

Sport Hunting as Ritual

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Every year, hunters kill more than 130 million animals in the United States. Except for a few aboriginal cultures that still hunt for food, most hunters in the U.S. hunt for "recreation" — for the apparent pleasure of stalking and killing. The number of hunters in the U.S. declined from 14 million in 1996 to 13 million in 2001. This longstanding trend is attributable to statistical evidence that hunting is most popular among older people in rural areas whose dying out is not being matched by the entry of young people into the activity. A parallel growth of an anti-hunting movement appears to be congruent with the ascendancy of human victimization consciousness in gospel-inoculated cultures. Meanwhile, wildlife control agencies are calling for increased hunting in the numerous areas in the U.S. where deer overpopulation is contributing to ecosystem damage, increased vehicle accidents, and agricultural losses.

Why do men hunt and kill animals they do not need for food or clothing? Why do comparatively fewer women hunt? Do hunters develop a rivalry with their quarry the killing of which provides a cathartic release? Does the kill of a hunt bring about social camaraderie? What explains the rituals associated with hunting, the obsessive attention to guns, knives, bows, or the rites of passage into adulthood that the successful hunt signifies for some adolescents? Is hunting an acceptable and needful outlet that transfers mimetic antagonisms between humans to the hunted animals?

A Short History of Hunting

Hunter cultures far predate recorded history. The earliest human recordings known are Australian aboriginal art of the Pre-estuarine period 50,000 years ago, with hunting as a common motif. The earliest European art consisted of animal figures drawn on pebbles; later the well-known Paleolithic cave drawings depicted animals and hunting. Preponderant archeological evidence is that early human social groups relied upon scavenging, gathering, and hunting for sustenance. Only in the past 6000 years has plant

cultivation and animal husbandry gradually replaced subsistence foraging. One could almost say that hunting is hardwired into human cultural “genes.” Animals figure in key roles in a profusion of legends, myths, fables, and symbols in all cultures. Down through history humans have hunted animals for food, fiber, and prestige, while themselves being hunted in some locales by large predators. One needs little effort to pull the covers off cultural legends to recognize human rivalry with animals. And follow human rivalry between humans in the guise of animals.

With hunting so central to a band’s existence, those men [*gender intentional*] with the most athleticism, skill, and cunning to obtain food and fiber or to defend from predation would be more valuable to the group. Such men would have prestige in the society and would elicit both the mimetic emulation and resentment of lesser skilled individuals. Early Paleolithic hunters almost certainly would need high group cooperation to bring down large dangerous game with their limited technology. Resentment among a people could be cathartically displaced upon the pursuit and violent bloodletting of a hunted animal. Conceivably the newfound group solidarity resulting from a successful blooded hunt could have led to the first experiments with animal and human sacrifice.

Hunting spawned technological developments, at first improved stone points for hunting, later, projectiles that could be launched from longer distance. Nonetheless, hunting technology advanced at a much slower pace in nomadic hunting societies than the technologies spawned by the settled agrarian communities where abundant food supplies enabled the specialization of labor. With the exception of certain fisheries, large settled communities have never been compatible with hunting. Dense human populations simply overwhelm animal populations. Thus developing civilizations have seen a gradual decline in the importance of hunting. Human labor has been channeled into agrarian food and fiber production, into building cities, into manning armies. In a number of civilizations hunting became relegated to the aristocratic class for royalties’ amusement and prestige.

Who Hunts?

Few hunters today hunt for economic advantage. Hunters do eat much of the game they kill. Sometimes hides are processed for leather or fur. Many hunters indeed do enjoy the utilization of their quarry. Eating their deer, or squirrel, or pheasant, or making a rug out of a bear, justifies hunting to their own minds and to much of the public. However, the cost ratio of direct hunting expenditures as well as the worth of hunters' time in the field makes game an expensive commodity indeed!

According to the *2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Survey* issued co-jointly by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Census Bureau, big game hunters averaged \$925 per hunter for the year; small game hunters spent an average of \$334 per hunter; migratory bird hunters spent on average \$470 per year; those hunting other animals spent \$233. Expenses included travel, equipment, licensing and fees, food and lodging, and guiding services. Big game hunters spent an average of 14 days hunting and 10 trips in pursuit of their quarry, while small game hunters and migratory fowl hunters averaged about 11 days hunting on 9 trips. Since hunters average 3 to 4 % of their annual days hunting, one could roughly calculate the value of their time with respect to their earnings power. Expensive are venison, quail, and duck indeed, especially considering the income distribution of hunters. Higher income people hunt more, with 57% of all hunters earning \$40,000 or more.

Other intriguing statistics from *The Survey* shows that 7 % of the white population hunts, 1% of the black population hunts, and 2% of other race populations hunt. 91% of hunters are male, 9% are female. Highest participation by age group is in the middle age years of 35 to 54, that being 49% of total hunters. Statistics also show that rural people hunt considerably more per capita than those from larger metropolitan areas. Although only 19% of the U.S. population 16 years and older resides outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), 41 % of all hunters live outside MSAs. 13% of those nonmetropolitan

residents hunted, in contrast to 5% of all metropolitan residents who hunted. Education attainment level distribution appears well distributed across the spectrum.

Prestige and Catharsis in Modern Sport Hunting

Hunters have markers that increase ones prestige: The male of the species, large horns, large body size, extraordinary plumage, perfect symmetry or oddity. An exotic species brings status, thus the allure of the African safari hunt. Bagging a dangerous beast such as a Grizzly Bear or Cape Buffalo also gives standing since the danger of the animal heightens the potency of the transference mechanism. The difficulty of stalking a species, the challenge of inclement weather, or the handicapping of an animal such as by using a bow rather than a rifle, serve to build prestige among hunters' peers and satisfaction in their rivalries with their game. "I give the animal I hunt a sporting chance" is a frequent comment that always elicits nods of approval from the more elite of hunters.

In this sense, fishing is similar to hunting in the markers of prestige, in exceptional size or rarity of a particular fish, or the challenge of catching a fish on light tackle or artificial lures. However, fishing is relatively bloodless, fish hold further distance from human resemblance, and angling does not use weapons that could serve a dual purpose to kill humans. Fishing is highly popular among children and women, all races, and encompasses a stronger metropolitan demographic. In fishing, the quarry is captured alive and is often released in good sportsmanship. With few exceptions, fishing does not provide the possibility of a blooded catharsis for the participants.

Modern hunters are enamored with the guns, bows, knives, and hunting dogs that are extensions of their own human powers. Many hunters and non-hunters alike take pleasure in collecting, cleaning, and decorating their equipment. Those in political movements who would restrict gun ownership might be likened to a castration threat. When male potency is tied up with guns, a threat to take away the guns is resisted from the core of psyches tied to mimetically induced rivalries.

In many rural areas hunting is a rite of passage, the bagging of a buck or turkey an entrance to manhood. Thus the attaining of this status pressures youth and occupies much of their interest. Such rites of passage are obvious in hunting cultures of the past (and the fading few that still persist). Envy and rivalries are deep and raw among the youngsters. The fathers and adult hunters understand adolescents' desperation to bag game; the wiser among them are gentle to cushion disappointment in those that fail the task, recognizing their own past disappointments and their consequent humiliation and impotency. During this time of apprenticeship the young hunter is taught to hide emotion over the death of an animal. Rather, a successful hunter is praised and given status with the adults. A common custom among some North American hunters is to smear the blood of a youngster's first deer kill onto his face. That a blooded kill goes hand in hand with newly emerging community solidarity is congruent with the mimetic model.

Sport hunting is a reenactment of ritual violence that pulls many back to an era when men's superior physical strength was crucial as providers, when fathers rather than schools taught their sons, when nature was raw and intimate rather than buffered by layers of technology and comfort. Hunting is not the lion lying down with the lamb, but neither is its negation to be taken lightly. Boys still need rites of passage into the adult community, men still need challenges that differentiate themselves from women, and men still need contests that build community and solidarity. The challenge for those who would castigate hunting is to substitute other mechanisms that build community and self-esteem while dissipating resentment with no human victims.