

Why Hunting is Good Medicine for Youth, Society and the Environment

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Depending on whose figures you use, there are at least 38 to 45 million hunters and fishers in the U.S. They are among the most prominent and influential of all demographic groups. Their total economic contribution is \$70 billion annually, \$179 billion in ripple effect. They support more jobs than the largest Fortune 500 company, and rank as the 11th largest corporation in America. Each year they generate six times more gold and silver than Hollywood's top 40 movies of all time.

Five million more Americans fish than golf. In a time when commercial fishing is fingered for depleting fish stocks world-wide, the real fish story is that sportfishing generates nearly ten times more revenue than commercial fishing. They spend more but use much less of the resource.

License sales and federal excise taxes on rods and reels and firearms and ammunition pay for most of the bill for fisheries and wildlife conservation and management.

Hunters and fishers contribute up to \$1.7 billion each year for conservation. For over 60 years, they have paid this self-imposed tax totaling more than \$7.6 billion for protection of our natural environment and fish and wildlife. Since 1934, when the first duck stamp was purchased, more than \$647 million has gone to conserving over 5 million acres of wildlife habitat, greater in size than the State of Massachusetts, providing breeding and wintering grounds for waterfowl and countless other species, most of them non-game.

Volunteer hunters make up groups like Ducks Unlimited which by itself has purchased over 10 million acres of wetlands habitat in North America. In less than 20 years, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has acquired millions of acres for elk and other wildlife, game and non-game. It has launched successful programs to reestablish elk throughout the midwest and eastern U.S. The National Wild Turkey Federation has established wild turkey populations across the continent. There are more deer and turkeys now than at any time in history.

Consider this: for every one of its 700,000 members, Ducks Unlimited has purchased about 15 acres of productive wildlife habitat to the benefit of the entire community of living things. If these men and women can translate their love of nature which was fostered in a duck blind when they were young into hundreds of millions of dollars to protect the living earth in a time when the sheer insanity of expanding economy threatens the survival of the biosphere, what do you think five million of them might do? Or fifty million?

The remarkable list of achievements of North American hunters and anglers goes on, but, tragically, at the very time when the earth needs them most the recruitment of youth into hunting is dwindling. Nine of ten hunters are now over forty, which means that in a few years recreational hunting may cease to exist. The decline in the ranks of hunters is due in part to a lack of understanding of the relationship between hunting and stewardship of the environment. What happens inside hunters that motivates them to work together and take responsibility for the

environment? Much of the blame goes to hunters themselves who have failed to articulate the inner side of hunting and communicate it effectively to nonhunters.

From the perspective of economy, ecology and environmental conservation, hunting is important and justifiable. However necessary, these justifications are not sufficient to win the day. The community of hunters has emphasized the effects of recreational hunting, not actually why they hunt or what hunting does for them as human beings. In so doing they have left out the very heart of hunting. The impressive economic impact of hunting and its unparalleled record in environmental conservation reflect the profound psycho-spiritual influence of hunting. If we want men who respect life and take responsibility for the environment, then we must be aware of what hunting does for the male heart.

The hunt is as archetypal to males as birthing is to females. The hunt marries young men to wild animals and nature just as birthing bonds a young women to children and life. Men are adapted to take life to serve life. Hunting itself teaches universal virtues, and the taking of life opens hearts and engenders respect and responsibility..

Both males and female may benefit much from hunting and fishing (fishing is hunting with a hook), but boys especially gain from hunting. Initiation to adulthood is inborn and automatic for women: they leave childhood and become capable of reproduction with the onset on menses. Not so for boys who during adolescence are compelled to prove themselves worthy as men. For hundreds of thousands of years boys have proved themselves worthy by killing a wild animal of sufficient size. That demonstrates to prospective brides, in-laws and society their ability to protect and provide.

The instinct to hunt appears early in males. A German scientist examined behavior in over 60 cultures worldwide. He observed in them all that boys between the age of 4 and 5 spontaneously begin to throw rocks, often competing with one another in terms of accuracy or distance. Cultural conditioning cannot explain the boys' behavior since in many of the cultures adult males do not throw rocks or anything else. Moreover, girls did not exhibit this behavioral pattern. Surely boys are programmed to begin developing weapon skills early in life, a reflection of the long history of hunting among human males. We can be equally certain that the original weapons of our earliest human ancestors were rocks.

Form follows function in evolution, and the human is no exception. The male shoulder is constructed differently than the female's and better suited for throwing, another indication of the male's adaptation to hunting. Whether President Jimmy Carter or staunch anti-hunter Cleveland Amory, most civilized men killed a bird or other small animal as a child. Normally they did so before initiated to hunting, and many had never seen anyone else hunt or kill an animal. They use rocks, slingshots, bows or air rifles.

Just as females are biologically adapted to reproduce, males are adapted to hunt, kill and provide. The instinct propels them to pursue the animal, but a surprise awaits them. The same happens to a young man whose rampant sex drive pushes him towards a sexual encounter. His surprise comes when he falls in love, not at all what he anticipated. And that is the way normal human

development moves, from lower to higher, in this case, from sexual instinct (eros) to spiritual love (agape).

From sex to love and marriage the path to fatherhood tempers a man's passion, opens his heart and teaches him compassion. The path of the hunt leads from instinct to the kill. The death of the animal evokes a strong mix of emotions and self-reflection. It is an ambiguous moment for most males who, according to surveys I've conducted, feel a combination of elation, sadness and pride.

In the same way that young children spontaneously imitate the gestures, postures and sounds of animals, the young hunter identifies with the animals he hunts. He studies them, tracks them, listens for them, anticipates them, calls them, even dreams them. When the moment of truth arrives the young man is caught off guard at the sight of the beautiful beast, bloodied, soiled and lifeless. In an eternal moment he realizes that he, too, is mortal and impermanent. At the deepest level he is stunned by the awareness that despite all appearances to the contrary he and the animal are essentially one, part of something far greater than themselves. It is a supreme moment of humility that launches a boy's spiritual life and connects him to nature.

The young hunter is also keenly aware that the animal died for him, for his passage to manhood and for the sustenance of his body and spirit. It is a holy communion, the original sacrificial rite that opens a young man's heart and fills him with empathy. "Thinking with the heart" means that when we hunt we learn to listen to our deepest feelings and honor them. That is why over 90% of the mature hunters I've surveyed report letting suitable specimens go, often because it simply doesn't feel right to kill them.

As one who serves life by taking life, the young hunter adopts a serious commitment to temper his passion, the origin of ethical life. For him the wild animal is a blessed gift. The hunt teaches a spirit of gratitude to the animals and for the gifts of nature as well as to life itself and the divine. Most older hunters report that they thank the animals they've taken as well as the Creator.

Hunting invokes an altered state of consciousness, one of supreme alertness to the animal and the environment. It gets us out of ourselves, beyond our ego, and as a consequence the hunt is fundamentally a religious experience, one that reconnects us to the source. Hunting teaches the interconnection and interdependence of all life, not in an abstract, intellectual sense, but at the deepest level of knowing. Like men of hunting-gathering societies, recreational hunters know from direct experience that interdependence is a fact of life.

Because hunting reveals the impermanence of life and our own mortality, the taking of an animal's life evokes respect for all life, animal and human alike. Killing an animal teaches us the terrible extent of our power, and so it evokes responsibility.

For these reasons, leading authorities in family therapy, male development, adolescent psychology and teen violence agree that shooting sports and hunting are good for youth. Michael Gurian, best-selling author of several books on how to properly raise boys into fine young men agrees with Dr. Jim Rose, neuropsychologist at the University of Wyoming, that not only is hunting unrelated to aggression and violence, it produces less violent, more peaceful men.

In a 13-year program in Idaho, delinquent boys were taken out for two weeks into the high desert where they had to survive with nothing more than a sleeping bag and a pocketknife. They learned to cooperate, to observe and study wild animals carefully, to invent weapons and traps so they could eat. The program was the most successful ever launched for troubled youth. One year after their wilderness survival experience, 85% of the boys had not resumed delinquency. Field supervisor, Wade Brackenbury, feels that it was the taking of animals' lives for food that most transformed the boys and engendered in them a sense of respect for life.

The meanest boy Brackenbury ever took into the wilderness was a Neo-Nazi who had beaten a black boy nearly to death with a shotgun. For several days he tried catching a marmot, and finally caught it under a rock and speared it. He drug out the marmot and held it on his lap as it looked into his eyes. Brackenbury said, "I've never forgotten the look on that boy's face as he looked into the marmot's eyes...It looked up at him and there was kind of this light of understanding or of mutual empathy, then the light kind of went out of the eyes of the marmot and it died. And that boy started crying, just broke down and wept, and the reason he was able to feel that was that he watched that marmot for several days...he had some empathy for it..." The boy cried hard for several days, as though an abscess had opened up and drained all his hate and anger, and then was a very different boy. When he was 18 the young man returned to become a counselor in the program, according to Brackenbury, directly from this one experience, which illustrates the profound influence of the hunt on opening the heart and engendering a commitment to serve others.

Hunting teaches us that, like all lifeforms, we are dependent upon the integrity and viability of nature.

Though the hunt is goal-oriented, it teaches us that all of creation functions by processes and that we are part of the process. It engenders a "7th generation perspective," making decisions today with future generations in mind. As Athabascan elder, Peter John, said, "The animals you take are important to your grandchildren." Because hunters are motivated to "fiercely protect nature," as poet Robert Bly said, they are the leaders in environmental conservation.

Hunting teaches us to be observant and patient, to emulate nature and slow down, to "be here now" in the present moment. It teaches us that inner peace and sanity are possible in an insane world. According to Don Jacobs, a leading thinker in education, "Hunting is the ideal way to teach young people universal virtues including patience, generosity, courage, fortitude and humility."

The hunt promotes genuine self-confidence, tempered by humility and gratitude, as well as self-sufficiency. It teaches us self-restraint in the use of lethal weapons.

The hunt naturally promotes ethics universally associated with aboriginal and recreational hunting. The First Precept of Buddhism is known as "ahimsa," which actually means "to avoid causing unnecessary harm," which to hunters means taking only what they need and using what they take. It also means minimizing the suffering of animals. The first vow of Zen Buddhism is to save all life, the equivalent among hunters of "putting back," stewardship of the environment.

The hunt submerges us in the subtle realities of life. These include the power of prayer, envisioning what we want, tempered by ethical choice. Every hunt is a prayer in motion, and seasoned hunters know that faith in the outcome has much to do with success. Hunting teaches us the significance of attitude, intention and right-mindedness.

These are some of the secrets hidden deep in hunting, the original rite of passage for which there is no substitute and the only path of initiation that marries men to the ‘other’ that is nature. Those who directly participate in the food chain enter into the Great Mystery of life as life and death. For them the sacred hunt is a love chain.

More than at any time in the history of the world we need men who are deeply wedded to nature, which is to say that we need men who value the viability of the entire biological community above consumerism and the unsustainable economy that feeds it. Hunters are such men. Their unparalleled performance on the front lines of conservation makes them the ideal model for a world in crisis.

I agree with Michael Meade that Western culture is unraveling. As apocalypse, the process may be gradual instead of dramatic, but surely it has begun. The first teen suicide recorded on earth was in the 20th Century. From 1986 to 1996 the number of children taking psychiatric drugs tripled. Depression is epidemic. Species are disappearing at an alarming rate, and humans may be causing global warming as well as loss of the atmosphere.

A U.N. global survey compiled every nation’s many problems and placed them into four categories. Then they reduced all the problems in each of these categories to a single word, as follows:

<u>Category</u>	<u>One Word Summary</u>
Culture	rootless
Politics	powerless
Economics	ruthless
Environment	futureless

All these words ending in “less” indicate that modern life is meaningless, exactly what Laurens Van der Post concluded after spending time with the still wild Kalahari Bushman for whom life was always meaningful. Likewise, for recreational hunters, life is full of meaning.

Meade believes that the deterioration of culture appears first among the youth and the elders. He believes we have forgotten our elders as the source of guidance to help us find our way home.

The ancient Greek story of Narcissus makes the point well. Narcissus was hunting with his young friends when he left them and went to a pond where he saw his face reflected. He fell in love with himself, but his fate soon followed in the form of suicide, the cost of turning one’s back on nature which is exactly what civilization has done. Like Narcissus we suffer from undaunted pride, and if we do not rejoin our hunting companions it may destroy us.

In the Iron Hans mythology from northern Europe, the boy ends up looking at his own reflection in the proverbial pond, but unlike Narcissus he has the Wild Man standing behind him so he does

not get stuck on himself, but instead maintains his connection with nature. The Wild Man in each boy helps him discover through the hunt the power, beauty and intelligence of nature.

Meade suggests that pursuit of the “normal” is not what we need. After 9-11, President Bush recommended that we resume normal life, like visiting Disneyland or shopping at the mall. Instead, Meade advises us to look to the edge of our culture for answers. To him the edge means art as soulful expression, but for me the edge of culture is nature, which shrinks as our abusive, exploitive culture expands. At the edge of culture are the wild men and women who communicate with animals, fight to protect wild places and work to pass on the original human culture, hunting, a culture founded squarely on nature and harmonized with human nature. When culture does not harmonize human nature with nature, it is doomed to failure. Like the wild man in Iron Hans we have many elders ready to show us the way home to recovery of nature-culture.

Among the greatest gifts we may give is to inspire enthusiasm in others. Inspire means “to set on fire,” and enthusiasm means “the God within.” If you want to be inspired with enthusiasm, attend a Ducks Unlimited banquet and observe the wild mentors, elders from the edge committed to the protection of great fortunes and the provision of gifts for our youth. If the truth be known, the heart of the hunter holds the keys to the future of human culture. The intelligence of the heart will bring us home.

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