

## A Moral and Spiritual Approach to Hunting

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### **Moral Specifics:**

Hunting is a contentious subject. Some (animal welfare) think it is immoral, while some (Teddy Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Paul Shepard) believe it is vital for cultivating virtue. Whatever your view may be, there are some well-defined ethics for hunting that provide much common ground with hunting's opponents. But first, I need to mention what distinguishes these ethics. Namely, they are voluntary and not enforced by law. This is important. Aldo Leopold remarked on the importance of voluntary submission to a hunting ethic: "...the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience...It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact." (Leopold, 178)

Beyond the laws and game regulations, and perhaps more important, the two most notable ethics of hunting are the ethic of clean kill, and the ethic of fair chase.

### **Ethic of Clean Kill.**

This is not a law, but it is something to which hunters adhere. The goal of this ethic is to ensure that animals are killed as quickly and humanely as possible. This presupposes that animals can suffer and that the suffering is morally significant. There is common ground here with Animal Welfare Ethics. Hunters are not sadistic, and we do not revel in the pain of other living creatures. We accept it as a normal and vital part of life for every living being, and we believe killing and respect are not incompatible.

### **Ethic of Fair Chase:**

Again, this is not a law, though some of the original ideas have been put into law, and it is something to which many hunters adhere. It is mainly a backlash to the destruction from

overkill by market hunters in the early days of our country. And if you don't know the history of market hunting, I suggest you learn it as a lesson of what not to do. As a result of the destruction from market hunting, it was decided hunters needed a code of conduct to distinguish honorable hunting from market hunting. From Boone and Crocket Club website: "The code needed to convey the idea that achievement in the field is best measured by the effort involved [rather than the quantity or size of game taken], that the hunting experience was far more important than the kill, and that hunting serves the goals of conservation."

Another idea of the fair chase ethic is that the animals should have a reasonable chance to escape. From BCC "There are no laws against shooting a game animal that has become partially domesticated or habituated to humans. Fair chase, however, would not take advantage of animals whose natural instincts have been compromised in this way." We see here that the freedom and wildness of the animal is honored and maximized.

3 main points of fair chase: Process over product, animals are wild and free, and hunters give back.

1. Emphasis on the process: 3 cultural values from Leopold:

1. Split-rail value. Reminds us of our national origins and evolution
2. Value in any activity that reminds us of our dependence on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain and the fundamental organization of the biota.
3. Value in any activity that exercises ethical restraints, called sportsmanship.

Leopold also was a proponent of the "go light" ethic for hunting, and he lamented the fact that hunters focused on gadgets and gear more than the process of the hunt. There is now a growing trend toward traditional and primitive bowhunting. Many of these hunters make their own gear. Aldo Leopold also wrote about the value of building one's own gear. On page 181 of *A Sand County Almanac* he writes: "Homemade aids to sport often enhance, rather than destroy, the man-earth drama; he who kills a trout with his own fly has scored two

coups, not one.” In addition to the man-earth drama, he thought this builds woodsmanship and self-reliance.

2. Chance to escape and not domesticated: pens, canned hunting, etc. Fair chase is against all of these. I would make the case that fair chase should also be against bait piles and food plots. Animals are left free and unfettered to live their lives as they see fit and as nature demands. Freedom and wildness of animals and land is honored and maximized. This is where we see an overlap with many other philosophical theories, such as: animal welfare, Albert Schweitzer’s reverence for life, Paul Taylor’s respect for nature, wilderness philosophers, etc.

3. Hunters give back. No one does or has done more for conservation than hunters. The giving has taken 4 main forms: Lobbying for laws and regulations to protect wildlife and wild lands, money from self-imposed excise taxes and various licenses, organizations for wildlife conservation which lobby for conservation issues, and time spent on conservation. Laws, regulations, and self-imposed fees include:

1900 The Lacey Act, outlawed markets for wildlife

1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Pittman-Robertson Act, excise tax on hunting gear and ammunition

Dingle-Johnson Act, excise tax of fishing gear

Conservation Reserve Program

North American Wetlands Conservation Act

Wetlands Reserve Program

License and stamp sales: The Federal Duck Stamp was the first, and many others followed

These are all the product of hunters' efforts, and they are the cornerstone of wildlife management and conservation. Again, they are voluntary, this was all hunters' idea. They are also unique in that the legislation contains mandates that the revenue which is generated from them must go to conservation/restoration/protection of the animals and habitat. The money is not to be appropriated for anything else, and believe me, the politicians have tried to steal it.

Organizations:

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, American Prairie Foundation, Whitetails Unlimited, Boone and Crocket Club, Wild Turkey Federation, Ducks Unlimited. All are influential and members will often donate work days to help with wildlife studies or habitat restoration.

One point I would like to bring up is that hunters are often accused of having a self-interested concern for wildlife. Namely, they only care about wildlife and conservation so they can kill wildlife now and in the future. While there may be some hunters who are this way, I don't believe the majority are self-interested or anthropocentric in the classical sense. They may be self-interested in the sense that hunters' interests and the interests of wildlife are so entwined that they cannot be separated, but the majority of hunters do have a genuine concern and regard for wildlife including non-game species, and they have done and continue to do much for non-game species, as well as those they hunt. Hunters are the single biggest reason there is wildlife to enjoy in this country. Emphasize again: these are self-imposed ethics of restraint and giving.

Spiritual Aspects

Most hunters will tell you there is something spiritual about hunting. In *A Sand County Almanac* Aldo Leopold wrote about the duck hunter: “That he is already overfed in no way dampens his avidity for gathering his meat from God.” ASCA p 166

In *Encounters with Nature* human ecologist Paul Shepard writes: “Unlike farmers who must labor in the fields and who earn by their sweat a grudging security in nature, the primitive hunter gets ‘something for nothing.’ The kill is a gift.” (Shepard, 73) The view of life as a gift seems in stark contrast to the commodified existence to which so many of us have become accustomed. This is a spiritual consideration.

Anthropological/Animism:

Native Americans were hunters and animists. Animism is the belief that everything in the world is “enspirited” or “animated” by a life essence. Many rituals developed out of these beliefs, and they vary among cultures. Some common themes for hunting are sexual abstinence and purification for hunt, smudging (bathing in certain smokes), sacred places tied to hunting, blooding (smearing blood of kill on face or body of hunter, usually done for first kill as a rite of passage). There are religions built around hunting and these rituals. Some native cultures talk of a “Happy Hunting Ground” where spirits go in the after life. Another common theme is that animals are gifts, and many times this was viewed as a contract between hunters and animals. Namely, the animals would give their lives in exchange for certain behavior by the hunters. i.e. respectful treatment of flesh and bones, offerings and gratitude. The idea of reciprocity and giving back is key. Many contemporary hunters are sympathetic to beliefs of Native Americans and other hunting cultures, and they draw upon their beliefs from time to time. David Petersen is a modern hunter and author who describes himself as a “Neo-Animist.”

David Sigurslid and Taoism. “Tao” translates as “the way”, and the Taoists believe the Tao is the right way to life. Focus on process and finding an end within the means. Sigurslid draws from Taoism, Aristotle, and Leopold primarily to inform his philosophy. He states that

hunting is our “Genuity.” Genuity is a word he made up to describe something which is genuine, transparent, and fits into the natural order according to its form and function. He flirts with spiritually informed evolution where humans have the anatomy, physiology, and ecological niche of a hunter. The forces which shaped our species are beyond our control, and he delves into spiritual considerations with them.

## Christianity

What hunting means for Christians is largely a matter of being in, a part of, and communing with God’s creation.

Creation story: after nearly every day is repeated the phrase, “And God saw that it was good.” What this means is that the value or goodness of God’s creation is not contingent upon any particular usefulness it may have to us. It is good in God’s eyes, intrinsically, and just because.

In the bible, God made a covenant with Noah. After the flood He gave Noah plants and animals for food. “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.” (Genesis 9:3)

Jesus also spoke to Peter about a relationship with animals. In a vision Peter saw “... something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners...I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’” (Acts 11:5-7) The voice Peter heard was from Jesus. One can see from these passages that there is a biblical basis for animals being gifts that are to be killed and eaten, and these gifts are good.

## Parallels between hunting and Christianity:

Power in the blood: the blooding ritual mentioned earlier and the saving and healing power of the blood of Christ. Communion is the most common form of symbolism conveying the power of blood.

Life through death: Just as Christians gain spiritual life through the death and resurrection of Christ and becoming one with Him, hunters live by eating (and thus assimilating and becoming one with) the animals they hunt.

### **Conclusion:**

There are many common themes between hunters and their detractors. Respect is one: Hunters have a respect and affinity for their prey and the land that is uncommon in the market of commodities. Freedom, wildness, and reciprocity are some other shared values. All are cornerstones of ethical hunting, and I believe hunting has much to teach us about melding these values with judicious use and conservation. Please don't watch any of the outdoor TV channels and think you've seen a true picture of hunting. Many, in fact most, hunters find these shows and images distasteful, to say the least. I encourage everyone to focus on the common ground and the deeper sentiments hunters share with them. By doing this, both sides can learn, establish common ground, and move on together for the benefit of themselves and the biotic community.