Obits for the Fallen Hunter: Reading the Decline—and Death?—of Hunting in America

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Only half a century ago, hunters claimed that the US was a nation born out of hunting, and the hunter was considered a national icon, a hero of national hegemony in settling the continent and dominating the world. How far the cultural currency of the hunter has fallen in less than 50 years is revealed in these five titles. They are among a new wave of books to reconsider the status and meaning of the hunter in America—attempts to unpack and, in some cases, rewrite the symbolic gear borne by the hunter. What these titles reveal, even as they try to defend the hunter, is a deep anxiety about hunting as a symbolic construct and its future as a sport in North America. Hunters are seriously worried that their pastime may be on the verge of disappearing altogether. In many ways, these titles read almost like obituaries for a dying sport.

Though hunting has long been a controversial sport, embroiled in contentious culture wars and identity politics, at no time since the Christian humanist critique of hunting in the Renaissance has sport hunting been so threatened, defensive, and diminished. The dwindling numbers of hunters in the US have made hunters feel increasingly persecuted, even brought to bay. Consider the facts, taken from the US Fish and Wildlife Services’ 2001 National Survey. Since the 1970s, the number of registered hunters in the US has fallen by almost one-half. Currently hunters make up only 6% of the US population. Since 1991, the number of registered hunters has dropped by more than one million, from 14 to 13 million, a decline of 7%. Over five times as many people—66 million Americans—now call themselves “wildlife watchers” than identify themselves as hunters (US Department of the Interior).

Many hunting experts predict that hunting may actually disappear. For example, Thomas Heberlein, a rural sociologist at the
University of Wisconsin–Madison, has written, “It is not out of the question that there will be no sport hunting... by the middle of the 21st century” (702–3). Given trends in social demographics, hunters fear that the future of their sport looks bleak.

What becomes apparent in these books, often unintentionally, is that the crisis in hunting is deeper than a public-relations problem or a shift in national demographics (country to city). It derives from the symbolic import of the sport of hunting itself—questions of masculine identity in America and the contested meanings of nature. As studies like Matt Cartmill’s *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (1993) and my own *Orion’s Legacy: A Cultural History of Man as Hunter* (1996) have shown, from Gilgamesh forward, hunting has carried special metaphorical significance in Western culture. Sport hunting is a cultural, not a natural, activity, and social values have been every bit as much a part of hunters’ equipment as they ride into the American woods as have been buckskin, Bowie knife, and rifle. This symbolic encumbrance defines the hunter as hero in his conquest of the beast and naturalizes discourses of conquest that can be deployed in such social venues as business, politics, settling the continent, defeating natives, and global expansion. This political trope—in the largest sense of the word—was also underwritten by a scientific discourse in the mid-twentieth century, in which evolution was theorized in terms of hunting. Hunting was for a time thought to have been the one unifying behavior that could explain the jump from hominid to hominoid—from ape to fully human. It was used to validate not simply the modern weekend hunter in his blaze-orange but, more significantly, predatory economic and social theories and imperialistic programs of global hegemony.

The identity crisis in hunting reflects shifts in American culture itself, in which these totalizing views of the hunter appear increasingly anachronistic and scientifically inaccurate. Culture seems to have outrun the hunter. Stripped of his cultural camouflage—his symbolic masks—the sport hunter has come to look less like a hero and more, as the titles themselves say, “a slob hunter.” The hunter-as-symbol is heavily involved in discourses of masculine identity and has figured prominently in historical contests over what it means to be an American male. Hunting has typically been an overwhelmingly masculine activity and remains so today, despite a growing number of women hunters in America.

Heavily inflected as a discourse of gender, hunting is now also in part about what it means to be an American woman—or, rather, an American feminist.

One of the common tropes of hunting narratives is the hunter being hunted. These books can be read in light of that trope. But it is
hunting, not the hunter, that seems hunted. The defensive, at times self-pitying, tone of these books is unmistakable as the hunter sees himself as cultural victim. Whether the hunter can disentangle himself (or herself) from his (or her) symbolic connections to masculine violence and national imperialism—whether most hunters even want to—is a genuine question. Even as they try to refashion the American hunter, to give him (or her) a new symbolic import to the nation, these books often deconstruct themselves. Plus, attempts to redefine the hunter lead directly to battles over the meaning of nature itself in an age of extinction and loss. And not many seem to grieve the hunter as a victim on the verge of disappearance.

2.

Two of the titles study hunting as it was historically constructed into a sport that could serve as a defining myth and metaphor of American identity—hunting as it became a cultural phenomenon, that is, not a natural one. Daniel Justin Herman’s Hunting and the American Imagination (2002) offers a compelling reappraisal of “America’s hunting myth.” It is a study of how a cultural activity has come to be seen as “natural.” Herman identifies the historical process by which American hunters gave their sport its uniquely American shape and symbolic register. He does this in the full awareness that the values that made the hunter a “hegemonic” figure and helped define American identity now epitomize what to many “is wrong with American culture: its celebration of machismo, weaponry, and death” (12).

Before he can demonstrate how the hunter came to serve as the “human banner for imperialism, laissez-faire individualism, and patriarchy” (xii), Herman has to strip the hunter of his pedigree as founder of the nation. This is part of the American hunting myth, constructed, according to Herman, in the nineteenth century and projected backward by the myth itself, especially in its most aggressive formulations by Theodore Roosevelt and the cult of the manly “strenuous life.” According to this mythical view of history, America is not only a nation of hunters. More basically, by virtue of their rugged individualism and close connection to nature, hunters handed the continent over to the Americans. The American hunting myth elevated the colonial hunter into a culture hero, opening up the continent to Americans and teaching American men who they were.

Herman argues persuasively that the hunter-as-hero did not exist in the colonial period but was a construct of the post-revolutionary nation to give itself a compelling identity. Hunting in the colonial period was not prized. Puritans demonized the hunter as “a fallen man: lawless, ignorant, cruel” (Herman 77) in anti-hunting
rhetoric derived from Christian humanists like Sir Thomas More. Puritans loathed sport hunting for political reasons as well, since it was the favored pastime of European princes like King James I/VI of England and Scotland. More significantly, the colonial hunter in America did not actually exist as such. According to Herman, the backwoodsman was not the same as a "hunter." The backwoodsman did not conceive of his life as a "hunter's" life but as a mix of activities, one of which was getting meat. It was not until the Revolutionary War that the hunter began to assume an identifiable American shape, so that discourses of the hunter came to be isomorphic with discourses of American male identity. Americans sought a hero to help them comprehend their nascent sense of national identity, and they turned to the image of the hunter. The figures of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were the first figures carefully defined as hunters—men who could possess the continent. Daniel Boone’s myth, argues Herman, molded the facts of the frontiersman’s life into a coherent shape, ignoring some of the more recalcitrant details, making him the “philosophical hero of the woods” and the emblem of a “proud, powerful, self-sufficient hunting folk” (77).

The interesting feature of the myth of Boone, and its literary embodiment in James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking, was its appeal to young men in the cities. Hunting was, paradoxically, a largely urban phenomenon—which explains why the current decline in hunting is not simply a matter of shifting American demographics from country to city. Described as “the author and artificer of his own fortunes” (104), Boone was the vehicle for a message that resonated with young men moving to a cutthroat capitalistic world in the cities. Herman describes the hunter as he naturalized American ethics. He calls this hunter the American indigene, or American native—the rightful inheritor of the continent from the dispossessed Native Americans. Roosevelt was the supreme American native. As a crucible of character, hunting showed how “the self-possessed hero triumphed over adversity without and anxiety within” (107). This “patriot hunter” taught Americans to see themselves “as a predatory, imperialistic, hunting nation” (121).

As these values have become increasingly problematic, Herman notes that now hunting, “to be blunt, seems backward” (282). Nevertheless, he hopes that hunting can purge itself of its ethics of conquest and violence. He concludes, somewhat weakly, that he hopes “hunting will not wholly be laid by” (282)—itself testimony to a lack of faith in the sport’s future.

Herman is not a hunter. Nor is Nicholas W. Proctor, whose Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South (2002) offers a critique of hunting without being expressly opposed to hunting. It emphasizes the centrality of the kill and the hunt’s use
in "mastery," especially in racist discourses. Proctor focuses on the
transformation of the colonial backwoodsman into the American
sport hunter, a process accomplished in large measure in the
South. His analysis focuses on hunting not as a myth, like Herman,
but as a cultural performance. The woods for southern hunters,
Proctor claims, were not really a school for learning Americanness,
but a stage. On that wild stage, hunters enacted a carefully scripted
drama that displayed the white male as worthy of rule—over
himself and his own passions, and over other humans, particularly
his slaves.

Proctor notes that the "sport hunter" in the South was con-
structed in explicit opposition to the backwoodsman and market
hunter. Perhaps the greatest irony about the American sport hunter
is that he intentionally kills animals not for meat but for their sym-

dolic value. The sport hunter takes his identity out of the animal he
kills. The southern sport hunter, Proctor shows—and Herman
makes similar points—was the man who did not hunt for meat and
mere utility, as did the market hunter and the "pot hunter." The
sport hunter distinguished himself from such mean pursuits. He
used hunting as a crucible of values that elevated him from prac-
tical concerns. The sport-hunting gentleman achieved his distinction
by following a set of rules, a sporting code, which meant enacting
set narratives that were elaborated in the sporting press. The two
most influential magazines, Spirit of the Times and American Turf
Register, emerged in the 1830s and showed hunting to be increas-
ingly associated with the landed gentry. "Defined by their adher-
ence to rules of sport (as defined by the sporting press)," writes
Proctor, "sportsmen transformed the hunt from a convenient
source of meat and hides into a rarefied form of recreation and
public display." The sport hunter became "a particularly southern
version of white manhood" (2).

By learning to control his own passions in the moment of the
kill—"a neatly bundled moment of prowess, self-control, and mas-
tery" (Proctor 69)—the hunter displayed the values required to rule
others. As such, southern hunting narratives become an effective
instrument for "the dissemination of...a particularly sentimental-
ized vision of slavery" (122). According to Proctor, slaves did not
hunt for sport but for practical reasons, unless they took their places
in sporting narratives as the often-frightened, slightly childish help-
ers of the masterly white hunters. For the white sporting gentlemen,
hunting was explicitly divorced from the household economy. And,
as Proctor notes, hunting remains "a symbol of masculine achieve-
ment" today, shackled, however, by its own symbolism, since "by
the end of the twentieth century, killing for pleasure alone had
become unpardonably unfashionable" (172).
3.

The final three titles are written by hunters who are explicit advocates for hunting, either in reasserting the old hunting values or arguing for new ones. Jacob F. Rivers III's *Cultural Values in the Southern Sporting Narrative* (2002) contrasts starkly with Proctor's study of the southern hunter. Rivers's book is an explicit defense of antebellum hunting. It is a stunningly blinkered and regressive view of hunting. Although conceived as a literary study of a regionalist literature, beginning about 150 years ago with William Elliott and William Gilmore Simms, the book is a literary study that defies literary theory and at the same time defies consideration of the implications of race and gender in sport hunting. He writes about his book: "there has been no attempt to employ contemporary theoretical discourse involving issues of political correctness" (xvii). Rivers offers a literary version of the hunter as an anti-intellectual and proud of it. The "ideal sportsman" (17), he says, is one who does his duty to his fellows and to nature. Yet Rivers locates this ideal figure in narratives in which "servants," with eyes "almost starting out of their sockets," must be rescued by masters (17). One would like to see Proctor's reading of race in these narratives. Rivers shows that, if you back a man with a gun into a corner, he is likely to start shooting.

Rivers's book has ambitions to be more than a history of a minor literary and regionalist genre. He wants to make some very large claims for hunting as the heritage of all humans; so despite his disavowal of theory, he marshals his own theorist on behalf of what he calls "hunting's indelible heritage" (xii). He draws heavily on José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher whose 1942 book *Meditations on Hunting* served for a time as a kind of bible of modern hunters. Ortega y Gasset argues that hunting returns humans to our Paleolithic and zoological origins. Hunting occurs "throughout the zoological scale" (Ortega y Gasset 46), and Paleolithic man had to "devote himself wholly to hunting." It was our "first occupation" and part of our "universal history" (118).

By the 1950s and 1960s, hunting as human origin became a privileged theory in anthropological literature and was given a scientific pedigree. This view of the role of hunting in human evolution climaxd in a 1969 conference and book of proceedings called *Man the Hunter* (1968), edited by Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore. The idea was popularized by a number of writers, perhaps most famously by Robert Ardrey in *The Hunting Hypothesis* (1976). According to this theory, human evolution—biological, behavioral, cultural—can be understood by hunting. Hunting wired into our genes certain traits and behaviors. As William S. Laughlin wrote
in “Hunting: An Integrated Behavior System” in *Man the Hunter*, hunting is “the master behavior pattern of the human species” (Lee and DeVore 311). Human reason and forethought, the sexual division of labor, cooperation among males, violence, war, and tool use were all the products of the evolutionary pressures of hunting. Hunting propelled us past the beasts and into humanity. As Ardrey put it, we became human because “for millions and millions of years we killed for a living” (11).

So overdetermined is this view of hunting that it could not long survive critique. Feminists were among the most critical. Mary Zeiss Stange’s *Woman the Hunter* (1997) clearly glances at this view of hunting, because she wants to take on one of its central features—gender. Reviewing the literature of feminist anthropologists, Stange shows how this overweening theory of the prehistoric hunter was critiqued. As many anthropologists have noted, it amounts to little more than a scientific “just-so story,” not so much explaining the past as projecting the present into prehistory. A theory of the violent origins of humanity fit well in explaining the circumstances of World War II and the Cold War. It also explained rigid gender roles in the middle of the century—man the hunter and woman the gatherer. But the problems are scientific and logical as well: if human reason and intelligence are the gifts of hunting, why are they shared by both men and women, when only men hunted? Evolution does not squander such gifts. Additionally, Richard B. Lee himself noted that hunting is not universal, as the theory claims. Modern hunting cultures sometimes devote as little as “only twelve to nineteen hours a week” to getting food (37). More devastating, as Lewis Binford noted in *Bones: Ancient Men and Modern Myths* (1981), protohumans were scavengers and prey before they were hunters. But man the scavenger is not as romantic as man the hunter.

For its theoretical hubris and scientific inaccuracies, anthropologists were led “to abandon the hunting hypothesis long ago” (Stange 57). Herself a hunter, Stange’s goal is to explain the growing role of women hunting, to carve out a theoretical place for the woman hunter. About one million women in the US now hunt. That is only 9% of all hunters, but the number is significant. As recruitment among young Americans dwindles, hunters now view women as the possible future of hunting. James Swan’s *In Defense of Hunting* (1995) is explicit on this score and has led to active campaigns to recruit women to save hunting. Stange wants to see these female hunters as something greater than the product of a particular historical moment, as feminism has opened up new avenues for women into formerly male arenas. She asserts that women hunters are not “merely another instance, in the afterwash of second wave feminism, of women entering into a previously male-dominated field” (1).
She claims instead that these women are “taking back something that began to be denied to us all, roughly ten thousand years ago, in the shift from hunter-gatherer to agrarian cultures that spelled the dawn of patriarchy” (1). She wants it to be part of the universal truth of hunting. Modern women are reclaiming a lost and prehistoric heritage, she says. She makes this claim after discrediting the hunting hypothesis. How can she have it both ways? How can women reclaim a tradition that she herself says no one believes in anymore?

It is much simpler and easier (think Occam’s razor) to understand modern women hunters as an expression of women’s greater access to power and to the symbols of power in the US. Stange acknowledges that hunting as a sport has always been about power, as much for women as it is for men. Queen Elizabeth I staged elaborate hunts during the Renaissance, when hunting for women was a passion and a fashion. Diane de Poitiers similarly cultivated a mythology around herself as la Diane chassereuse. The Greek myths of Actaeon and Orion, in their relations with Diana or Artemis, make hunting the vehicle for exploring the way power is distributed between the genders—largely, it is worth adding, in erotic terms. Herman makes the same point about women hunters in America, calling his chapter on the subject “Manly Men and Manly Women.”

*Woman the Hunter* is an intentionally polemical book, and the real prey are not animals, nor even men. The real argument is with women, specifically those feminists who link hunting to violence and masculinity—women like Susan Griffin in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) or Marti Kheel in *Animals and Women* (1995). In her fight with these “ecofeminists,” Stange makes it clear that hunting is always about gender—in this case, about what it means to be an American woman, or, more precisely, an American feminist.

The fight is engaged over the figure of Artemis, goddess of virginity, animals, and hunting. Stange, it turns out, wants to universalize women’s right to hunt both through prehistory and myth. She views Artemis not as a product of Greek culture but as expressing a universal truth about hunting. She writes that Artemis had a “powerful reality for women, rooted in archaic rites of blood-sacrifice and in the everyday realities of blood-knowledge,” adding that it is “tempting to evade the truths embedded in myth and ritual” (142). What is this “reality, or “truth,” of hunting? The answer is “blood-knowledge.” I return to this unappealing and unconvincing assertion at the end of the essay.

Hunting is facing an identity crisis, whether for male or female hunters. Jan E. Dizard faces the crisis in hunting most directly in *Mortal Stakes: Hunters and Hunting in Contemporary America*
His title is about hunting itself—it faces its own mortal stakes. But unlike Rivers or Stange, who are both aggressive in their very different views of hunting, a brooding pessimism pervades Dizard’s book. Also a hunter (he prefers upland birds), Dizard wonders why men and women would “embrace an activity that many view as anachronistic… Have hunters somehow failed to keep up with the times? Are they stuck in the past[,] just a bunch of ol’ boys?” (1).

Dizard interviews 38 New England hunters to answer these questions and argues, unsurprisingly, that hunters are not “unreconstructed jerks” (172). Still, he admits hunting needs defenders. Yet the book almost reads like a brief against hunting. He reviews the declining number of hunters and explores the demographic shifts in hunting. He notes the many problems with hunting, including shooting accidents and the so-called small war every fall in the woods. He describes families in which children of hunters become vegetarians, for example. “No one with whom I spoke,” he concludes, “could be said to be optimistic when it came to assessing the future of hunting” (172). Worse, the hunters indulge in what amounts to self-pity. One hunter even describes hunters themselves as an endangered species. Suddenly, these tough-minded hunters—realists when it comes to killing creatures—turn emotional about themselves. But describing themselves in terms of endangered animals is in itself galling, since hunting is primarily responsible for plunging several American species of animals into extinction, including the great auk, heath hen, Carolina parakeet, and, most famously, the passenger pigeon.

4.

Personally, I cannot work up much sympathy for hunters. Though I am not sorry to see hunting’s decline over the last few decades, I doubt that it is likely to die any time soon. With the growing militarism and the resurgence of imperialistic values in the country that have been so closely associated with hunting in the past, we might even expect hunting to stage a comeback. Yet in the debate over the ethics of modern hunting, there is embedded a debate about the contested meaning of nature itself.

Decent-minded hunters have been trying to alter the image and the ethics of sport hunting for about a decade or so. Writers like Richard Nelson in Heart and Blood: Living with Deer in North America (1997) or Ted Kerasote in Bloodties: Nature, Culture, and the Hunt (1993) have made pleas for a refoundation of hunting ethics on models supplied by Native Americans. Several of the titles in
this review referred to what might be called the “new hunter” in describing the changing meaning of hunting—a more spiritual or mystical relationship to nature.

How successful these writers have been in redefining hunting is questionable. Counter them with such men as the hard-rocker Ted Nugent, a fanatical bowhunter who shows no respect for the animals he kills and is as aggressive and violent as any nineteenth-century hunter. He uses Mafioso language to describe hunting, as if hunters were hitmen.

Vice President Dick Cheney himself reawakens old associations between American imperialism and an insatiable appetite for killing. Himself one of the country’s “big guns,” on 8 December 2003, Cheney visited a Rolling Rock Club near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to shoot pheasants. In what critics call a canned hunt, he and nine other hunters shot some 400 to 500 pen-raised pheasants released for them to kill. Cheney is said to have shot more than 70 of the ring-necked pheasants himself. Texas alone has more than 600 hunting ranches, also called “kill ranches,” where busy hunters can shoot essentially captive animals. As reported in the New York Times, Field and Stream editor Sid Evans said, “I don’t see anything terribly wrong with it” (Bumiller).

Hunters do not usually criticize such operations because they fear the slippery slope. These two stories illustrate an uncompromising insistence on killing. Despite recent efforts to soften the image of the hunter, hunters have to explain killing for pleasure. To do that, they make death central to their understanding of nature and animals. Ortega y Gasset, for example, condenses hunting into “an ethic of death” (89). The hunter’s major image for the animal becomes, finally, “blood.” It is metonymic for the creature, the sport, and the deepest truth of nature. The mysteries of life are reduced to the mysteries of killing. “Death is essential,” Ortega y Gasset writes in the most famous and most quoted passage of Meditations on Hunting, “because without it there is no authentic hunting. . . . To sum up, one does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted” (96–97).

Each of the four writers in this review who explicitly defend hunting (Proctor in Bathed in Blood does not) make the same move, trying to sanction an ethic of death as the fundamental truth of nature. The claim implies that hunting transcends culture and that the hunter is alone in his courage in facing the true realities of life—summarized in the death of animals. It is a predatory world: eat or be eaten. Hunters are realistic enough to face up to it. Darwinian language is often used to lend scientific authority to this view of nature. Never mind for the moment that hunters speak of a predatory world but never imagine themselves as potential prey. Only animals die. Hunters
are exempt from this predatory cycle so that the “sport” is entirely one-way. The game is stacked from the start against the “game.”

What about the 94% of the population who do not hunt? They are regularly figured as misguided victims of fantasies about life and nature. Not surprisingly, Rivers is the most insulting to—and mean-spirited about—non-hunters. If you are one of the 66 million Americans who prefers watching birds to killing them, you are a “second-hand environmentalist,” a “parlor naturalist” who prefers to “define actual human experience in terms of the abstract, arbitrary agenda of political correctness” (147). Hunters, however, face facts squarely, especially the realities of “evolutionary cause and effect” (148). How a hunter engages in evolution, when he is killing animals that are raised and protected by state game departments—or when they kill the biggest and most fit for trophies—is another question. This is not to mention hunters, like Cheney, who kill pen-raised birds. Stange makes a similarly arrogant move. Earlier I quoted her praise of “blood-knowledge” (142). She claims that this understanding of death enables humans to break through the screen of metaphor that mediates our relations to reality. “There are some realities,” she writes, with “death paramount among them—which cannot be reversed” (161); hunters are “disabused of attitudes grounded in fantasies about nature and dreams of the past” (161) This blast against fantasy comes from a writer who appeals to ancient goddesses and myth: “Artemis knows the way, but the only way she will take us there is as a hunter” (162).

Despite his attempts to be reasonable and balanced, Dizard falls into the same hunter’s trap. Speaking of bird watchers and garden feeders, Dizard cannot apparently resist a parting shot: “Though pure of heart, this sort of relationship with wildlife turns out to be as self-serving as hunting, but unlike hunting, it is deceptive, not honest, self-service. Because spectatorship falsifies our relationship to wildlife, it clouds our understanding….Sport hunting alone holds us to a higher standard” (207). But surely makes no sense. Is watching animals “false”? Does that make science false, since the scientific study of nature is based on careful observation? What does “honest… self-service” mean? That hunters are unflinching in their hypocrisy? That they must project their guilt onto bird watchers? No amount of finger pointing at the “pure of heart” will redeem hunters from the guilt they feel or bring birders down to their level.

The tough realism of the hunter is just as much a fantasy as anything hunters accuse non-hunters of doing. They try to dress their sport in Darwinian terms, but the view of nature is really Hobbesian—nasty and brutish. Their Darwinism is skewed in the same way that social Darwinism is a skewed attempt to justify predatory economic behavior. Darwinism posits a struggle for life, but Darwin himself is
clear that struggle is a complex interaction of climate, geography, adaptation, and population dynamics. It is not simply about predation.

Recentu, I traveled to the Galápagos Islands, the location most intimately associated with Darwin’s theory of evolution. In fact, it is often called a living laboratory of evolution. Research continues there to this day on “Darwin’s finches,” the seed-eating exemplars of evolution. These finches are not predatory. The greatest predation in the Galápagos was introduced by humans, the whalers and buccaneers who devastated the populations of iguanas and Galápagos tortoises. Those who visit these islands comment on the animals and their “tameness.” Darwin noted it, too, as he played with marine iguanas and rode the tortoises. Melville did as well. The animals are variously called tame, friendly, curious, silly, stupid, fearless. Sea lions swim up to you in the sea or walk up to you on the beach. Mockingbirds land on you. Blue-footed boobies let you approach to within inches. Over five million years of evolution without predators gave the creatures this wonderful tameness.

This intimacy with animals is deeply moving and utterly different from the violent “blood intimacy” praised by hunters like Ortega y Gasset (91). It is an intimacy that many people now long for as nature becomes more threatened and vulnerable, more driven into the remote corners of the world. Wildlife writer Peter Matthiessen describes the feeling well in The Birds of Heaven (2001). He is speaking about cranes in this passage: “Perhaps they will one day regain the confiding trust that is so moving in wild creatures of remote places which man reached very late, places such as the Galápagos [sic], or where for centuries man has honored a prohibition against killing, as in certain Buddhist regions of the Himalaya” (182). In our relations with animals, I find this ethic much more inspiring and noble than hunting.

The Galápagos Islands offer new lessons in human relations with animals, a different vision of nature, despite being the epicenter of evolutionary thought. No wonder the first Spanish name for these stark volcanic rocks was “Islas Encantadas,” the enchanted isles.

Works Cited


