

## THE REWARDS OF FAIR CHASE

By Howard N. Ellman

Why do we hunt?

Only a tiny fraction of us would go hungry without the rewards of the chase. Only a tiny fraction who kill game to sell at market would face starvation without the proceeds of such sales. Thus, we do not hunt to survive. We hunt because it holds a mysterious attraction for us. What is the source of that allure? What primal thirst do we slake when we engage in the pursuit of game birds, animals, fish?

Ten thousand years ago -- fifty thousand generations -- all humans were hunter-gatherers. A genetic residue of that heritage lives to some degree within all of us. But that was a long time ago and the conditions of that life differed dramatically from those of today.

For one thing, we did not stand at the top of the food chain. Humankind filled the role of both prey and predator. And the latter role was performed under far more perilous circumstances than hunters face today -- even when seeking the most dangerous game -- and with far more uncertainty as to the outcome.

As recently as the early nineteenth century, plains Indians killed buffalo to feed and clothe their families, using handmade bows and stone tipped arrows, loosed from horseback while at full gallop, without saddle or stirrups. What bow-hunter today could duplicate that trick, even with a modern compound bow and aluminum shafted arrows fitted with surgically designed, razor-edged broadheads? In those same times, Arctic natives stalked polar bears on the ice floes, armed with spears. Who among us would be up to that challenge today?

To put the matter bluntly, we are filled with a primal urge to hunt, derived from a time when success required supreme woodcraft, skill with primitive weaponry, and courage to face mortal risk.

We now have at our fingertips the products of modern technology that diminish the need for skill and largely eliminate any vestige of risk, even so much as the risk of getting wet. Modern technology, and the gadgets that are its progeny, gives us the power to deceive and kill all fauna on earth with relative ease.

Somehow, we know in our hearts that a line must be drawn, that we cannot deploy the full power of human technology against the birds and animals. We regard ourselves as sportsmen, not killers. We bridle when the matron at the cocktail party berates us for depriving innocent creatures of their lives purely to gratify some primal urge. ("Don't give me that nonsense, mister. We all learn at a young age in civilized life to curb a number of inner urges. It begins with potty training, doesn't it?")

Defending ourselves, we speak of fair chase, the heritage of all mankind as hunters and gatherers, integral components of a complex biotic system in which each species plays the role assigned to it in the pyramid of life. We speak with fervor, with conviction. But those concepts are abstractions, of little meaning except as applied to specific cases. And it is at this critical juncture where the community of hunters falls into disarray because we have no consensus among ourselves and thus lack a clear note to play. Indeed, it seems that we lack the most rudimentary template to frame the questions.

Aldo Leopold, an ornithologist, botanist, teacher, forester and game manager, recognized our dilemma more than 50 years ago, saying, "I have the impression that the American sportsman is puzzled; he doesn't understand what is happening to him."

In *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, (Oxford University Press 1987), Leopold observed that all cultures retain part of their hunter-gatherer heritage. He found cultural value in experiences that remind us of our past and our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain.

"Our pioneer ancestors gave birth to two ideas," Leopold stated. "One is the 'go-light' idea, the other the 'one-bullet-one-buck' idea. The pioneer went light of necessity. Both of these ideas were forced on us; we made a virtue of necessity. In their later evolution, however, they became a code of sportsmanship, a self-imposed limitation on sport."

But these virtues have been cast aside by a "civilization (that) has . . . cluttered this elemental man-earth relation with gadgets," he wrote. "Our tools for the pursuit of wildlife improve faster than we do. Gadgets fill the pockets, they dangle from neck and belt. The overflow fills the auto-trunk, and also the trailer."

We have lost sight of our cultural, pioneer heritage. We have forgotten, as Leopold notes, that "sportsmanship is a voluntary limitation in the use of these armaments. *It is aimed to augment the role of skill and shrink the role of gadgets in the pursuit of wild things.*" [Emphasis added].

Because a hunter's acts are dictated by his own conscience, he wrote, "voluntary adherence to an ethical code elevates the self-respect of the sportsman. . . . voluntary disregard of the code degenerates and depraves him. . . ."

Even in 1948, he saw duck-hunters as having fallen the farthest on the scale of ethical standards. He admitted being unable to draw the line between "legitimate and illegitimate gadgets." But his message is clear. "[T]here must be some limit beyond which money-bought aids to sport destroy the cultural value of sport."

Part of the reason for this is that "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."

*"It has not dawned on him that outdoor recreations [particularly hunting] are essentially primitive, atavistic; but their value is contrast-value; that excessive mechanization destroys contrast by moving the factory to the woods or to the marsh,"* he said. [Emphasis added].

There can be no doubt that Leopold would have pronounced anathema upon all mechanical decoying devices currently in vogue today among waterfowlers. Indeed, the passages quoted above could have been written with those devices as their prime target -- although first published nearly fifty years prior to their advent.

Devices that nullify the special skills, the special art of the sport destroy its cultural value. Without cultural value, blood sport stands naked, without justification in societies where ample sustenance can be obtained by other means. Our failure to understand and act on this logic is why the derisive comments of matron at the cocktail party prove so devastating.

The line between sportsmanship and killing is not that difficult to draw. It takes skill, practice and awareness, for example, to draw the right notes in the right sequence at the correct pace from a factory made duck call. Thus, a hunter who uses such a device well does not do violence to ethical standards merely because he did not carve and assemble the call himself. Skill, practice and awareness provide the yardstick -- together with a firmly held conviction that a gamebird has value beyond serving as a target, or a measure of manhood on a full strap, or an attractive island in a puddle of sauce on the dinnerplate.

The explosive growth of modern technology makes it all the more imperative that we focus on the cultural values that comprise sportsmanship and demand adherence to those values for ourselves and our companions.

Ask yourself: How do roto-ducks and mallard machines and remote controlled battery operated devices of all kinds relate to self-reliance, hardihood, woodcraft and marksmanship? Wherein lies the cultural value, the sportsmanship in the use of such gadgets?

Make no mistake. We have the technology to turn waterfowling into an outdoor version of a video game, complete with console, joystick and arcade soundtrack. We have battery-powered spinning wing decoys operated by remote control. We have radio controlled, propeller driven decoys built on the chassis and principle of the child's toy speedboat. We have strobe-light decoying devices, a battery powered device that makes decoys act like ducks in a feeding frenzy.

A few "hunters" have combined all these devices in multiples, in one electrified, mechanized set, controlled with an integrated circuit board in the blind. Nor is this the end of the travesty. Sony has already created a remote controlled dog robot to fetch and carry. Can a waterborne version be far behind?

Must we ask the regulators to force ethical rules down our throats, like errant children who won't take their medicine or junkies ordered into the methadone clinic?

Maybe learning to control rampant trigger-itch and the lust for easy kills is, after all, a little like potty training -- or sticking to a workout regime. We vanquish an animal urge to achieve something more valuable. Self-restraint is the essence of sportsmanship. Heightened awareness and a sense of connection is the reward.

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If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.

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