

2006

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Recommended Citation

Larson, Derek (2006) "Avoiding "Silent Fall": Ethics and the Future of Hunting," *Headwaters*: Vol. 23, 109-125.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol23/iss1/16>

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Avoiding “Silent Fall”: Ethics and the Future of Hunting

Public attitudes toward hunting have passed through several distinct phases in American history. For the longest period of time — from the earliest colonial settlements to some indistinct point in the mid-19th century — hunting was simply another means of procuring food. But as the population grew increasingly urban and the nation industrialized, hunting was slowly redefined as sport, an activity undertaken not primarily to secure food but for recreation. In the 1870s romantic tales of wilderness hunts frequently appeared in general-interest magazines, suggesting the sport was far enough removed from daily life that reading about it was emerging as its own form of leisure.¹ By the 1880s, advances in food preservation and transportation, fueled by growing urban markets, drove the commercial harvest of wild game to unprecedented levels; sport hunters found themselves competing against more efficient market hunters for ever-shrinking supplies of game. As early as the 1890s their combined impact had driven regional game populations (and indeed some entire species, such as the passenger pigeon) to near extinction. Amidst these declines sport hunters organized to lobby for regulations that banned market hunting, established bag limits and seasons for individual species, and ultimately redefined hunting purely as sport rather than commercial activity. Their efforts culminated with the passage of the federal Lacey Act in 1900, which shored up state efforts to protect game resources from market hunters and set the stage for the coordinated wildlife management policies that followed.

Throughout the 20th century hunting was understood solely as sport, and its popularity skyrocketed in the 1950s as the post-war economic boom and access to inexpensive firearms attracted new generations of hunters to the field. Half a century later sport hunting remains widely popular. In 2001 a total of 13 million hunters spent in excess of \$20 billion in pursuit of wild game in the United States.² But despite its popularity a variety of factors threaten the future of hunting. Urban sprawl and farmland conversion are eating away at game habitat while the supply of public hunting land is also declining in many regions. Even more immediate are

a series of demographic trends that appear to be driving a decline among hunters themselves — a drop of seven percent between 1991 and 2001 alone. One element of this decline is age-driven: as baby boomers reach their mid-sixties they begin to age out of the deer hunting population, which accounts for 79 percent of all hunters.³ Other significant factors include the growing suburban population (suburbanites are less likely to hunt than their small-town and rural counterparts) and the decline in traditional two-parent homes (91 percent of hunters are males, the majority introduced to the sport as boys by their fathers).

Perhaps the gravest long-term threat to hunting comes from shifting public opinion. As fewer Americans hunt and the historic connections between hunting and subsistence fade from memory, it is becoming harder for hunters to explain their pursuits to non-hunters. Attempts to restrict or even ban hunting altogether have arisen, often led by animal rights groups who employ stereotypes of hunters or present the actions of an unethical (and often law-breaking) minority of hunters as arguments against all hunting. In part by portraying hunting as little more than brutal killing pursued for fun by ill-educated rural conservatives, anti-hunting activists have achieved in a few years what decades of demographic trends have only begun to hint at: a future threatened not by Rachel Carson's ominous silent spring, but a "silent fall" no longer marked by the seasonal rituals of millions of Americans returning to the field in pursuit of deer, waterfowl, and small game.

Pro-hunting groups have done a reasonable job in recent years of presenting their side of the story to the public. The common arguments offered in support of hunting are that it is an indispensable tool for wildlife management, that excise taxes on hunting equipment and license fees pay for the lion's share of the nation's wildlife habitat and species protection activities, and that the act of hunting itself is an important part of our cultural heritage. Indeed, over the past decade a broad pro-hunting literature has appeared that includes works by game managers, ecologists, psychologists, historians, and political scientists writing in response to the anti-hunting rhetoric that has become so prevalent in public debates over game laws and regulations. But despite reasonable arguments in favor of hunting, the public appears to have become divided not over specific regulatory issues such as bag limits or season length, but over whether hunting should continue *at all*. A spate of studies have indicated that somewhere in the range of 15–20 percent of Americans oppose hunting for wide a variety of reasons, a population at least twice as large as the total of all hunters in the nation.⁴

Rising Opposition to Hunting

Individual concerns about hunting can range from fear for the safety of bystanders to the belief that killing animals under any circumstances is immoral and should be

absolutely prohibited. While one might assume the majority of those in the 15–20 percent of the population opposed to hunting fall somewhere near the middle of this spectrum, the rhetoric of the anti-hunters is often compelling and may attract more people to the extreme end of the spectrum over time. The immense gap between hunters and animal rights activists on the basic question of whether killing animals is justified under any circumstances tends to polarize the debate over hunting even when the two sides might share common ground in concern for a species or its habitat. In the court of public opinion hunters must also overcome an experiential gap in regard to this issue that anti-hunters do not face, as anti-hunting tactics are typically structured to produce emotional responses linked to common experiences with pets and other domesticated animals.

The depth of this division is evident in the anti-hunting arguments presented by many of the major animal rights groups in the United States. Emotional appeals are the most common rhetorical device of campaigns coordinated by organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Animal People, The Fund for Animals, and Defenders of Wildlife, all of which operate public relations and publishing programs in the U.S. Smaller activist groups, like the Animal Liberation Front, the Committee to Abolish Sport Hunting, and the Hunt Saboteurs Association often take direct action to disrupt legal hunts through protests and interference with hunters in the field. Although these groups sometimes defend their actions by disputing the interpretation of the same wildlife management data hunters cite in their defense, their anti-hunting positions generally stem from the belief that animals should simply not be killed for human use. This position is often based on the writings of theorists like Peter Singer or author/activists like Cleveland Amory and Merritt Clifton, although the emotional appeals of the latter type are more frequently used in anti-hunting literature directed at general audiences than at activists themselves.⁵

In practice, anti-hunting advocates blend animal rights rhetoric with other anti-hunting positions to appeal to a broader audience and commonly rely on shocking images of dead animals, tales of unethical hunters, and heart-wrenching stories of orphaned fawns to generate public support for their positions. Merritt Clifton, the founder of Animal People, claims that hunting “causes a deer surplus” because it has upset the male/female balance by selecting bucks for harvest, leaving more does to breed with surviving bucks. While wildlife managers may argue the point, Clifton states unequivocally that “the more bucks are shot, the faster the deer population will grow.”⁶ His most extreme positions, however, link hunting with child molestation, rape, prostitution, and wife beating through questionable use of statistics and reliance on social ecologist Stephen Kellert’s classic study of hunter motivation, which

labeled one category of hunters “dominionistic” because they felt hunting demonstrated their control over animals. Clifton elsewhere extends this line of thinking by pointing out “the high proportion of serial killers who also hunt animals” to his readers.⁷

Along similar lines, another animal rights activist employs a common negative stereotype in an *Animal People* editorial entitled “Hunters Out of the Closet,” in which she relates the unpleasant story of an encounter with hunters in New York state that resulted in an exchange of obscenities. The editorial concludes that

... there is growing psychological evidence attesting to the sexual insecurity of many and perhaps most hunters, whose aggressive posturing frequently covers for inability to relate in a mature way with women, reflected in a high divorce rate; whose fascination with weapons may symbolize repressed penile obsession; whose violence toward animals displaces sexually frustrated impotence, and whose evident preference for male companions is suggestive of repressed homosexuality.⁸

These and other attacks on hunters by animal rights activists do not speak directly to the concerns of the majority of non-hunters, but use hyperbole and questionable assumptions to associate hunters with virtually every negative social factor imaginable. Theoretical approaches and ethical concerns such as Peter Singer’s arguments against “speciesism” and anthropocentrism are lost in this overwhelming rush to condemn hunters as the fountainhead of violence, pain, and misogyny.

Protests against hunting are not limited simply to rhetorical efforts; actions in the field are often coordinated and publicized by organized anti-hunting groups as well. Their tactics include direct intervention, such as placing themselves between hunters and their prey, using noise to frighten animals away from hunters, and the pre-hunt application of human or predator scents (usually urine) around known hunting areas in effort to drive game away. According to one study, they might also direct their supporters to

...apply for hunting licenses themselves, or register nursing home residents for free senior-citizen hunting licenses in order to reduce the limited number of licenses actually available to hunters. Also, activists enter the woods before the hunting season and play loud radios or recordings of wolf howls, and walk their dogs on leashes, to teach young animals not yet experienced in being hunted to scatter.⁹

Although hunters may not even be aware of such pre-season or covert actions against them, the growth of public demonstrations at or near hunting sites in the past decade has led to hostile confrontations and drawn media attention to the issue, which is the

primary goal of the organized anti-hunting groups. Individual action not associated with organized protest has also become more common, including direct intervention in hunts and public challenges of hunters.

Hunting Advocates Respond

In response to the increasingly confrontational nature of anti-hunting protests and direct interference with legal hunts, most states have passed “hunter harassment” laws that make it a crime to impede an authorized hunt. These laws have faced First Amendment challenges from anti-hunting activists and several were found to be overly broad or vague by the courts and were redrawn in the late 1980s.¹⁰ The most widely cited case arose from the individual protest of a Connecticut woman who engaged a group of goose hunters in conversation in an attempt to convince them hunting was morally wrong; she was arrested and charged with violating the state Hunter Harassment Act. The Connecticut law, which stated simply that “no person shall harass or interfere with another person engaged in the lawful taking of wildlife,” was ruled unconstitutional in 1988 after the Connecticut Supreme Court found it failed to define the operative terms “harass” and “interfere” adequately, leading to an infringement on protected speech.¹¹ Connecticut lawmakers then set out to draft a new law that would survive future challenges, resulting in a model hunter harassment law that was content-neutral and narrowly tailored to meet the state’s interest in regulating free expression on public property.

The 1990 revision of the Connecticut statute was upheld by the courts in 1992, suggesting that such second-generation hunter harassment laws may generally survive First Amendment challenges.¹² So far this has proven to be the case; the Montana hunter harassment law, based on a model created by the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America, was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Montana v. Libburn* in 1995. The case, involving an activist who stepped between a buffalo hunter’s gun and his target and yelled “Don’t shoot!” was argued by lawyers working for the animal-rights group Fund for the Animals but they lost their First Amendment challenge.¹³ Most hunter harassment laws currently in force are based on models developed in response to challenges of this nature.

One such model demonstrates the degree to which hunter harassment laws are targeting anti-hunting protests, rather than anti-hunting speech. It states in part, “No person may obstruct or impede another person who is engaged in the lawful taking of wildlife at the location where the activity is taking place with the intent to prevent such taking.” The section noting potential violations reads like a list of the direct-action anti-hunting tactics discussed above, including driving or disturbing wildlife, using natural or artificial visual, aural, olfactory, or physical stimuli to affect

wildlife behavior, erecting barriers that affect wildlife access to a hunting area, and actions taken to impede hunters' access, remove their belongings, or block the line of fire.¹⁴ With these laws in place, hunters generally need not fear confrontations in the field or direct interference with their actions. Removing the anti-hunting protests from the site of the hunt, however, offers only a marginal victory for hunters. Those who wish to preserve the hunt will need to take their case to the general public and address concerns that go beyond the debate over killing alone.

Polls indicate that many more people oppose hunting only under certain circumstances than are likely to hold strongly to the view that killing animals is always wrong. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that when hunting is defined as "killing animals for food" it draws far less objection than "killing animals for sport."¹⁵ Thus the definition of hunting as "sport" is an important aspect of this issue, one that hunters should address by differentiating between pursuits commonly understood as sports and activities that may result in the taking of an animal's life. They may in fact share the anti-hunter's view that the potential taking of life is the defining characteristic of hunting, but often claim this as the source of the high degree of respect for wildlife that hunting proponents like James Swan, an environmental psychologist and author of *In Defense of Hunting* (1995), cite so commonly as a positive attribute of hunters.

In contrast, ethicist Ann Causey argues that hunters should simply avoid the debate over killing entirely. Writing in *Environmental Ethics*, she summarizes the position of the anti-hunting movement concisely: "Anti-hunters believe, instinctively, that it is morally wrong to kill for pleasure. Period." Hunters obviously do not share this belief, and there is little hope of finding common ground on the issue. Causey in fact finds the entire debate lacking in purpose, arguing that

...the desire to hunt is the modern vestige of an evolutionary trait of utmost adaptive significance to early man. Though the urge to kill has in the past been reinforced by instinct, it is tempered in modern man by reason. This gives rise to the big conflict characteristic of sport hunting: the mixture of elation and remorse, of thrill and regret. It is instinct versus intellect... Is it morally wrong to wish to hunt for sport and to take pleasure in the occasional kill? The answer, it seems to me, is no. It is not morally wrong to take pleasure in killing game; nor is it morally right. It is simply not a moral issue at all, because the urge itself is an instinct, and instincts do not qualify for moral valuation, positive or negative. Thus the urge to kill for sport is *amoral*, lying as it does outside the jurisdiction of morality.¹⁶

To accept Causey's position would imply that hunters do not need to win a moral debate over killing because the debate is unnecessary. They would be better served by a concerted effort to increase public awareness of the merits of hunting and to address the concerns of non-hunters that are based on issues that may be resolved, rather than expending time and energy debating the small minority of animal-rights adherents that will not be swayed.

Evidence in support of this approach can be found in studies of non-hunters' beliefs about hunting, including a series of group interviews conducted in 1978 which produced a list of 115 concerns about hunting and hunters. Of the top twenty concerns only five directly concerned the treatment of animals, while the other fifteen involved the safety of humans, training issues, regulation, and property rights.¹⁷ Safety was the most frequently cited issue, which likely represents the primary concern of the majority of non-hunters today. High-profile coverage of accidents, such as the death of a suburban New England woman who was mistaken for a deer and shot in her own backyard a decade ago, has spread through the media and likely increased the fear of accidents and irresponsible hunters among the general public. Although the number of accidents remains small in proportion to the number of safely conducted hunts, the involvement of firearms in hunting naturally generates strong opinions about the relative safety of the practice that may not accurately reflect accident statistics.

Objections to hunting based on the treatment of game animals, waste of meat, equal access to public lands, trespass on private lands, litter in the field, and a variety of issues surrounding the behavior of hunters are also high on the list of concerns voiced by non-hunters in public meetings, letters to the editor, and in conversations between hunters and non-hunters. Not surprisingly these are the type of objections that are commonly addressed in state hunting regulations through requirements for safety measures such as blaze orange clothing, restrictions on hunting certain well-used parcels of land, and programs intended to open communication between hunters and private land owners to reduce trespass. Specific practices can be regulated by law, but hunter conduct during and after the hunt is hard to regulate, monitor, or enforce. In most cases personal conduct in the field is dictated primarily by the individual hunter's own ethical code, which may or may not prove adequate in addressing his or her need for guidance.

The Role of Hunting Ethics

Ethics have long played a traditional role in hunting, possibly stemming from the religious beliefs of pre-Christian animists who believed their prey possessed spirits that would affect future hunts if mistreated. Many Native American religions hold

similar beliefs and require specific rituals before, during, and after the hunt. Such beliefs have survived in Western society in the care of hunters, who may regard them as ethical standards of behavior toward their quarry, and (in an ironic twist) are also found among many anti-hunters. Even utilitarian meat hunters generally place some ethical constraints on hunting practices, often stating them in terms of “respect” for animals. Hunters must rely on their ethics when faced with questions about what is “the right thing” to do in a variety of situations, ranging from when or if to shoot to how long one must spend trying to track a wounded animal. Philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset believed that ethics were the dividing line between hunting and killing:

The exemplary moral spirit of the sporting hunter, that manner of feeling, of taking up and practicing hunting, is a very precise line, below which fall innumerable forms of hunting that are deficient modes of this occupation. Hunting, like every human activity, has an ethic which distinguishes virtues from vices.¹⁸

There is no central source of hunting ethics, however, and standards vary considerably from place to place and between individual hunters. Consequently, what one hunter may feel is a legitimate (or even the only) way to hunt a particular species may violate another’s basic ethical precepts. The contemporary debate over the future of hunting has created an ideal atmosphere for hunters to come together and collectively formulate an ethical code that will apply to all conditions, species, regions, and practices, while seeking to address the issues that give rise to conflict with non-hunters.

Hunting ethics have historically been learned by young hunters from older hunters, usually transferring from father to son in our male-dominated hunting society. Older hunters with more experience in the field can be both more “wood wise” and more advanced in their understanding of the hunter/prey relationship than their younger companions. A 1985 article based on a University of Wisconsin study of more than 1,000 hunters proposed a five-stage model for hunter development that predicts an evolution of hunting ethics as experience in the field increases. Writing in *North Dakota Outdoors*, Robert Jackson explained the five stages he identified as the **shooter**, **limiting out**, **trophy**, **method**, and **sportsman** stages of development. These stages portray the hunter as first measuring success by simply achieving a kill, then moving consecutively to maximizing the number of kills, and then maximizing the quality of kill, before becoming concerned primarily with the method of the hunt. In this penultimate stage the hunter follows self-imposed limitations on hunting methods to maximize the perceived quality of the experience; taking up bow hunting as opposed to using firearms is a common choice in this stage. In the final stage

non-utilitarian values dominate, including external ideals such as stewardship and ecology, and the hunter may prefer to communicate a love of hunting with others rather than hunt himself.¹⁹ As hunters progress through these stages they build upon the lessons learned from their initial hunting companions and from their own experiences to develop what might be considered a “mature” hunting ethic. This process may take a lifetime though, and there is clearly a need to instill an ethical sense in the beginning and intermediate hunters who make up the vast majority of those in active pursuit of game.

Unfortunately for hunters, there has been no widely established method of teaching hunting ethics. As noted previously, most hunters learn hunting ethics from watching other hunters in the field or from their parents when they are introduced to hunting as children. An informal survey of hunters on the Internet confirmed this impression, as the majority of respondents cited fathers as their primary source of an ethical hunting tradition. Other hunters explained how they were taught differently:

I did not have such luck as to have hunting parents. I had to learn my hunting skills from other friends who did. I had a neighbor that got me started on squirrel hunting, first year with no gun, second with a BB [gun], and finally the third with a 410 shotgun.²⁰

Another told this story:

My first stepfather and I never hunted, but we did shoot and fish. I figured because we were catching fish, that was the same as hunting, and he set me straight with something I fully intend to pass on to my sons. [He said] “When you can H.E.A.R., you can hunt.” HEAR, as it turned out, is an acronym for Honesty, Ethics, Admiration, and Respect. He told me that without all those things, nothing more than a killer would I be.²¹

And a third found his ethics through observing nature around him:

None of my relatives hunt. Fishermen, mostly, farmers, the rest. My ethics come through study of nature, reading about my prey, my competition, my surroundings, and by being out there. Being in the woods in the crystalline silence of sunrise is as close to a religious experience as I’m ever likely to have. [You must] try to join the chain, not top it. It can be a very humbling experience, realizing that they don’t need you, and that, in the grander scheme of things, you don’t matter. Ethics come from within, and spring from respect. To know nature is to respect it. And from this comes ethics.²²

These examples represent what are probably the three most common sources of ethical instruction: other hunters, parents, and self-guided observation of nature. A fourth source of ethical instruction is the hunter education class, which many states now require of young or new hunters. Once simply called “hunter safety” courses, they were originally intended to prevent hunting accidents and increase awareness of game laws; over time the courses evolved to teach some of the ethics hunters once were expected to learn from their fathers, likely in response to a combination of factors including the decline of hunting instruction within families, the need to provide instruction to new adult hunters, and from public calls for more ethical hunters. Satisfaction with these courses is very high; a 1992 study of hunters who had taken a hunter education class found that 81 percent “felt positive about the course” and nearly 96 percent felt the experience increased their hunting satisfaction.²³ There is, however, no common curriculum of ethical instruction in hunter education courses and the focus remains more on safety and familiarity with hunting regulations than on teaching ethics.

It is clear that there are a variety of ways to learn hunting ethics, but nothing to ensure that everyone who takes up a gun in pursuit of game learns a common core ethic or even that they learn any ethics at all. Government can regulate specific hunting practices but cannot hope to address the varied conditions and circumstances that make each hunt, and hunter, unique. The need for an ethical standard was recognized a century ago by the Boone and Crockett Club, whose elite members had become concerned about the impact of technology on the hunt. The development of automatic weapons and motorized transport especially threatened the nineteenth century model of the rugged individual pitting his wits against the mighty beast, so the club created a standard called “fair chase” and required all gentlemen hunters to sign a pledge to uphold it before joining the club, and once again upon submitting an entry for the official record book.

Established Ethical Standards

For the past century the fair chase standard has served as the only widely accepted definition of sportsmanship as it applies to hunting. By defining proper conduct of a hunt as “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over such game animals,” the fair chase ethic places significant limits on the actions of hunters. A list of specific prohibitions has grown up around it, evolving to include the use of airplanes, motor vehicles, or electronic devices in pursuit of game, and also proscribing hunting within artificial barriers or on commercial game farms. The final precept of fair chase requires full compliance with all applicable game laws and regulations.²⁴

To the wealthy gentlemen of the Boone and Crockett Club, fair chase set them apart from the excesses of the market hunters and the practices of lower-class “meat hunters” alike. Though no panacea, through their leadership and influence on wildlife managers and state bureaucrats the fair chase standard had become part of the general core of hunting regulations in most states by the 1950s, providing a limited set of hunting ethics that was codified in law. There were still, of course, many ethical issues left unresolved by fair chase, including the most basic questions of respect for animals, property, safety, and the feelings of non-hunters. This lack of a comprehensive ethical base has contributed to the decline of hunting and underlies the threat of future restrictions stemming from the objections of the anti-hunting movement. In an attempt to address this shortcoming, and in response to criticisms from hunters and non-hunters alike, the pro-hunting Izaak Walton League set out in 1991 to establish a new, comprehensive ethical standard.

The Izaak Walton League’s “Hunter’s Pledge” was created with both ethics and public relations in mind by a coalition of major national hunting and conservation organizations. The league’s executive director expressed the organization’s concern for the future of hunting at the unveiling of the pledge, noting that the effort “shows that hunting and conservation groups are united in their efforts to change hunter behavior. In a crowded society, hunting must be ethical and responsible — or it will not be tolerated.”²⁵ Similar thoughts were voiced by a representative of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies: “With the public’s continuing interest in the environment and wildlife, we must be sure hunters are good environmental stewards whose images are not tarnished by unethical behavior.”²⁶ The Hunter’s Pledge speaks directly to a variety of issues not addressed by the fair chase standard or common hunting regulations, and includes specific provisions related to the most common criticisms voiced by non-hunters. It requires that hunters:

- Respect the environment and wildlife
- Respect property and landowners
- Show consideration for non-hunters
- Hunt safely
- Know and obey the law
- Support wildlife and habitat conservation
- Pass on an ethical hunting tradition
- Strive to improve their outdoor skills and understanding of nature
- Hunt only with other ethical hunters²⁷

Each of these points is defined in more detail in the pledge, presenting a standard of ethical conduct that is built upon respect for wildlife and other humans, as well as concern for the public image of hunters.

Responses to specific objections to hunting often raised by non-hunters also appear in the pledge document. Prohibitions against waste and mistreatment of animals are included, as are guidelines for transporting and storing game in a manner that will not offend non-hunters. Hunters pledge not to use alcohol while hunting, to leave natural areas as they find them, and to participate in conservation organizations. One might well assume that if all hunters obeyed the letter of the Izaak Walton League pledge, a good portion of the opposition to hunting would evaporate along with the unethical practices that produce it.

Hunting advocate and writer Ted Kerasote believes that hunters must take every measure possible to redefine the place of hunting in our culture in positive terms and to self-police their ranks to reduce the incidence of unethical hunting. He would extend the ethical guidelines of the Hunter's Pledge to include some specific reforms of current practices that are most offensive to non-hunters (and, he believes, ethical hunters as well). These include de-emphasizing the record book and reducing the prominence of trophy hunting and speaking out against most forms of hunting competition, especially things like prairie dog shoots that reduce hunting to simply killing for a tally. Kerasote is especially adamant about the need to recruit more women as hunters and to make them feel welcome in the field. The traditional role of the male as hunter has been overstated, he believes, and involving more women in hunting may help alleviate the emphasis on competition between males. More pragmatically, he notes that "it is women who will vote hunting out of existence."²⁸ Some public officials have already taken note of these demographics and have instituted programs aimed at recruiting new women hunters, including the establishment of special women-only hunts.²⁹ Recruiting large numbers of new hunters, male or female, also offers the opportunity for formal ethical instruction at the beginning of their hunting careers.

Ethics and the Future of the Hunt

There is some debate as to how an ethical standard might be taught and enforced, and whether or not it would be effective. Kerasote advocates mandatory hunter education classes for all hunters. The Izaak Walton League recommends that people refuse to hunt with unethical hunters. Incentive programs have also been established to improve hunting ethics. For example, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Service created its Master Hunter program which employs a combination of advanced hunter education and public service to meet four major objectives:

- To foster positive relations between hunters and landowners.
- To increase access to private lands by giving landowners a way to identify Master Hunters.

- To improve the hunting experience and the public image of hunters.
- To develop a pool of ethical and knowledgeable hunters.

To encourage hunter participation in the program, Master Hunters are allowed to hunt on specially reserved parcels of private land, in areas closed to other hunters, and in state-sponsored wildlife management hunts used to solve specific animal population or depredation problems. To become a Master Hunter in Oregon, one must satisfactorily complete a home study course on ethics, a classroom session with a hunter education instructor, a firearm proficiency test, and at least twenty hours of volunteer service intended to benefit wildlife.³⁰ Though it is unlikely that a large percentage of hunters will have the time and inclination to pursue such certification, the presence of even a few Master Hunters in the field and the associated media coverage of the program can only improve the public image of hunters.

In 1993 Jim Posewitz, a retired biologist from Montana, founded Orion: The Hunter's Institute to increase public awareness of the positive impacts of hunting and to promote hunting ethics. His book *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting* (1994) is the best single text on hunting ethics available today, explaining in clear terms the role of ethics in hunting and providing an ethical model for hunters. Judging from the frequent citations in hunting magazines and on the Internet, his book has made a strong impression on hunters. Posewitz defines the ethical hunter as "A person who knows and respects the animal hunted, follows the law, and behaves in a way that will satisfy what society expects of him or her as a hunter."³¹ He believes that hunting ethics can be spread simply by increasing awareness among hunters who will naturally accept ethical practices once they are exposed to them, as he derived his own ethics from observation of nature and considers hunters part of the natural order.

Perhaps the best way to promote compliance with an ethical code like the Hunter's Pledge is through peer pressure. While there are many distinct hunting cultures in the United States, they are all linked through national organizations and media outlets including species-specific conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited and commercial magazines like *North American Hunter*. With adequate funding it would be possible to publicize a new ethical standard and promote hunter awareness (and compliance) through these national outlets. A similar effort directed at off-road vehicle (ORV) users called "Tread Lightly" has proven to be an effective tool in improving public relations and reducing the negative environmental impacts of ORV use. Publicized with funds from the ORV industry, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, Tread Lightly depends on increased awareness of the impacts of ORV use and peer pressure to reduce improper and unsafe recreation.

Many hunters are already familiar with this model and would be likely to respond positively to a campaign to improve hunting ethics, especially if it were explained in terms of preserving the hunt, just as the ORV community has justified its campaign as the only way to preserve access to popular driving sites.

Whatever method may be used to propagate it, establishing a comprehensive ethical code for hunters will yield immense benefits. First and foremost, it will address many of the concerns of non-hunters and improve the public image of hunting. While a media campaign aimed at alleviating popular misconceptions of hunting would help counter the prevalence of negative stereotypes in the media and popular culture, more frequent public contact with ethical hunters would likely improve individual perceptions of their friends and neighbors that hunt. Eliminating, or at least dramatically reducing, the problems of poachers and “slob hunters” whose actions fuel anti-hunting arguments would further reduce the negative attention hunters currently attract. Anti-hunting groups would then have to rely even more directly on animal-rights language in opposing hunting, a tactic that has proven effective with only small numbers of people and would likely fail to motivate enough voters to further restrict hunting. Similarly, concerns over safety, property, and competition for resources could be reduced by a new population of ethical hunters who are more concerned about their impacts on other people and animals than current hunters may be.

Public relations aside, adoption of a universal ethical code would yield immediate benefits in the field, including safer hunts and better hunting conditions for all. Ethical hunters would avoid competing for game, and negative impacts on other natural resources related to hunting would decrease as hunters became careful to avoid littering or disturbing habitat while in the field. Participation in conservation programs may increase, providing more funds and volunteers for habitat restoration projects and other related activities. A closer relationship with and understanding of nature is also a logical product of a new hunting ethic, which should increase the pleasure of the hunt and allow for success to be measured in ways other than the kill. Increased self-esteem for hunters, a result of personal accomplishment in learning and upholding a common set of ethics, could help attract new hunters and be profitably channeled into hunter education and outreach programs, alleviating concerns about recruitment and the decline of hunting participation. Finally, young hunters and children would benefit from exposure to ethical hunters as role models.

Avoiding “Silent Fall”

Hunting is unquestionably an important element of our collective history and still plays a major role in the lives of many Americans. However, as the percentage

of active hunters in our society has declined, hunting has lost some of its public support and perhaps its ethical grounding as well. The transition from hunting for food to hunting for recreation produced a new ethical context that was not collectively addressed by hunters until early in the twentieth century, and then not comprehensively. In the decades that followed, opposition to hunting on practical and moral grounds has come to threaten the future of hunting. The most practicable way for hunters to respond to this rising anti-hunting sentiment is not to engage in protracted debate with animal-rights supporters, but instead to redefine hunting in a new ethical context that will satisfy public concerns about hunters' actions while simultaneously improving the experience of the hunt.

Several models of ethical codes exist, enough to suggest a common core of values that may be used to unite hunters and persuade non-hunters that hunting should continue. Efforts to establish, teach, and enforce an ethical code are underway in parts of the country but should be extended through a national campaign to preserve the hunt, not only from its opponents but also from the unethical actions of hunters themselves.

The benefits of hunting as a form of recreation and means of better understanding the human place in nature are significant but could be lost if hunters fail to take action to eliminate ethical abuses that lend currency to negative stereotypes and lead to increased public opposition to hunting in general. Without a coordinated effort to improve the practice and public perception of hunting, the ranks of the thirteen million Americans who currently hunt will continue to shrink, perhaps leading to a silent fall in our not-too-distant future.

Endnotes

1. J.G. Wilson, "Two Weeks in the Wilderness," *Appletons' Journal: A Magazine of General Literature*, Sept. 9, 1871.
2. U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. *2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation* (Washington, D.C., 2002) 31–45.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Mark D. Duda, *Factors Related to Hunting and Fishing Participation in the United States: Phase I: Literature Review* (Washington, DC: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1993) 6-ff., 163–182.
5. See Janelle Rohr (ed.), *Animal Rights: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1989).
6. Merritt Clifton, "Hunting Facts," <http://www.envirolink.org/arrs/hunting_facts.html> (3/14/96).
7. *Ibid.*; Merrit Clifton, "Hunters and Molesters," <<http://www.envirolink.org/arrs/essays/molesters.html>> (3/14/96); and Stephen Kellert, "Characteristics and Attitudes of Hunters and Anti-Hunters," *Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference* 43(1978): 412–423.
8. Anonymous, "Editorial: When Hunters Come Out of the Closet," October 1993, p. 1. <<http://www.envirolink.org/arrs/ap/93/10/editorial2.html>> (3/14/96).

9. Aileen M. Ugalde, "The Right to Arm Bears: Activists' Protests Against Hunting," *University of Miami Law Review* 45 (1991): 1114–1115.
10. Bradford J. Roegge, "Survival of the Fittest: Hunters or Activists? First Amendment Challenges to Hunter Harassment Laws," *University of Detroit Mercy Law Review* 72:437 (1995): 438–471.
11. See *Dorman v. Satti*, 862 F.2d 432 (2d. Cir. 1988).
12. John A. Grafton, "Hunter Harassment Statutes: Do They Shoot Holes in the First Amendment?" *West Virginia Law Review* 69:191 (1993): 198–208. See also John W. Maloney, "State v. Ball: Connecticut's Hunter Harassment Statute Under First Amendment Fire," *Bridgeport Law Review* 13:783 (1993): 783–811.
13. Anonymous, "Hunter Harassment Legislation Upheld in Highest Court," *Outdoors Online* <<http://www.ool.com/oga.huntharass.html>> (3/14/96).
14. Grafton, "Hunter Harassment Statutes," 21.
15. See generally Duda, *Factors Related to Hunting and Fishing Participation*, 165-185.
16. Ann Causey, "On the Morality of Hunting," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 327–343.
17. *Ibid.*, 174–175. See also A. H. Rohlfing, "Hunter Conduct and Public Attitudes," *Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference* 43 (1978): 404–411.
18. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 101–102.
19. Robert Jackson, "A Letter From Wisconsin: The Making of a Hunter," *North Dakota Outdoors*, Sept./Oct. 1985, pp. 31-33.
20. Jay Porter, "Re: Hunting Ethics: Where do you learn them?" <rec.hunting> (3/10/96).
21. Carl Payne, "Re: Hunting Ethics: Where do you learn them?" <rec.hunting> (3/11/96).
22. D. J. MacIntyre, "Re: Hunting Ethics: Where do you learn them?" <rec.hunting> (3/12/96).
23. Duda, *Factors Related to Hunting and Fishing Participation*, 130-131.
24. Anonymous, "Fair Chase Statement for All Hunter-Taken Trophies" <<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~powlesla/personal/hunting/text/boone.txt>> (3/14/96).
25. John Husar, "All Hunters Need to Take the Pledge to Keep Their Sport Spotless," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 July 1993.
26. *Ibid.*
27. "Responsibility and Respect: A Code of Conduct for Hunters" <<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~powlesla/personal/hunting/text/isaal.txt>> (3/14/96).
28. Ted Kerasote, "To Preserve the Hunt," *Orion: People and Nature* Winter, 1996, 13-19. See also generally Kerasote, *Bloodties: Nature, Culture, and the Hunt* (New York: Random House, 1993).
29. Peter Finn, "More Women Feel the Pull of Male Hunting Tradition," *The Herald-Times*, Bloomington, IN, 22 Feb. 1996.
30. Anonymous, "Oregon's Master Hunter Program Overview" <gopher://gopher.state.or.us:70/00/documents/ORNW0176.text> (3/14/96). See also "Master Hunter Program" <http://www.dfw.state.or.us/outdoor_skills/hunter/master_hunter.asp> (1/10/06).
31. Jim Posewitz, *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethics and Tradition of Hunting* (Billings, MT: Falcon Press, 1994), 110.

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