

Of Gadgeteers and Bionic Deer

On the Bastardization of Hunting

For pre-agricultural, foraging peoples—our “savage” human forebears—sacred and secular were inseparable. The same wild animals preyed upon, were prayed to, and with life and death the yin and yang of daily existence, sacredness was diffused throughout.

It’s still true today, of course, that life feeds on death. But, unlike our ancestors who knew exactly where their meat came from and at exactly what costs, we modern carnivores (most of us, most of the time) buy our meat as de-animated product without considering that it was in fact quite recently part of a living, albeit genetically deracinated and chemically larded, animal. This commercial distancing from our food makes it easy for us to euphemize, ignore, and, in extreme cases such as veganism, deny the deaths that nourish all of our lives.

Yet, for an open-eyed minority of modern hunters, the ancient animistic sense of soulful, visceral unity with wildness—diffused sacredness, if you will—remains grounded as ever in awe, humility, and reciprocity. “Wildness is what I kill and eat,” proclaims Paul Shepard, the father of human ecology, “because I too am wild.”

Evolutionarily, hunting is a definitive human activity. The hunting/gathering lifeway—owing to the distinctive ways of living, thinking, and worshipping it fostered—was the Prime Mover behind our becoming human. As Paul Shepard testifies, “The dynamic of escape and pursuit is the great sculptor of brains.” Spiritually, when we “lived” wild animals daily, we came to think, pray, and be as wild animals. Thus did hunting patiently guide our formative humanity toward a universal animistic (zoomorphic) cosmology, binding humanity intimately to Earth via the great gastronomical round of life-giving death.

For at least the final 1.8 million years of human evolution—coincident with the emergence of the penultimate hominid, *Homo erectus*—this was the way life was; the way we were. By 50,000 to 100,000 years ago, near the apogee of the icy upper Pleistocene—“The Age of Man”—*Homo sapiens* was a done deal. Thus, when Paul Shepard declares that “wilderness is where my genome lives,” he reminds us that genetically, socially, physiologically, psychologically and spiritually, we exist today as “space-needing, wild-country Pleistocene beings, trapped in overdense numbers in devastated, simplified ecosystems.”

Shepard is hardly alone among scientific philosophers in proposing that this gaping mismatch between our lingering Pleistocene design for wildness and our current concrete culture is responsible for much or most of the angst, immaturity, violence, environmental genocide, and multifaceted suffering plaguing the world today.

Which is not meant to suggest that hunting is a univer-

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sal antidote to our pandemic existential despair, being neither right for, nor available to everyone. Yet, neo-animistically informed hunting, because phylogenetically it remains perhaps the definitively human activity, continues to provide a reliable and wholly organic pathway to what Shepard would term “phylogenetic felicity.” But only if you do it right. And there’s the rub.

After 5,000 years of civilization, with its acutely humanized morality and absurdly alien spiritual paradigms, many if not most modern sportsmen have lost contact with the ancient gossamer thread twining hunting with spirit. No longer do they enter nature in pursuit of spiritual as well as physical sustenance. Rather, most hunters today seem motivated by trivial, pointless, morally questionable desires; by an aching boredom and consequent hunger for escapist divertissement. Thus, modern hunting’s problem sprouts not from hunting per se, but from the current culture of hunting. And that culture is shaped, which is to say misshaped, by the commercial world in which, to one degree or another, we all must live, work, worship, and play.

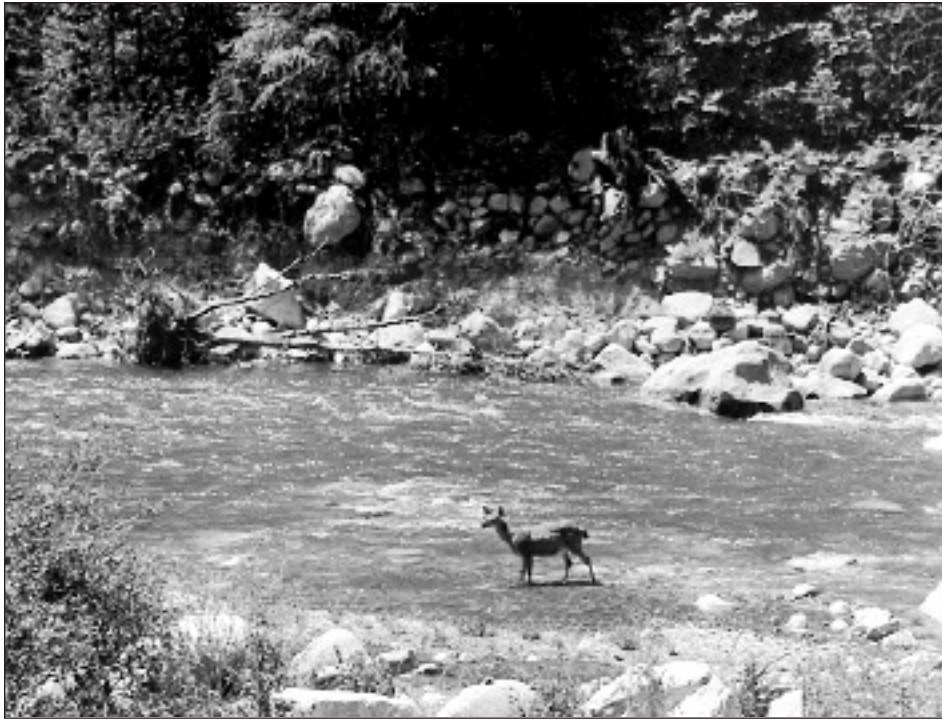
What can be said about hunting,” asks Edward Abbey, “that hasn’t been said before? Such a storm of conflicting emotions!”

Indeed, amidst all the confusion and controversy surrounding hunting today, what can be said with objective authority about hunting and hunters, their worldviews, motivations, and morals?

First and foremost, we can say that modern hunters are far more dissimilar than they are similar and that the concept of a cohesive hunting community is flatly bogus. A quarter-century ago, Yale research professor Stephen R. Kellert conducted a study involving some 3,200 participants nationwide—a study which even today remains the definitive academic statement on the attitudes of hunters (and antihunters) toward wildlife.

Based on mountainous data, Kellert split hunters into three broad groups: utilitarian/meat hunters (43.8 percent of those who had hunted within the previous five years), dominionistic/sport hunters (38.5 percent), and naturalis-





HANK MEALS

Delighted by all of this and dreaming of an ever-more profitable future, green-eyed wildlife geneticists, according to an article in Sports Afield, “are working to map out the genetic code of whitetails so they can isolate the antler chromosome that will make genetic engineering for big-racked deer available in the near future. With that map will come the possibility of cloned trophy deer.”

tic/nature hunters (17.7 percent).

As their title suggests, utilitarian/meat hunters claimed to hunt only for food. Almost exclusively male, they were older and lower in education and income than the national average. Additionally, most had rural agricultural backgrounds. Although meat hunters tested fairly well on Kellert’s animal-knowledge scale, they registered coldly utilitarian attitudes toward animals, as reflected in their support of trapping, predator control and other “practical uses” of wildlife. It’s a type, Dr. Kellert and I agree, that has dwindled nationwide as a result of increased urbanization, education, and income.

By contrast, the dominionistic/sports were dominantly urban and knew little about nature. To this group, says Kellert, “the hunted animal was valued largely for the opportunities it provided to engage in a sporting activity involving mastery, competition, shooting skill and expressions of prowess.” Whether the dominionistic/sport subset has grown or shrunk in the quarter-century since Kellert’s study, it certainly has become more visible, more technologically oriented, and more materially affluent.

Stephen Kellert was still a boy when pioneering hunter/conservationist Aldo Leopold first recognized the fathers and grandfathers of Kellert’s dominionistic/sport set. After praising the skills, independence, effort, humility, and naturalistic outlook inherent to traditional hunting, Leopold went on to damn the hunters: “And then came the gadgeteer, otherwise known as the sporting-goods dealer. He has draped the American outdoorsman with an infinity of contraptions, all offered as aids to self-reliance, hardihood, woodcraft, or marksmanship, but too often functioning as substitutes for them. Gadgets fill the pockets, they dangle from neck and belt.... I have the impression the American sportsman is puzzled; he doesn’t understand

what is happening to him.... It has not dawned on him that the outdoor recreations are essentially primitive; atavistic; that their value is a contrast-value.... The sportsman has no leaders to tell him what is wrong. The sporting press no longer represents sport; it has turned billboard for the gadgeteer.”

Today, not only the sporting press, but the Internet has turned “billboard for the gadgeteer.” Consider the Fall 1998 issue of *www.HuntingNet magazine*: “The official publication of the world’s largest hunting website.” Announcing the issue’s theme is a bold, gold headline, writ large across the chest of a young, Ramboesque cover model: “Takin’ the High-Tech Road.” Gadgets fill the pockets of this virtual bowhunter’s computer-designed camouflage clothing and, indeed, dangle from neck and belt. To hammer the point home, each of the goodies is highlighted in a close-up captioned photo: GPS, mechanical broadhead, night-vision binoculars, electronic range-finder.

To take maximum advantage of most states’ laughably liberal interpretation of primitive weapons—users of which are granted longer and otherwise more favorable hunting seasons—our synthetic nimrod is equipped with a space-age compound bow constructed almost entirely of high-tech synthetics and elaborately configured with cams, cables, pulleys, overdraw, sight, stabilizer, and other modern “primitive hunting” techno-crutches.

In Nature Boy’s “free” hand, he carries a portable self-climbing tree stand—an essential aid for outwitting those clever suburban Bambis and Falines. But for all of this, where, we’re left to wonder, is Gadgetman’s infrared heat-source detector, his bionic ear, game-trail timer, two-way radio, mechanical string release, chemical odor-eliminator scent-proof suit, synthetic rattling antlers, and all the other junk that’s routinely hawked and editorially hyped in the



commercially venal sporting press today? Surely, no self-respecting primitive-weapons hunter would venture afield without such traditional essentials as these. Is our boy perhaps under-equipped? More likely, all that unseen booty is stashed in his ATV, waiting on a trailer behind his SUV, over on the far side of the cornfield.

Nor is gadget-mania the worst of it. What, I wonder, would old Aldo think of the current cult who pay to kill captive, increasingly biogenetically engineered trophy animals?

This sick little story begins, and ends, with the worst and least of the testosterone-drenched subset Stephen Kellert calls dominionistic/sports. This lunatic fringe—a tiny minority even among the head-hunting crowd—literally buy their “trophies of a lifetime,” paying big bucks to indulge in the shooting-gallery executions of big bucks. And increasingly, the victims in this bloody for-profit business—trophy deer, elk, and other “game” species—are selectively bred for specific morphological traits—big horns, antlers, or skulls. Many have pet names and are tame enough to eat from your hand.

By definition, any “hunt” requiring no hunting at all is no hunt at all. Yet, the privatization and genetic manipulation of wildlife for profit, euphemized as “alternative livestock ranching” (or more de-animating yet, as “farming”), is booming in the rural western U.S. and Canada. Moreover, it’s eagerly endorsed by most state and provincial departments of agriculture. Never mind that game farming and canned killing are roundly decried everywhere by concerned wildlife managers, ethical hunters and those relatively few among the nonhunting public who know of it and give a damn.

How can this be? Why is canned wildlife killing so ubiquitously legal?

Landowners’ rights. States’ rights. Culturally inculcated Cartesian dualism. Money. Jobs. Politics. The American way.

And please remember this: Each time you enjoy a meal of “wild game” at a restaurant, you become an active participant in the obscene cruelty of game ranching. We have enough domesticated “genetic goofies” already—let wildlife remain wild.

To date, the blight of bio-engineering has yet to infect public wildlife or true hunting; no designer-breeding of trophy-antlered elk or deer for release into the wild. So far, the bio-manipulation of wildlife remains limited to the private arena: hybridizing pen-raised “hunting preserve” pheasants to maximize their “sporting qualities;” transplanting embryos from one subspecies of elk into another in hopes of building a super subspecies; feeding nutritionally hot supplements to promote unnatural antler growth; sperm-banking and artificial insemination of “factory mother” cervids with the semen of trophy males.

Regarding the latter caper, the stellar example is “30-30,” the world’s largest-antlered captive white-

tail buck. In 1996, 30-30 was purchased at stud for \$150,000. Today, his semen is worth more than gold-plated cocaine. After being electro-ejaculated, each load is divvied into several dozen test-tube doses that sell on a seller’s market for \$1,500 a squirt.

Which brings us back around to those smarmy little cowards who finance this Nazi Dr. Doolittle circus of horrors, gleefully forking over \$8,500 for the privilege of gunning down a custom-bred, alfalfa-fattened, trophy deer. Execution rights to a big bull elk can cost a whole lot more.

Delighted by all of this and dreaming of an ever-more profitable future, green-eyed wildlife geneticists, according to an article in *Sports Afield*, “are working to map out the genetic code of whitetails so they can isolate the antler chromosome that will make genetic engineering for big-racked deer available in the near future. With that map will come the possibility of cloned trophy deer.”

Yes, and given that brave new bio-tech breakthrough—why limit our God-playing to the private fenced pasture, where only the filthy rich can participate and profit? Already, some quality-conscious public-lands head-hunters are petitioning state and provincial wildlife agencies to adapt the wonders of bio-bastardizing to the genetic enhancement of public wildlife on public lands.

Should this ever happen, true hunting is dead. Naturally evolved wildness, likewise, will be no more. And where to then? “A world of made,” counsels e.e. cummings, “is not a world of born.”

All cultures are made. And ours is made to worship efficiency: fast, easy, and certain. To transport this workaday, time-clock mentality into what should be the challenging, meditative, and magically uncertain adventure of the hunt, is to trivialize one of humanity’s oldest, most rewarding, joyful, and—for those of us blessed and cursed with hunters’ hearts—sacred acts.



This is modern dominionistic/sport hunting's central problem—a collective failure of the spirit, precipitating the lockstep erosion of both internal ethics and external respect.

Yet, contrary to what myopic or disingenuous anti-hunters would have the public believe, all is not doom and gloom in the world of modern hunting. “In defiance of mass culture,” Paul Shepard proclaims, “tribalism constantly resurfaces.” And he is right. Standing in proud contrast to the egoistic sport and the pragmatically utilitarian hunter, is Kellert's third type, the naturalistic/nature hunter. As a group, Kellert's nature hunters were younger, more educated, and affluent than meat or sport hunters. This tribe, not surprisingly, also included the highest percentage of female hunters. Further distinguishing themselves, Kellert's nature hunters participated not only in hunting, but in such “nonconsumptive” outdoor activities as camping, backpacking and bird-watching. (In an ironic confluence of opposites, these same passions, minus hunting of course, were shared by many of the most ardent antihunters in Kellert's study.)

Nature hunters also hunted more often than members of the other two groups, “perhaps suggesting a stronger commitment...to the activity.” Moreover and significantly, nature hunters scored the highest “knowledge-of-animals scale scores” of all those tested—hunters, nonhunters and antihunters alike. While the dominionistic/sport staggers aimlessly through his gadget-confined world of made, and the meat hunter thinks only of his stomach, the nature hunter is an active and versatile player in the big wide world of born. He or she is also a de facto neo-animist, a bona fide spiritualist (whether she or he knows it or not), perpetuating the bottomless tradition of our prelapsarian ancestors, the archetypal nature hunters.

Whether ancient or neo, the animistic worldview, as defined by anthropologist Richard Nelson, embraces all of nature as “spiritual, conscious and subject to rules of respectful behavior.” It's hardly coincidental, then, that nature hunters—including the likes of Richard Nelson, Aldo Leopold, Michael Soule, Dave Foreman and myriad notable others—so often number among our most passionate nature lovers and defenders.

In dominionistic/sport hunting, with its gadget-addiction and lust for “bigger and better,” even unto the extremes of bio-engineering, the traditional hunter's heritage of animistic altruism is not only lost, it's openly mocked. For hunting to survive, for hunting to deserve to survive, this must change.

Ironically, the antihunting movement is the least likely tool for affecting needed hunting reform—insofar as most animal rights champions (Kellert's two basic types are “humanistic” and “moralistic”) are driven more by an emotionalized fervor to censor others than by an informed biologic, and appear incapable of distinguishing nature hunters from canned killers.

A better bet is informed and selective criticism of contemporary hunting values and practices, sounded from

within as well as without the hunting ranks. “To criticize the bad,” Ed Abbey reminds us, “is our duty to the good.” And among the baddest of the bad today, in hunting as elsewhere, is biotechnology. At the very least, therefore, all who care—authentic hunters, concerned nonhunters, and antihunters alike—must find a way to unite in condemning bio-technology for what it is: a super-weapon in befuddled humanity's war against natural-born wildness...and thus, against ourselves.



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