CHAPTER 3

A SHOT IN THE DARK

The Dubious Prospects of Environmental Hunting

Hunters are often perceived to be environmentalists, as they are a major political force for protecting various ecosystems that support the game they pursue.¹ Take Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) as a case in point. It is a not-for-profit environmental organization that has 7,100 established habitat projects across Canada, where habitat is provided for waterfowl and 600 species of plants, insects, and animals.² The organization was founded in 1938 by sportsmen³ who enjoy killing the waterfowl in these environments.⁴ I want to show that there is a tension between (1) the obviously environmentally minded and commendable pursuit of preserving habitats and (2) the preservation of habitats to enable one to engage in the sport of killing members of species that live in these habitats. To do so, I will explore the relationship between hunting and environmentalism.

I will argue in this chapter that many standard defenses of hunting as an environmental practice fail. First, I will discuss the view that hunting allows humans to take on their natural role in ecosystems. Second, I will address the claim that hunting is the ideal method for learning to appreciate nature and morally relate to it. Third, I will call attention to the paradox of ethical hunting. The tenets of the sportsman’s code lead to a commitment not to hunt at all. Last, I will return to the tricky DUC Case, which we will be better equipped to handle following a sustained reflection on the relationship between environmentalism and hunting.
Taking On Your Natural Human Role
by Killing Non-Human Animals

It can be argued that hunting is natural and preserves the balance of nature. Some contend that the natural human role in ecosystems is as predator and consumer of non-human animals. Others claim that hunting is a way to preserve the balance of nature. I will counter these views through a discussion of the crippling, negative impacts of attempts to manage game animal populations of non-human animals, and current technological advances in hunting tools. Less a reminder of one’s membership in the biotic community, hunting is more a testament to humanity’s ability to dominate.

First, let’s get clear about what claims of “naturalness” amount to. “Natural” is a ubiquitous term that is often used to smuggle in claims of moral correctness. Proposing that hunting is a natural activity and that it is therefore a morally permissible activity is highly problematic. We can also say war is natural; this does not mean we actively advocate pursuing it or that we consider it a good state of affairs. We could say humans naturally manifest violence and greed; this does not mean we try to encourage these traits in our children. To say a thing is natural does not make it morally right. Claims to the moral rightness of hunting cannot depend on the claim of naturalness.

Unable to appeal to the naturalness of being hunters or the naturalness of predator–prey relations between human and non-human animals, one might instead contend that hunting keeps the balance of nature in check. The viability of this claim is called into question through the negative impacts hunting has on species’ well-being. For example, Lewis Regenstein notes that “Hunters and other forms of ‘wildlife management’ can adversely affect the evolutionary development of animal species: by seeking out and killing the largest and strongest animal of the herd (e.g., the 12-point buck or the bighorn ram) the hunter removes the best of the breeding population.” Hunters do not pursue the weak and the old. By destroying the animals most likely to survive harsh winters through removing the most genetically fit animals, how are hunters aiding the species? Moreover, given the central role individual members can play in their larger communities, the destruction of one member may have unpredicted negative impacts: “The loss of the leader of a wolf family, for example, can traumatize and disorient the pack for a long period.
of time, and affect its ability to survive and reproduce.” Again health and fitness may resultantly decrease, calling into question whether hunting contributes to the balance of nature.

Hunting is often defended as a method of population control. The role of hunting in regulating populations today is often predicated on the initial flaws of attempts to regulate populations. The over-hunting of predators is often the cause of the problem of now overpopulated species. A good example is with regard to deer populations:

A claim frequently made by hunters is that they are the conservationists, and are helping “balance the ecology” by preventing the overpopulation and starvation of wild animals. They conveniently ignore the fact that, in the few cases where deer actually do overpopulate, it is often because hunters have helped eliminate the deers’ natural predators, such as wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes.

Thus we can see that ecosystem health is likely best preserved by allowing species to self-regulate in the environments they inhabit. Peter Wenz argues that predators other than humans are often destroyed by hunters to ensure that they will have sizable enough game populations. As a result, “the modern hunter disrupts rather than helps maintain natural balances in the ecosystem.” To ensure hunters do not decimate prey animal populations, “predators of those populations are decimated, such as the wolf, formerly a predator of deer in Wisconsin.” The 1973 Senate Commerce Committee issued a report “recommending new legislation to protect endangered species. It stated that ‘the two major causes of extinction are hunting and destruction of habitat.’” There is something very wrong if we consider one of the two major causes of extinction – hunting – to be an effective method of population control.

Moreover, modern limitations on hunting and the creation of more efficient and lethal tools for hunting change the dynamic of hunting considerably. Aldo Leopold laments:

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The illegal kills, which are left to rot, help to illustrate another problem with some forms of modern hunting: today hunting is usually about sport, not survival. Further concerns arise when we consider the modern technology used. Leopold, a seasoned hunter himself, marked a net trend pointing “clearly toward more and more mechanization, with a corresponding shrinkage in cultural values.” If the mechanization for hunting is too sophisticated, the façade of fair chase crumbles. Given modern weaponry coupled with game reserves, the success of hunts is greatly increased. A sense of equal membership in the biotic community is hindered by hunters having highly efficient and damaging technology at their fingertips.

Discover Nature by Killing Non-Human Animals

Another defense of hunting is that it is an excellent method for learning about nature. Henry David Thoreau maintains that through interacting with nature via hunting one gains respect for one’s prey and is led to discontinue the practice of hunting. Such a view fails to account for more fruitful methods of facilitating respect for nature, such as becoming a naturalist.

Thoreau suggests hunting is a good way to introduce the young to nature, and he maintains that after this education humane hunters will leave off killing. He recalls such an introduction to nature himself:

I sometimes like to take rank hold of life and spend my day more as the animals do. Perhaps I have owed to employment and to hunting, when quite young, my closest acquaintance with Nature. They early introduced us to and detain us in scenery which otherwise, at that age, we should have little acquaintance. Fishermen, hunters, wood-choppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and wood, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation.

It is certainly true that those in direct contact with nature witness intricacies more readily than those who are not. Thoreau is correct in proposing that the teaching of ecosystem appreciation at an early age is elemental to producing an adult who has a bond with nature. It is crucial to cultivate an appreciation for the complex interworkings of the natural world.
But shooting at the very entities that compose nature is a rather strange way of doing this. Put simply, killing is not generally the best form of learning about others and manifesting respect for them. Consider an analogous argument applied to another natural species, namely, *Homo sapiens*. Entertain the absurdity of the following statement: I learned to respect human life and understand my relation with it by tracking *Homo sapiens*, learning of their surroundings and their behavior patterns, and then killing them for food.

Thoreau’s hope is that the student of nature “goes thither first as a hunter and fisher” until later, provided they have the “seeds of better life” in them, to identify the hunted creatures as proper objects of poetry or natural study “and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind”.¹⁷

We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more humane, while his education has been sadly neglected. This was my answer with respect to those youths who were bent on this pursuit, trusting that they would soon outgrow it. No humane being, past the thoughtless age of [girlhood or] boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that [she or] he does.¹⁸

Thoreau’s trust that humane humans exposed to hunting will soon outgrow it is far too idealistic. Raising hunters with an ethic that should eventually override the desire to hunt is not a wise way to educate our youth if a move away from hunting is the desirable end. Such an approach is counterproductive because the goal (not hunting) is pursued through encouraging contrary behavior (hunting). As an educational model one rarely first encourages the behavior believed to be non-ideal, in the hopes that a realization of its wrongness will grow out of performances of the non-ideal behavior. Analogously, consider the wrongheadedness of educating someone about the wrongness of theft by first encouraging them to learn the craft of thievery and then hoping that with time they will realize they should leave off this enterprise. It is a fault of our society that hunting is “oftenest the young [woman’s or] man’s introduction to the forest, and the most original part of [herself or] himself.”¹⁹ The introduction to the forest should be a far less destructive one.

Hunting is often thought of as a way for humans to create or renew awareness of our too often forgotten relationship with nature. However, there are many options other than destroying animals as sport or for food that can serve equally well for getting people immersed in nature: hiking, backpacking, camping, photography,²⁰ wildlife research,²¹ becoming a
naturalist, sketching, and participating in citizen science, to name a few. Such pursuits provide an opportunity to commune with nature in ways hunting does not, facilitating relationship and learning without killing. These activities also serve as counters to the claim that people who are against hunting do not want to get their hands dirty, wish to remove themselves from nature, and do not realize the fundamental truth of life is kill or be killed. Mucking about in a bog exploring the members of the ecosystem involves getting dirty, being in and of nature, and relating directly to it — the relation just is not one of killing. In response to the kill or be killed mantra, humans alone have the capacity to be ethically informed consumers. Some humans, that is, not those faced with limited access to non-animal food sources due to poverty or geographical location, need not kill non-human animals to survive comfortably. The death of others to ensure human survival is inevitable given our membership in the food chain and wider ecological systems, but there are choices regarding what sort of death is involved (be it of plants or animals). Although some hunters may know more intimately where the flesh that they eat comes from and pay closer attention to how those ecosystems function, a naturalist can have an equally intimate relationship with non-human animals and knowledge of ecosystem function.

The Paradox of Ethical Hunting

We must recognize that there are differently motivated hunters. Some hunt respectfully and depend on their prey for survival. Respectful hunting that is necessary for survival is morally permissible. All organisms are entitled to pursue their own survival. In circumstances outside of survival there is a hunting code of ethics meant to ensure ethical hunting practices. Paradoxically, however, premises of this code lead to the conclusion that hunting is morally wrong.

Hunting was once necessary for survival. In those circumstances, of course, hunting is permissible; we have a right to survive. Such hunting gains moral dimensions if it is done respectfully, which minimally involves following the basic code of hunting ethics that I discuss below. To understand the attempt to hunt ethically, we must look at both the methods of killing non-human animals and the motives initiating the killing. Eugene Hargrove writes:
Tribes often had customs according to which they asked the forgiveness and understanding of wild animals that they killed for food. Such customs or traditions, however, did not survive in Western civilization, in which a tradition of sport killing of wildlife for pleasure, not food, developed instead. The hunter, according to this tradition, derives enjoyment from the killing [of] animals without any feeling of guilt.\textsuperscript{25}

Hargrove over-generalizes here, painting all hunters with the same brush. There are hunters that hunt for the sheer pleasure derived from it. E. Donnell Thomas responds to hunting naysayers with: "In short, we have become a society of secular Puritans, reading evil into just about anything that anyone could possibly do just for the hell of it."\textsuperscript{26} There are hunters that hunt to have an experience in nature that involves predatory relations, but may well also involve remorse. Consider Thomas McGuane's reflection that: "Nobody who loves to hunt feels absolutely flunky-dory when the quarry goes down. The remorse spins out almost before anything."\textsuperscript{27} The point I wish to take from Hargrove is that to the extent that hunting is a recreational pursuit where pleasure is derived from the act of predation and killing, it is not a morally sound act. This is because unnecessary harm is caused to an animal (pain, death, maiming), potentially their kin (an animal with young), and potentially to the species (removing the fittest members). Killing unnecessarily is immoral because it is an act of unnecessary destruction; others are harmed without good reason. We must ask what the specific reasons are for hunting today, being mindful not to borrow romantic historical notions that no longer apply. Aldo Leopold shares in Hargrove's concerns about modern hunting:

Take a look ... at any duck marsh. A cordon of parked cars surrounds it. Crouched on each point of its reedy margin is some pillar of society, automatic ready, trigger finger itching to break, if need be, every law of the commonwealth to kill a duck. That he is already overfed in no way damps his avidity for gathering his meat from God.\textsuperscript{28}

There is ample reason to question idealized notions of hunters communing with wilderness, taking from it one buck with one shot, in the great glory of nature.

Now I will focus on ethically concerned hunters who follow the sportsman's code. These hunters are faced with the self-defeating nature of the code. Brian Luke outlines the primary rules of the sportsman's code: "SC1. Safety first; SC2. Obey the law; SC3. Give fair chase; SC4. Harvest
the game; SC5. Aim for quick kills; SC6. Retrieve the wounded.” Of note is that “the code as a whole entails a strong principle calling for the minimization of the harm done to non-human individuals.” This is evident through rules to lessen the pain inflicted by hunting (quick kills, retrieving the wounded), therefore showing a concern for the animals themselves. A hunter is no more successful in achieving a kill by killing quickly as opposed to, say, torturing the animal; either way, the animal ultimately ends up on her/his plate. The concern present in the code for limiting animal suffering shows concern for the animal itself.

According to Luke, this concern for the animal’s well-being, when brought to full fruition, would eventually cause one who upholds the code to give up hunting altogether. The end result is the valuing of an animal for its own sake (rather than for its sake relative to human consumption and/or desire for an entertaining recreational pursuit). Luke tells the story of a hunter who fatally wounded an elk and pursued it for 30 consecutive days to retrieve it: “Viewed in this way, rules SC5 and SC6 are not abstract injunctions to minimize suffering in the aggregate; rather they represent the hunter’s sense of personal responsibility for the suffering of the specific individual that they shot.” This case serves as evidence that the hunter’s code contains concern for the well-being of the animal itself; hunters following the code wish to avoid causing unnecessary pain. “Of the six parts of the sportsman’s code,” only SC1–3 can be given a reading solely concerned with the hunter’s well-being; the rest of the code presumes “a recognition of the intrinsic value of individual animal lives and a sense of personal responsibility for minimizing one’s imposition of animal suffering.”

SC5 and SC6 are what lead to the essential contradiction of the sportsman’s code. “The commitment to avoid causing unnecessary pain implies leaving healthy animals alone, not just shooting them more carefully, the rules hunters have developed to prescribe how to hunt ethically presume principles that pointedly raise the question of whether to hunt at all.” It follows from SC5 and SC6 of the code that on the face of it hunting is wrong. Hunters’ ethics are paradoxical because “hunters become more ethical by hunting in a way that is sensitive to the animal’s interest in avoiding pain and continuing to live; nevertheless, this very sensitivity and respect for animals entails that hunting is not justifiable, that even true sportsmen are not acting ethically.” In response to the paradox one can choose to embrace it, renounce the code, or renounce hunting. One could also claim that although one has an interest in minimizing some suffering, this interest need not expand to a desire to end all
unnecessary suffering. However, to the extent that hunters adopt a code of ethics that manifests care for those they kill, they will have to provide independent argument as to why the care they show stops short of a limitation on killing the non-human animal. Furthermore, the harm inflicted can reach beyond the particular animal killed; it can apply to its young, mate, and the entire pack if the role of the animal killed was a vital one for their success as a group.

Hunting and Environmentalism

Now I will return to the claim that hunters are indeed environmentalists. I have argued against the views that hunting preserves the balance of nature and that hunting is an ideal introduction to nature. I have also described the paradox of ethical hunting. DUC is a hunting group lobbying for the preservation of wilderness that manifests a desire to ensure the survival of the species it hunts. One problem with its stated aims is that the places to be “preserved” are specific and limited. Also, to save a thing for use is not the same thing as saving it for its own sake. Ecosystem preservation for making certain species available for recreational killing results in a game reserve, an area where a crop of organisms are made available for human consumption. Although habitat preservation is achieved by DUC, the motivation is primarily for hunting – it is not an act that manifests an appreciation of species and ecosystems for their own sake. The underlying motivations of environmentalists, those who recognize the inherent worth of species and ecosystem health, differ from those of hunters. When environments and particular species are saved for hunting purposes, it is to ensure game production for future slaughter. The desire for non-human animals as human food/entertainment is the central concern. Although the practical actions advocated by hunters and environmentalists may overlap at times, the underlying motivations are importantly different. Hunting is often done at the expense of species fitness. Also of worry is the fact that only environments that produce desirable game for sport are “worth” saving. Moreover, it has been shown hunting is not the best means for generating respect for non-human animals.

In summary, claims about the naturalness of hunting are deeply problematic. There is much contrary evidence against the claim that hunting preserves the balance of nature, including harms to species fitness via
hunting, hunting being one of the primary causes of extinction, and the failure of hunting as an effective method of population control. Current hunting technology is so effective that hunting is less a reminder of humanity's role in a healthy web of life, and more a testament to humanity's ability to dominate. Claims that hunting is the best method for learning about nature are met by the absurdity of applying this line of reasoning to learning about, say, human animals. I presented alternative methods for respectful engagement with nature and gathering knowledge. Ethical hunting is paradoxical. Components of the sportsman’s code make evident a concern for the animal itself. This concern, if brought to full fruition, would result in the cessation of hunting. It turns out that the assumption that hunting and environmentalism automatically go hand in hand is fraught with difficulty.38

NOTES

1 I wish to flag here at the outset that my discussion of hunting in what follows applies primarily to hunting as practiced in North America within a Western tradition. My critique applies only to this group. Indigenous hunting, and the practices associated with it, would require a far different philosophical analysis.


3 I follow suit with common terminology such as “sportsman” and the “sportsman’s code” but I’d be negligent not to note the gendering of hunting language, and how pronounced it is. This is a topic worthy of independent study which, unfortunately, time and space do not allow for here.


7 Ibid., p. 14.

8 I take this as a manifestation of hubris regarding human abilities to manage the complexity of ecosystems.


10 I should qualify this by saying we should, of course, seek to remedy or minimize the destruction that occurs through human involvement (e.g., the
havoc that can ensue following the introduction of invasive species). Doing this well requires great humility, though.


12 Ibid.


15 Ibid., p. 181.


17 Ibid., p. 159.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Wildlife photography as an ethically superior alternative to hunting is discussed by Jonathan Parker in chapter 13 of this volume.

21 This is a suggestion made by Aldo Leopold in A Sand County Almanac, p. 184.


23 The moral justification for adopting a solely plant-based diet is derived from (1) the desire to minimize the negative environmental impact of obtaining protein from non-human animals – see Francis Moore Lappé's Diet for a Small Planet (New York: Ballantine, 1971) – and (2) the desire to minimize pain.

24 I am here thinking of Karen Warren's description of respectful hunting in "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," in Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, George Sessions, Karen J. Warren, and John Clark (eds.) Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2001), pp. 322–42. She recalls a story of a Sioux elder whose son was sent to learn "Indian ways" from his grandparents (p. 338). As I read the account, it is one where the hunting is necessary and thus morally permissible. The boy was taught "to shoot your four-legged brother in his hind area, slowing it down but not killing it. Then, take the four-legged's head in your hands, and look into his eyes. The eyes are where all the suffering is. Look into your brother's eyes and feel his pain. Then, take your knife and cut the four-legged under his chin, here, on his
neck, so that he dies quickly. And as you do, ask your brother, the four-legged, for forgiveness for what you do. Offer also a prayer of thanks to your four-legged kin for offering his body to you just now, when you need food to eat and clothing to wear" (p. 338). This sense of reverence seems essential for manifesting adequate respect.  


28 Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, p. 166.  


31 Ibid., p. 32.  

32 Ibid.  

33 Ibid.  

34 Ibid., p. 33.  

35 Ibid.  

36 Ibid., p. 39.  

37 Ibid.  

38 I wish to thank Nathan Kowalsky, Darren Abramson, Wayne Myrvold, and Michelle Willms for their comments on earlier drafts.