HUNTER'S ★HORN

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Staying Relevant

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The reasons we hunt go far beyond enjoying the outdoors or spending time with friends. The deeply personal motivations that lead us afield and the sense of connection with our quarry are much more difficult concepts to put into words.

BY SHANE P. MAHONEY

We need to convey a clearer message about hunting's benefits to the non-hunting community.

The desire to understand our place in nature is an ancient human preoccupation, arising long before our earliest recognized civilizations. Indeed, the emphasis given to this by hunter-gatherer societies, our longest and most successful social enterprise by far, gave rise to the extraordinary world of myth and ritual that are among the great hallmarks of our humanity. In this sense, it can be argued that modern art and religion were born in a womb of uncertainty, an intense and shadowed place where man's sense of uniqueness conflicted with his inescapable dependence upon the wild others he pursued and killed. It would appear little has changed, and modern debates over our dual citizenship, as both nature's consumers and custodians all, are unlikely to go away anytime soon.

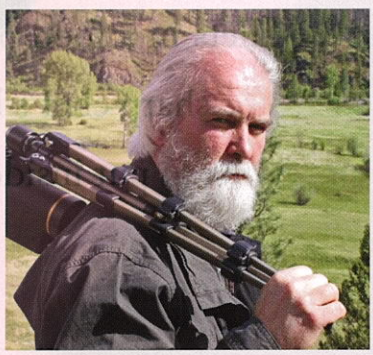
In this conceptual struggle, hunting has emerged as one of the most contentious issues of all. Why in the modern world, it is asked, should the willful pursuit and taking of wild creatures be allowed? Obviously, for many people, experiences with wildlife can include the stalking and voyeuristic capture of the animal, visually or with camera, but not extend to predatory engagement. Many individuals thus condemn hunting as an anachronism and unnecessary cruelty. By focusing on the animal's death, they come to condemn the hunting process that leads to it. While it may be convenient for hunters to condemn such ideas outright, or ascribe them to a fringe "animal rights crowd," the reality is that many people who hold such oppositional views towards hunting are neither fringe elements nor animal rights activists. They simply don't see any societal value in hunting, and therefore see the pain and death of wild creatures that result as unnecessary and unacceptable.

Many of these individuals care deeply about wildlife and conservation. In this sense, they rightfully deserve both our respect and willingness to explain. They are, after all, on our side — though not on the same team. If they are led to honestly ask us, "Why do you hunt?" and "What relevance does hunting have today?" then I believe, as hunters, we have a responsibility to answer truthfully. But this, it appears, is not such an easy task. Most often, hunters respond to the question of "why" by explaining some of the benefits they personally derive while hunting, rather than the deeply personal motivations that lead them to pursue it. Thus, they will cite time outdoors, or the exercise benefits, or the opportunity to spend some time with friends and family as the reasons for their hunting activities — to which the opponents of hunting respond, but why do these things need to end in the death of a beautiful creature? Can you not derive these pleasantries without killing things? The truthful answer, of course, is we can and often do.

These perspectives obviously frustrate hunters, believing as we do that our engagements with wild animals lead us to become elite advocates for their conservation and protection. We see the economic and political support that hunters have so long provided as critical to wildlife. We further point out that under many circumstances hunting can help reduce negative wildlife impacts that can undermine crucial public support for this resource. We point to animal diseases, threats to human property and safety, and habitat destruction or alteration as just some of the negative impacts that unrestrained wildlife populations, native or invasive, can inflict on society. Hunting, we argue, can help deal with these issues, at no cost to the taxpayer. So, doesn't everybody win? And if hunters don't do this, who will?

This is all true, at least in part. Unfortunately for hunting, there are also many exceptions to these arguments. In fact, we hunt only a tiny percentage of the wildlife species in North America. Most animal populations rise and fall with no influence from hunting whatsoever, and relatively few examples of hunting effectively regulating animal populations can be found. Furthermore, many hunted species have reached incredible numbers, far beyond what hunting can reasonably control. Certainly, it is true that hunters, through license sales and tax levies, do fund an incredible array of conservation programs, supporting game and non-game species management and research, and purchasing extensive amounts of habitat for biodiversity in general. However, considerable public funding from general revenues is also applied to wildlife conservation in North America, often far more than hunters are aware of or will acknowledge. Yet, there can be no doubt that, per capita, hunters pay the greatest freight, and this fact we emphasize too little.

So, where does this leave us? It leaves us in desperate need of a more fundamental debate and dialogue on the issues of why we hunt and the relevance of hunting in modern times. It may be fashionable or convenient to reduce arguments in favor of hunting to simplistic categories or half-truths, but in the end these arguments will fail us where it matters most: in the fight for the hearts of the public majority who still support hunting, for the support of those who may be opposed but are truly open-minded, and for our own lifelong commitments to our greatest engagement with nature. In support of hunting, we need strong, clear arguments, based on real evidence and delivered with enlightened passion. What organization will rise to lead this charge, I wonder? ★



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