Restoring the Older Knowledge
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by Ted Kerasote

In America, and in general, we dislike hunters. We dislike them because they use tools of destruction. And we dislike them because they kill beings who win our affections-mammals and birds rather than fish. Even those who want to engage the values of primalness often dislike the hunter because he insists on getting blood on his hands whereas most of us are satisfied with less graphic measuressongs, drums, a simple walk through the trees. Most important, though, we dislike hunters for their dishonesty-for how their actions do not live up to their claims that hunting is a noble and conscientious activity.

Some hunter advocacy groups claim that these accusations are no more than perceptual problems, rooted in animal-rights literature and urban people's diminished connection to tools like firearms, to land and animals, and to natural cycles. Such arguments have a shade of validity as well as a great deal of smoke screen behind which to avoid the truth: the hunting community has denied the character of many of its members and until very recently has refused to addressdeeply, with commitment, and spiritually-what constitutes appropriate behavior toward animals.

. This denial is no longer being tolerated, just the way our nation, in fits and starts, will no longer tolerate racism, the actions of the alcoholic behind the wheel, abuse within the home, or the unsustainable use of the commons. Intolerance of the hunting community comes about not only because trophy hunters make headlines when they're prosecuted for violations of the Endangered Species Act or hunters in the pay of sporting goods manufacturers are convicted of shooting elk in Yellowstone National Park while making hunting videos. It is not only these egregious violations of the law that infuriate the public. Additionally, it is how, on a thousand days in a thousand ways, we witness what Steven Kellert has called the "dominionisticlsport hunter" act with a callousness that debases everything hunters say about hunting's being a sacred connection to our Paleolithic roots.

Kellert's 1978 survey sampled hunters across the nation and found that 38.5 percent were what he termed the" dominionisticl sport hunter." Often living in cities, these hunters savor competition with and mastery over animals in a sporting contest. Another 43.8 percent of the sample Kellert called "utilitarian/meat hunters" -people interested in harvesting meat much as they would a crop of wheat. And 17.8 percent of the survey he termed "nature hunters." The youngest segment of the hunting population, these individuals know the most about wildlife, and their goal is to be intensely involved in nature through hunting.

Unfortunately, it has been the dominionisticlsport hunter, even though he represents less than 40 percent of American hunters, who has often set the image for the rest of the hunting community. Despite hunters' best efforts at educating the public about the hunter's role in conserving habitat and species, it is this group's behavior that the public remembers when they hear the word hunting. Not only are this group's actions highly visible, but as a group they may very well represent more American hunters than Kellert's study leads us to believe.

Indeed, they may represent a great many nonhunters. The developer who fills a wetland, the homeowner who spreads toxic herbicides on her lawn, everyone of us who continues to support mono culture forests, agribusiness, and animal factory farms-all participate in a type of dominionistic mastery over wildlife and nature. Often, because the effects of such practices occur far away from our daily lives and in the form of what economists call "externalities" -birds, small mammals, and reptiles gobbled up by combines and poisoned as nontarget casualties of pesticides-we can ignore their enormous destruction. On the other hand, the dominionistic hunter's actions are visible, premeditated, and often discomforting, but they ,are in keeping with the fundamental beliefs of the culture that has bred him. When his worst colors show, he can easily become our scapegoat, one who, like an oft reprimanded child, seems to revel in ever more unruly behavior.

As a committed hunter, I say this with regret. I say this with embarrassment. And I say this with frustration. Whereas the hunter was once the teacher and shaman of his culture, he is now the boor. And I'm forced to emphasize this point because on so many days in the field I myself have seen the average hunter bend the rules

of fair chase and even the laws of the land-spotting game from aircraft, chasing animals with vehicles, or shooting on the evening before the season opens. On so many occasions such dubiously taken animals end up in the record books, our record-keeping organizations paying only lip service to the standards they have set. I have seen downed hen mallards left to float away so they wouldn't be included in the day's bag limit, and the hHnters I have been with only grudgingly retrieve them when their obvious disregard has been pointed out. Some of my own neighbors have taken bucks on their girlfriends' tags; around my home two mule deer, an elk, three antelope, and a black bear with triplets were poached during the last few years; several coyotes were hung on a fence to rot because they were, well, "just coyotes"; and most recently one of Yellowstone's reintroduced wolves was shot because it was "just a wolf." But these aren't real hunters, goes the hunting community's old saw, these are the lawbreakers, these are the people who indulge in inappropriate behavior.

On the contrary, I believe that these individuals are hunters and that their attitudes are founded in the same values that Americans have held about the commons: namely, take as much as you can before it's used up. For a century and a half, starting slowly with the writings of Henry David Thoreau and gathering speed with the forest and park campaigns of John Muir, the American conservation movement has tried to alter the consciousness of use-itup-and-move-on. For hunting, this change in consciousness was initiated by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887, with his founding of an organization of ethical hunters called the Boone and Crockett Club. Their invention of the idea of "fair chase," while needed to stop the indiscriminate slaughter of wildlife for the restaurant and millinery trades, only began to create a genuine hunting ethic, the rough design for what Aldo Leopold would later call "the land ethic," and what I'm calling appropriate and compassionate behavior toward nature.

However, a hundred years after Roosevelt transformed the nation's leading hunters into some of its most effective conservationists, the most compelling ideas about our evolving relationship with animals come not from hunters but from nonhunters and even antihunters. Indeed, the story of the modern hunter as the best of conservationists often seems, at least to this hunter, like an exhausted myth.

In part, this myth says that it is hunters who are active and fit, and who know nature and wildlife best. However, if you visit the forests during hunting season, you find the roads full and the backcountry largely empty, many hunters "camped" in RVs full of amenities. When hunters are asked to support the creation of legally designated wilderness areas in which hardy recreation takes place (and the places that are irreplaceable wildlife habitat), they often choose to side with the so-called wise use movement and others who want to build roads through the last remaining wild country.

The old hunting myth goes on to say that the hunter is a disciplined, reluctant taker of life. Yet if this were the case, why are so many of my nonhunting neighbors afraid to go into the woods during hunting season? Perhaps it's because there are too many hunters who resemble the fellow I met several years ago on a trail. I asked how he had done. He replied that he hadn't seen any elk but that he had taken" a sound shot." His disregard for the suffering he might have caused was borne out a few years later when, not far from my house, one elk hunter shot and killed his good friend when the friend bugled.

The myth goes on to say that hunting is a courageous and sometimes dangerous activity. The sporting press has been particularly fond of painting this picture. However, with the advent of nature docunessed the behavior of wildlife that is not being threatened. After you have fished fifty feet from several brown bears in Alaska, and come to no harm, it is difficult to believe that shooting one is either a courageous or a dangerous activity.

It is often said that hunters hunt to return to a world of origins, simplicity, and honest interaction with nature. But when you look at hunters, especially bowhunters, in the pages of sporting magazines, in the equipment catalogs, and in the woods, they look like a cross between Darth Vader and a commando. If you go to one of the annual trade shows that display new outdoor equipment, a hundred people a day will try to sell you a new hearing aid, a new camouflage pattern, a new scent, cartridge, or bow that will improve your chances of getting game, and too few hunters question the replacement of skill and intuition by gadgets.

Of course, using improved technology to enhance survival has been one of the hallmarks of our species since ancient times. Does this inventive tradition mean that we are permitted no room to discriminate between laser sights and atlatls? Developing codes that distinguish appropriate from inappropriate technology is one of the challenges hunters need to face and have not.

All these examples show the discrepancy between who hunters claim to be and who their actions demonstrate that they are. Many outdoor people, including backpackers, canoeists, climbers, and skiers, have noticed that the hunter hasn't cornered the market on nature lore, woods savvy, or hardihood. In fact, he is frequently lacking in them.

Actions also speak louder than words when it comes to the hunter's relationship with the animals he kills. When the hunting community, believing that it can't lose any form of what it calls "hunting," refuses to denounce such activities as shooting live animals for target practice or for competition, its moral stature vanishes.

The image of the hunter as a farseeing conservationist also comes into question when hunters and agencies that represent them refuse to consider the idea that some wild species, not typically eaten as food, might no longer be hunted. These would include brown bears, wolves, and coyotes. Hunters tend to reject such proposals as radical thinking, yet they are increasingly being floated by sportsmen themselves. Indeed, they evolved out of the ideas of some farseeing hunters at the end of the nineteenth century who suggested that certain bird species should remain immune from pursuit. In its time, this suggestion seemed ridiculous to some of the hunting community. It is now unquestioned.

Finally, the American male hunter has been resistant to incorporating women into his activities, mostly because women have stricter rules about which deaths are necessary for the procurement of food, and which are no more than gratuitous, based on fun or the gratification of ego. Men fear that women hunters would close down the sorts of hunting that can't be morally justified.

Given this list of grievances, is it possible to reform hunting? One must also ask the larger question: Is hunting worth reforming? The first question is one of logistics, the second one of sentiment. Logistically, hunting can be reformed, given what reforms most thingsenergy, time, and money. However, whether hunting is worth reforming depends on how you feel about animals. If you believe that humans can exist without harming animals-that we can evolve to the point that death is removed from the making of our foodthen hunting is indeed a relic. If you believe that human and animal life is inextricably linked, and that the biology of the planet demands and will continue to demand that some life forms feed others, then hunting not only is part of that process but also has the potential to serve as a guide to how that process might be most conscientiously and reverentially undertaken.

I believe that hunting can be reformed and is worth reforming, and I offer these suggestions on how to do it.

First and foremost, the hunting community and wildlife agencies need to find money and staff to provide more rigorous hunter education programs. Biology, forest management, expert marksmanship, and ethics would be covered in far greater depth, and a stiff field and written test passed before a hunting license was issued. Part of this course would examine the pros and cons of ecosystem management and wilderness designation, so that hunters might become a constituency for keeping habitat undeveloped.

This will be an extremely difficult task, given that a more stringent program will eliminate some hunters, which of course will decrease funding for agencies and profits for the sporting industry. If more stringent hunter education is to succeed, agencies will have to find additional funding besides the current bargain basement prices of licenses, and objections from the hunting and outdoor equipment industries, not eager to lose customers, will have to be met.

Nonetheless, there are ways to overcome the loss of revenue associated with a reduction in the hunting population. A hunting license remains one of the most inexpensive forms of recreation in North America today. If, for argument's sake, the number of hunters in the United States was reduced by half, couldn't license prices be doubled to make up the difference? A deer license that was seventeen dollars would become thirty-four dollars and still be a bargain. Could gun, clothing, and outdoor equipment manufacturers raise their prices twofold and maintain sales? Unlikely. But outdoor equipment could be taxed, as guns and fishing tackle now are, to produce revenues for wildlife that isn't hunted. As well, a small income tax could be levied for wildlife care and research.

Second, de-emphasize the record book and the pursuit of trophies for the trophy's sake. This is not to say that animals will no longer be admired and that taxidermists need be put out of business. Rather, we would stop valuing animals by so many inches of horn or antler. I would also suggest that if records must be kept as a way of honoring animals, only animals are listed, not hunters. In addition, hunters might initiate a completely new form of record keeping, one that honored the greatest amount of wildlife habitat conserved.

Third, hunters need to speak out against competitions that involve shooting animals-deer, pigeons, coyotes, prairie dogs, you name it. Such gaming shows a gross disrespect for animals and has nothing to do with hunting.

Fourth, managers and communicators need to consider reshaping the terminology they use. Sport and recreation, the terms that distinguished conservationist hunters like Roosevelt from the market hunters who participated in the decimation of buffalo and waterfowl, have become pejorative terms when used with reference to killing animals. They are unacceptable to many in the environmental movement, who are

not opposed to hunting if it is done with care, and many nonhunters, including vegetarians, who have been ambivalent about hunting but who can understand the activity as a "least harm option" when compared to agribusiness and the domestic meat industry. Perhaps hunters can call themselves simply hunters.

Likewise, the words consumptive, which has been used to describe hunters, and nonconsumptive, which has been attributed to birdwatchers and backpackers, need to be discarded. They are divisive terms, and consumptive is increasingly going to have a negative sign over it. Besides, consumptive and nonconsumptive, like sport and recreation, aren't the most precise terms with which to conceptualize these issues. Should the hunter who hunts a deer ten miles from his home be called a consumptive resource user, and his neighbor who flies ten thousand miles to Antarctica to watch penguins be termed a nonconsumptive user of the planet's resources? The entire hunting debate needs to be reframed in terms of an individual's impacts on regional, national, and global wildlife.

Fifth, the hunting community must open the doors of hunting to women: in its practice, in its ideas, and in its administration. "Man the Hunter" has been a great sound bite for anthropologists who believe that hunting has been one of the primary shapers of human character, but women-helping to stampede bison and mammoths over cliffs, skinning animals, making clothing, and gathering vegetables and herbs-worked just as hard, if not harder, to keep the species alive. Indeed, if women anthropologists had been doing most of the research, hunting peoples over most of the temperate globe might have been more accurately labeled "gatherer-hunters" rather than "hunter-gatherers." Either way you choose to read it, both genders contributed to the evolution of our species, and it would be healthy if, today, they participated more equally in all the tasks of living, from raising children to growing and killing food. Until women restore their sympathies to hunting's fundamental lifegiving, life-respecting aspects, and have a hand in reducing its elements of machismo and competition, hunters will be fighting an uphill losing battle. It is women who will vote hunting out of exIstence.

Sixth, hunters need to participate in more realistic population planning and immigration policy. At current birth rates, and along with legal and illegal immigration, the United States will have four hundred million people by the year 2080. There will be almost no room left for wildlife. We need to examine our policies on tax credits for bearing children, on teenage sex education, and on the availability of birth control. The United States has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the developed world. Denmark, with equally sexually active teenagers, has one of the lowest. Ignoring the issue of population control, as most everyone in North America does, will lead to the inexorable loss of wildlife habitat, wildlife, and hunting as we know it.

Seventh, hunters need to publicize a more accurate cost accounting of American diets. Millions of North America's hunters hunt locally and put a substantial amount of food, in the form of venison and birds, on their families' tables. In terms of their consumptive effect on the total environment, some of these hunters-who don't use large amounts of fossil fuel to go hunting-can have less impact than supermarket vegetarians whose entire diet consists of products from America's intensively managed and fossil-fuel-dependent industrial farms, where wildlife gets killed from pesticides, combining, and habitat loss.

To illustrate this idea, one must compare the kilocalorie cost of different diets. An elk shot near a hunter's home in the Rocky Mountains incurs a cost to planet Earth of about eighty thousand kilocalories. This includes the energy to produce the hunter's car, clothing, firearm, and to freeze the elk meat over a year. If the hunter chooses to replace the amount of calories he gets from 150 pounds of elk meat with rice and beans grown in California, the cost to Earth is nearly five hundred thousand kilocalories, which includes the energy costs of irrigation, farm equipment, and transportation of the food inland from the coast. It does not include the cost to wildlife-songbirds, reptiles, and small mammals-killed as a by-product of agribusiness. Their deaths make the consumer of agribusiness foods a participant in the cull of wildlife to feed humans.

Even when we understand these trade-offs, it's not always easy to make clear or compassionate choices about our diets. The elk in the forest, the tuna at sea, the rabbits lost as the combines turn the fields to provide us with our natural breakfast cereals, as well as the Douglas fir hidden in the walls of our homes and the wildlife displaced to light and heat our buildings with fossil fuels or hydropower-all are foreclosures. Every day, consciously or not, we close down one life after another, a constant, often unwitting choice of who will suffer so that we may continue living. Given this reality, what one animalrights scholar has called "the condition of being an imperfect being in an imperfectible world" and the difficulty of escaping from it completely, we may attempt to do the least harm possible to other life. Virtually always, this means finding our food more locally. In some home places such a discipline would still include hunting, in other home places organic farming, in some places both.

No matter our sentiments about animals, hunters and nonhunters

remain in this dynamic system together. All the accusations that may be fairly leveled against the American hunter-greedy, thoughtless, lazy, consumptive, sexist-can also be brought against our culture at large. How can we expect more of the average American hunter, or for that matter inner-city gangs or junk bond dealers, when they are a product of a society that, in its films, politics, work ethic, and recreation, frequently displays these very negative characteristics and in the main has lost a sense of attention, discipline, care, practice, respect, and quality?

This impoverished state exists because we have lost our teachers and our holy people. Hunters ought to be in the ranks of both, but unless they find impeccable ways to restore what was a sacred activity, it will be, in its depauperated condition, rightfully disparaged and it never did. The humble, grateful, accomplished emotions that surround well-performed hunting cannot be equated with fun, that which provides amusement or arouses laughter. If hunters are going to preserve hunting, they must recreate it as the disciplined, mindful, sacred activity it once was for our species. They will also need to help redeem the culture in which they have grown and which finds fun at the expense of others. This is a job for hunters not only as hunters but also as citizens-an ongoing task to define what is appropriate behavior between both person and person and between what Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux holy man, called the two-Ieggeds and the fourleggeds. I would say that this definition will have much to do with the notions of kindness, compassion, and sympathy for those other species with whom we share this web of life and on whom we depend for sustenance. . . the very notions-and I might add restraint-that informed the lives of many hunting peoples in times past.

Such a reformation-or rather, return to older principles of mutual regard between species-will be a profound undertaking, for it is based on the pre-Christian belief that other life forms, indeed the very plants and earth and air themselves, are invested with soul and spirit. If we must take those spirits, it can only be done for good reason and then only if accompanied with constant reverence and humility for the sacrifices that have been made. Whether we're hunters or nonhunters, meat eaters or vegetarians, this state of heart and mind compels us to sayan eternal grace.

Facing up to this basic and poignant condition of biological life on this planet-people, animals, and plants as fated cohorts, as both dependents and donors of life-wasn't easy ten thousand years ago and won't be easy today. Of course, we can back away from the task, but I think the result will be either a world in which people continue to dominate nature, or a world in which simplistic notions of how to reduce pain sever the bonds between people and nature. In either case, hunters will still be distant from the complex burdens and daily sympathy that ancient hunters considered the basis for a loving community of people and animals.

Can this reformation really be accomplished without the participatory context of gathering and hunting that informed our species for thousands of years? Can we know the old knowledge of hunting times even though many of us spend lives far from the animals and plants that sustain us? I doubt it, unless we attempt to restore participation. Many of us may never have the privilege to thresh wheat we have grown, skin a deer we have killed, or filet a fish we have caught. Virtually all of us, though, have a window and a piece of sky. We can choose to grow salad greens or a few herbs. Though a small gesture of participation in the world that feeds us, putting one's hands in a small pot of dirt, emblem of the original ground from which we have sprung, is a powerful thing to do and a beginning. If we are hunters or anglers, I will suggest that it is our first duty to introduce nonhunters and nonanglers to the participatory context. In short, take a child, a friend, a spouse hunting or fishing, and don't be ashamed to show that reverence for life goes hand in hand with the taking of it.

It is time to stop the rhetorical protection of hunting. It is time to nurture and restore the spirit that informed it. Such a commitment, if followed diligently, would certainly close down hunting as a sport. It would maintain it, though, as one of our important and fundamental weddings with nature.