests and fields of Vermont, Ohio, Nebraska, were stalked in October and November by America’s ordinary people.

This democratic tradition of hunting is one of our greatest legacies—a truly egalitarian activity—but it is currently imperiled. Its loss would be tragic, a reversion to an aristocratic past which we should shun. Unfortunately, hunters themselves are hastening the demise of their sport as they know it.

The Shift from the Public to the Private

Every state has its unique history. Texas has little public hunting because vast tracts of the state are in private hands, and it has a tiny amount of public land. The Rocky Mountain states have, like Texas, large tracts of land which are controlled by private individuals or corporations, but, unlike Texas, they also have large tracts of public land. Maine and Michigan are like Pennsylvania in that they have long traditions of public hunting, but are unlike Pennsylvania in that large tracts of both states are controlled by timber interests, which, on the one hand, are generally friendly to hunters, but, on the other hand, also have the final say over the disposition of those lands. And so on, for each state.

How do we define the difference between “public” and “private”? The answer, one would think, is obvious. “Public” lands are owned by the government and are open for use by any member of the public, without distinction. “Private” lands are controlled by any non-governmental entity. Simple.

But what about land which is controlled by private entities, individual or corporate, but are dedicated to public use? Are these lands dedicated to private ends or public ends? It is possible that public hunting on private land is in fact “public” use in the highest and truest sense of the word: “of, relating to, or affecting the people as a whole, or the community, state, or nation.” We expect our publicly held lands to be open to public use, and take that for granted; yet, when privately held land is open to the public, doesn’t this also approach an ideal of civil and civic behavior?

I would like to suggest the term “civil lands” to denote the sharing of lands which are in fact held privately.

To use one example, Pennsylvania has a tradition of public hunting that is as old as the Commonwealth itself. Legendary Pennsylvania hunters (Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett) and Pennsylvania rifles (the Kentucky, actually Pennsylvania, long rifle) symbolize this tradition. In Pennsylvania, the general public approves of hunting more than in any other state. Originally Pennsylvania was almost entirely in private hands, but the state has bought

large tracts designated as state forests and state game lands. But traditionally most hunting was on private land that was left open to the public.

The tradition of civil use in Pennsylvania has been put into practice through various programs that encourage cooperation between landowners, hunters, and the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The state's population has always been extremely diverse, and its patterns of settlement offer a strong contrast between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural. The state is populous yet includes large amounts of open ground. The tradition of civil land use has been exceedingly beneficial to many people over the generations. That may be changing, which would be tragic.

This tradition is extremely valuable in two ways. First, it has produced the practical result of making hunting possible for ordinary people, who are often working class and who may live in urban areas. This tradition of civil use has opened the countryside to people who cannot afford or who do not want to own large tracts of land.

Second, the civic use of lands is a valuable tradition for social reasons. Because people are willing to share resources, and because they are willing to respect those resources, (including the prerogatives of the landowner), there is a community of hunters who, at some level of consciousness, recognize their commonality of interests. The community is not bound together altruistically. The bond is mutual self-interest, probably the most enduring bond in any community.

This need for public space and civic land is especially acute in our eastern states, where, after colonization, most land was in private hands, and public lands therefore needed to be obtained by purchasing lands at public expense, or by the goodwill of the rich as gifts. Westerners who complain about the large amount of public land in their states would do well to recognize that those lands in fact are extremely valuable assets for everyone, cheaply obtained. However, because the public lands are available, there has been little development of the civic use of lands; large landholders feel no need to cooperate with the public.

One of our greatest environmentalists and land managers, Aldo Leopold, spent the second half of his splendid career advocating, not for wilderness, but for the health of privately held land. He recognized that the farmer and the forester profoundly influence the health of all the land, including the creatures that live upon it. He knew that we are all part of the larger biological community. Hunters should not forget that they too are part of this community. (During trips to Pennsylvania, I have lamented the proliferation of NO TRESPASSING signs where once the ground was open.

I was saddened to hear the response: “I would post that ground if it was mine. The hunters have trashed it and the landowner had to clean it up.” These hunters have destroyed a piece of the human community, and I doubt if that kind of person has any idea whatsoever that there is such a thing as a biological community.)

I fear that the tradition of civic use is weakening, and I trace this weakening to the rise and perpetuation of Reaganism and the catchwords “privatization” and “property rights.” As the NO TRESPASSING signs go up, hunters are increasingly faced with the choice of buying property, joining a club, or not hunting. Of course, once the hunter becomes a landowner or joins a club, he in turn feels the need to post his own little domain; thus the old concept of civic use steadily erodes. When each hunter wants to secure a relatively small piece of land for his exclusive use, every hunter eventually suffers, because in the long term he is acting against his best self-interest. Those who can afford to buy have a little bit; no one has a lot. Society at large suffers because another piece of the community has been destroyed.

The Rise of Anti-hunting Sentiment. Where Hunters are at Fault

Hunters are amazed, bewildered, and angered at the rise of anti-hunting sentiment in America. The hunters I know tend to attribute such sentiment to irrational opponents (militant vegans, crazed and violent pacifists), fuzzy minded kooks (animal rights nuts who think animals are people), emotional do-gooders (who don't want Bambi to be murdered), or political pariahs (liberals generally, who are probably responsible for the whole mess).

This writer intends to make a case in defense of hunting, and also plans to offer a critique of anti-hunting forces in America. However, I first want to challenge hunters to examine themselves. A brief list of rhetorical questions directed at hunters will do:

1. Have you dedicated yourself to the study of your prey and its habitat?
2. Do you have a clear idea of sporting behavior and fair chase?
3. Do you have a genuine and legitimate use for the meat you obtain? Or is the meat actually a nuisance to your household?
4. Do you understand and respect the law?
5. Do you promote the preservation, restoration, and development of good habitat, public and private?
6. Do you respect and cherish the entire habitat: land, water, air, plants, and animals?

7. Do you have a clear idea why you hunt?
8. Are you willing to exert yourself as part of your dedication to hunting?

And another list:

1. Do you trash public or private property?
2. Are you loud, obnoxious, or drunken?
3. Do you kill for the sake of killing?
4. Are you more interested in the technologies of the hunt than in the hunt itself?
5. Do you rely on the internal combustion engine for motive power, or do you rely on your own legs?

Before hunters discredit the opposition, they need to make certain that their own house is in order.

Anti-hunting Sentiment. Where the Critics are Wrong

Hunters need to understand that anti-hunters are working from a strong ethical base. This is an important point. They are not necessarily just kooks and cranks.

I am convinced that each ethical advance that we humans can win—and such advances are rare and hard-won—can help us ratchet our species to a higher level of understanding and behavior. Of all areas of human social growth, ethical growth seems to be the most difficult of attainment. Centuries can go by during which we expand geographical and technical knowledge, while our ethical behavior does not advance one jot. During some centuries, such as the 20th, our advances in science and technology take sudden and astounding leaps while our ethical behavior as a species reverts to a level of barbarism unequalled in history.

In fairness, I will entertain the idea that it may be that the animal rights position, if it prevails, will lead to a salutary revolution in the law, producing a more just and humane society, or perhaps lead us to a path of love, as in Buddhism. All great ethical ideas require us not to reform the world, but ourselves, and perhaps I would be a better man if I recognized that not only do I form a biological community with other animals, but also a religious or legal community.

Whether or not this happens, I do know that one ethical development is necessary, which is that humans must learn to understand their place within the natural world. This understanding must begin with a union of biology

and ethics. The ethical position must be inextricably joined to biological understanding. And the fact is, a good hunter stands closer to the heart of nature—closer to this union of the biological and the ethical—than do most other people.

What does a hunter actually *do*? (I recommend Jose Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Hunting* on this subject.)

As y Gasset points out, the primary characteristic of the hunter is that he is *alert*. This alertness extends to all areas of his environment, not just to his focus on his prey. The good hunter watches and knows the weather; the hydrology of his environment; navigation; plants and their function; non-game life, such as songbirds; the rudiments of entomology; and mammals and game birds. Of the animals and birds that he considers his prey, he must know how to identify them; locate them; and trace their movements, both locally and seasonally. He must know something of their life histories and their breeding habits. Above all, he recognizes that his studies are a lifelong challenge. He will always be a student of his environment.

The second characteristic of the hunter is that he wraps his environment around him. When he steps into the forest, field, or marsh, he enters a realm that is closed to most moderns—almost a magical kingdom. He sinks into nature's ocean, and becomes continuous with his environment. All of his behavior, mental and physical, becomes unified and focused. He is one undivided organism. There is no difference between intention and action; he is what he does.

A few other human activities create this condition of undivided focus and unity. I imagine that a field biologist functions at times with the same kind of unified intensity, as does a serious photographer or birder. An athlete who is totally absorbed in the game may be functioning in a similar sphere, as is a child at play.

The third main characteristic of the hunter is that he walks with death. Anti-hunters might insert here: "Yes, as does a murderer." But think again. We all walk with death, each and every minute of our lives, but most of us manage, most of the time, to ignore its presence. The good hunter, however, bypasses the ingrained hypocrisy of our society, which deals in massive death every day while managing to ignore it. Reformers can (and should) expose the horrors of industrial farming, the assembly line chickens, the concentration camp-like feedlots and slaughter houses, the daily trading in animal parts. But even if our farming and butchering methods were completely humanized and sanitized, the simple fact would remain: we live off the deaths of other organisms, and we too shall die.

Our society has done much to separate ourselves from this basic reality. Our food is presented to us neatly packaged, and we have no idea of the histories of the organisms we consume on a given day. We don't know how it was raised, the manner of its death, or the way it was butchered or preserved. We hired someone to raise it, and we hired someone to kill it. Most of us don't grow our own vegetables, and most of us don't kill our own animals. In our culture, food is just another consumer product. We consumers are utterly removed from the most fundamental facts of life. We manage to block out our knowledge of our own mortality in the same way. The good hunter has decided to bypass this hypocrisy; many among the anti-hunters have decided to embrace it.

I am convinced that most moderns do not know how to connect to the natural world, and I am certain that most moderns do not recognize that dealing in death and eating the results is an important way to connect to the natural world. In my home state of Alaska, the traditional Native religions are all based on a connection to the natural world, and that connection is usually based upon food. Indeed, what could be more basic and important to survival—hence, the spiritual life—than sustenance? The salmon and whitefish, the caribou and moose, are not just nutrition, they are spiritual sustenance as well. There is an intimate connection between the animal and the human. The animal is absorbed into our very cells. What could be more fundamental? Even—or especially—Christians should understand this, because the single most important sacrament is Communion, in which the Eucharist is ingested. The act of eating is the Christian's most intimate connection with God.

(Trophy hunting does not produce any of the physical and spiritual intimacy I am discussing. I am not concerned here with trophy hunting, and I have no desire to defend it. Trophy hunting is a symptom of what is wrong with our society. Its sole purpose is to gratify the ego; the trophy hunter is just one more consumer.)

How do people try to connect to the natural world? Are those connections real?

People connect through gardening, flower identification, birding, learning animal tracks, butterfly identification, photography, geology, fishing, and similar activities. Are the connections to nature thus established real, i.e., authentic? In my judgment, yes. Why? Because they require *engagement*. I wrote above that the first characteristic of the hunter is *alertness*. This

alertness allows the hunter to *engage* his environment. The good hunter is like the scientist, the birder, the gardener, in this respect.

I wonder how many people try to connect to the natural world in a sustained, committed way. I fear that as people fail to connect, or don't try to connect, that our society will become increasingly artificial and false, and that hunting will become at best a quaint, at worst a barbaric, anachronism.

A good example of trying to connect is the popularity of "nature shows" on television; I understand that an entire cable channel is given over to this audience.

I suppose that there are a number of reasons for the existence of these shows: they provide an hour of escape; they are beautiful; they "take" people to where they do not ordinarily go; the subjects are in themselves fascinating; the shows are edifying.

On balance, this is good, I suppose, but the viewer pays a high price for his surrogate experience. First, the viewer relinquishes a genuine and encompassing sense of engagement with the real, concrete world, and exchanges it for a reality that has been mediated by film crews, editors, marketing decisions, and the claustrophobic "reality" of television itself. Second, the viewer takes it on faith that he is witnessing the natural world as it really exists, when in fact what he is watching is a highly condensed and rigorously edited version of bits of the natural world, stitched together to make a story. On the television screen there is always something dramatic happening, but to a careful observer who is on the spot, the natural world is composed of great silences, long periods of apparent inactivity, events that are hard to see and which take a long time to unfold, events that are begun and concluded in seconds, and all occurring in the context of cold, heat, wind, rain, and in the world of rich odor.

Trying to connect to nature electronically fails to engage the viewer in what really exists, and, what is worse, deceives many viewers into thinking that the natural world is truly like that artificial, heavily edited, and radically condensed show. I have been in the field as a guide with people who exclaimed, "It's like what I saw on television!" as if this were high praise; television was their reference point that validated their actual experience; what they saw on television was real, and their own experience an imitation. Their reference point was the television show rather than their own first-hand experience. For many Americans, television is reality.

How many of us live in the urban womb, in a mental world controlled and mediated by electronic impulses? One can only guess, and tremble.

It is not my contention that hunting is the only way to establish a genuine connection to the natural world. I do contend, however, that a movement

away from hunting—that is, a movement away from an important means of genuine engagement—is a potential loss of significant proportions. I fear the economic and social impulses that are leading our species further and further from its natural roots into an increasingly solipsistic world.

The Capture of Ordinary Hunters by the Economic and Political Right Wing

One important characteristic of liberal thought is its commitment to exploration. The liberal attitude has always frightened conservatives because it is willing to test—that is, entertain and explore—new ideas. Liberal thought, as expressed in science and politics, is open to the consideration of the novel. A corollary of this statement is that liberal political parties have been willing to include many diverse groups and ideas under one “umbrella.” Liberals may gain power when they appeal to many groups; but they may lose power when they try to be too inclusive.

When the liberal Democratic coalition of the 1970s disintegrated, many moderate, mainstream groups shifted to the political right. They were convinced that the liberal umbrella was far too capacious. For example, at the same time that the Democratic Party became weakened because of fragmentation, labor unions also lost membership and political and economic power, and many Democrats with labor backgrounds became enthusiastic Reaganites. And who continued to support Democrats? Feminists, minorities, labor unions tied to government service, and, as far as working class hunters were concerned, assorted kooks such as animal rights activists. Add the National Rifle Association into the mix: to the working class hunter, who else would fight the good fight against gun control and other liberal sins?

Finally, and most tragically, many hunters came to assume that environmental activists, too, were among the enemy. Once they concluded, falsely, that environmentalism was inimical to hunting, the logic, for many hunters, was simple: if the liberal environmentalists are my enemies, then who are my friends? The answer seemed clear. Right wing defenders of firearms, super-patriots, property rights advocates, and the right wing generally, including even the extractive industries. In other words, many hunters became allied with the very institutions that were set on destroying habitat and limiting hunting opportunities. (The bizarre quasi-military attitude adopted by some hunters, including their clothing and equipment, is another expression of this shift in attitude.)

In my formative years as a hunter, hunting was a non-political and non-ideological activity. Nowadays I have trouble escaping both the politics and

the ideology when I associate with many hunters. To my mind, hunting should, by its very nature, be an activity that stands outside the dynamics of the larger society. The real hunter stands aside from modern life. He is also the staunchest of environmentalists.

Why I Hunt

The reasons why I hunt are few, simple, and powerful.

There is a strong element of the traditional in the hunt.

There is the tradition of routine. Early hours. Step outside to starlight and frost, or snowfall. Back in to prepare breakfast in the dark morning stillness. Walk a familiar path to an old hunting site; smell the recurrent and ancient smells of the salt marsh or the autumn hardwood forest; the slow emergence of dawn over the marsh, the accretion of light in the forest; the slow fading of the evening light; the feeling of fatigue at the end of a day.

There is the tradition of friendship. A person's hunting companions are old friends. Their old routines mesh with your old routines. Conversations and stories tend to repeat, which is good—they are always pleasurable and well-seasoned. Hunters preserve the past, and they know that the present is fleeting. The moment of the hunt is ephemeral, but the memories endure. We remember the dead: the birds, the deer, the old dogs, the old friends. We know that human life passes as quickly as the seasons and the creatures of the wild. Likewise, the intensity of the hunt is a brief flame. The work of a heroic dog lasts a few minutes, hours, years. Like the human hunter, he gives himself to the brief, enveloping intensity of the moment and vanishes, except in memory. The combination of old friendships, old stories, old memories, can produce a compost that yields something about the conduct and significance of life that approaches wisdom.

In a good hunter, the virtues of dedication and honor are well developed.

The good hunter dedicates himself to the lifelong acquisition of knowledge. Though most hunters wouldn't express it this way, the best hunter is a self-taught field biologist. He studies nature from the inside, his feet on the ground, alert, engaged, using an active intelligence. The best hunters I know, including Eskimos of northern Alaska, Athabaskans of interior Alaska, waterfowl hunters of the salt marsh, grouse hunters of the eastern hardwoods, deer hunters of the upper Midwest, all share this trait. In the best of these hunters, intelligence is in the ascendance, expressed as alertness and engagement: the active mind is dedicated to its task. I hold this ideal as a standard to which I aspire, but which I have not attained.

I also aspire to the form of dedication that is best named “courage.” As the ancients taught, possessing talent and intelligence, and possessing knowledge, including ethical knowledge, is worthless unless one has the courage to carry one’s talent, intelligence, and knowledge into action. The quality of courage begins with the small things, such as answering the alarm clock in the morning. The good hunter dedicates himself to carrying out his task, regardless of the intimidating forces to be found in the wilds: cold, wind, driving rain, deep snow, difficult terrain, darkness, fatigue. It is wise to extol this ideal of courage and perseverance in a culture that is wallowing in material comfort and self-indulgence. Not only do we not feel shame at our flabbiness; we elevate our easy hedonism into an ideal, claiming that the attainment of material comfort constitutes life’s highest achievement. To a person of honor, including the good hunter, this attitude is a perversion of what it is to be human.

I value the code of honor of the good hunter. The code includes simple things, like adhering to the rules of fair chase, and recognizing the restrictions of game laws. The good hunter needs no external monitor. More important, the code of honor takes its highest form in the relationship the hunter has with his prey. There is no honor in paying a slaughterhouse to do your killing for you, nor is there respect for the animal when it appears anonymously on your plate. The good hunter faces his prey without hypocrisy and without pretense. The moment when the hunter kills is a moment that is unmediated. The hunter takes full responsibility for ending the animal’s life; his relationship with his prey is direct, and the violence of the act and the death of the animal are naked facts unvarnished by hypocrisy and rationalization. This violence can be repellent and unsettling, to the hunter as much as to anyone, but to my mind it is far better to live honestly than to live by proxy, in a culture of voyeurs, where people’s sanitized lives are “lived” vicariously.

The paradox that is contained in the act of killing is ancient: one kills what one loves, for it is a fact that the good hunter loves the animal in a way that most people, who want their “natural” experiences sanitized, could never understand. The hunter’s relationship with the prey is utterly direct, unlike viewing animals on a television screen, through the bars of a zoo cage, through the windshield of your car in a National Park, or in some other abstract and theoretical way. Nature’s organisms consume nature’s organisms, it is false to pretend otherwise; and let’s remember that the television watcher, the zoo visitor, and the park motorist also want to exploit nature’s creatures for their own delectation.

No, it is not necessary to kill in order to act authentically. An authentic relationship with nature's creatures can be attained in other ways. Nor, on the other hand, is killing during the hunt morally equivalent to murder. Our sanction against murder is based on our belief in the sanctity of the human individual, and in our insistence that no individual can declare himself the tyrant who has the right to control—end—someone's life. In the natural world, however, it is the preservation of the species not the individual that is the rule of existence. If murder against the animal kingdom occurs, then the murderers are those who create the conditions that result in the extinction of species. Grave harm is done when a well-meaning but ignorant, and perhaps self-righteous, person wants to preserve the life of *this* deer, *this* individual, while remaining unaware of the health of the entire species. In our egotism, we project our human concern with the sanctity of the individual onto the natural world; *that* deer eating the shrubbery is a precious individual, we think; but the entire herd may suffer from malnutrition or starvation out of our sight—we can't see it from the dining room window—and we can muster no empathy whatsoever. Thus does self-righteousness and cruelty walk hand-in-hand.

When I move into the wilds as a hunter, I move into a world that has been transformed from the ordinary to the significant. What was yesterday simply a plot of forest becomes today a magic kingdom. When I hunt, I step out of the womb of civilization into another, perhaps more complete, reality. I step away from the artificial into the real, from the trivial into the meaningful. My surroundings are charged with significance, the very air itself infuses my lungs differently, I am prepared to see what is usually hidden from the human gaze, catch a glimpse of the secret lives that are being lived all around us all of the time, but of which we are unaware. And that sense of intense living endures steadily while I am on the hunt, whether or not I even so much as fire my weapon or release an arrow.

And when I leave the woods, I fear that I will slip back into the ordinary round of life, my mind yielding to habit, the daily round waiting to dull my existence, grind and flatten it to match the flatness of our homogenized modern lives.

If we drive hunting from modern life, or confine it to the privileged few, we will have taken yet another step towards flattening life in the direction of passionless safety. And if the hunting community continues its unthinking direction away from its natural allies—environmentalists, ecologists, protectors of habitat, advocates of healthy public lands—then we shall hasten our demise.