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HONORING THE HUNTED

Showing respect for the fallen animal is a good first step toward helping nonhunters understand that hunters truly value wildlife.



MARK WERNER

Photos that emphasize respect for the dead animal present a much different perspective to nonhunting viewers than traditional "grip and grin" trophy photos.

In various regions of the world, hunting is coming under increasing scrutiny and is subject to growing criticism, and there appears little likelihood that this reality will fade anytime soon. At one level this is hard to explain as our traditional, cultural activity is supported by many of the world's leading conservation organizations and has a proven track record of contributing to wildlife science, management, and protection. In addition, the economics associated with hunting prove that it not only benefits large numbers of people but also provides incentives for wildlife to be valued, and thus protected, from frivolous or illegal killing or displacement by competing land development activities.

So, why is it that hunters are struggling so hard to convince society that hunting remains relevant and worthwhile? Beyond any doubt this is the most important question facing the hunting world. No amount of bellicose argument and fist thumping over what hunting's opponents stand for will do us any good at all. But just maybe, if we carefully probe and answer this question, we will gain insight that can move us forward. So, let's state the problem in clear terms. Why doesn't society recognize the good we do?

The answer to this question is complicated, but clearly one reason is that nonhunters find it difficult to believe that we care about wildlife in any emotional sense. Seemingly, they cannot get past their impression that we take pleasure from an experience that often

results in the death of wild creatures and, therefore, we cannot possibly care for animals in any real way. Far worse, a growing percentage of people may have the impression that all we care about is securing the animal's death. With respect to our conservation efforts they say we only intervene in debates on wildlife's future when the opportunity to hunt is threatened and not for the good of wildlife, as such. In some, perhaps many, cases, they are right! It appears, given this, that these people are not prepared to accept hunting, regardless of its social and economic benefits. They reject it on an emotional basis, which floats like a hairy lump in our logic-informed gruel that demands and expects a science-based acceptance of hunting.

This is frustrating for certain, but should the hunting community take these concerns seriously? Will this sentiment grow to a point where hunting is really threatened, or could even disappear? I suspect the latter is a long way off for hunting in general, but I don't think we should be complacent about the possibility. As the experience in some African and European countries has shown, hunting can be displaced by political sentiment and public opinion, so I think the prudent course is to try to determine how we can affect that opinion and turn it in our favor. I disagree with those who

About DSC

An independent organization since 1982, DSC has become an international leader in conserving wildlife and wilderness lands, educating youth and the general public, and promoting and protecting the rights and interests of hunters worldwide. Get involved at www.biggame.org.

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argue that we can ignore this issue and who suggest there is really no way to effectively change societal views on hunting, and with those who feel that opposition to hunting has always existed and is simply something we have to deal with.

But how do we do this? How do we demonstrate to the wider public that hunters do care about wildlife, and that our interests in wild creatures and the lands and waters they occupy extend far beyond the practical question of whether there will be animals to hunt and fish to catch? I suggest we begin by honoring the hunted, and by letting the hunter play a distant second fiddle to the magnificent creatures we pursue and sometimes kill. Doing so will require a major change in our culture—a culture that is intoxicated with awards that promote the hunter and magazine stories and television shows that do the same. Everywhere in our communications the hunter is alive and smiling while the animal is lifeless and conquered, often bloodied and contorted in death. Is there really any wonder the public is conflicted about us and feels that it is the animal and not the hunter who needs support?

There is another way to communicate what we do. We can tell exciting stories and develop powerful films about the hunt that really do emphasize the animal, and that lead readers and viewers to marvel at the extraordinary capacities of endurance, strength, and wariness wild creatures possess. We can displace our discussions of weaponry, our own prowess, and the animal's final moments with narratives that speak of wild beauty, of inspiration in nature, and of the deep sense of peace and fulfillment we find in our days afield. We can explain to the nonhunter that what we pursue is the experience of a brief, unfettered existence; one that is always too short, yes, but timeless, as well. We can explore the realities of that existence, the fellowship, the hard pushes across wild terrain, the raw experience of weather and sky in places where life slows down and problems become

diminished. We can explain the slow conversations by open fires, the deep sleep that beckons, and the early rises in morning darkness that allow us to witness the breaking day.

There is nothing wrong with explaining that an animal died in this pursuit, nor in describing the sense of achievement we may feel at the end of any hunt, whether an animal was taken or not. We cannot and should not disguise the fact that animal death is a reality in the hunting world. But surely, if we wish to convince the general public that we care for something more, and pursue something greater than the animal's death, we must emphasize the experience and the living animal most—not ourselves and certainly not the carcass that remains when life's fire has been extinguished.

We all recognize that hunting is a complicated experience that is difficult to convey to the nonhunting public. Yet, we must also surely realize that unless we improve our ability to do so, hunting will be pushed ever further to the margins of society. It is clearly insufficient for us to be concerned with this only when dramatic events such as the killing of Cecil the lion explode in the media. We need to remain focused on a long-term campaign to keep the public on our side, and one of the best ways I know to do this is to convince them that we care for animals in a fundamental way. Yes, we may take the life and thereby take possession of one wild creature during our hunt, but that does not mean we do not admire them in life and wish to see their future secured.

It is not enough that we say this to one another; what is essential is that we say this to the wider audience that has its ear to the ground and its fingers on the political pulse. If we wish to convince them, then let us provide the emotional evidence of our conservation ethic. Let us diminish the focus on our achievements, and on us. Let's start honoring what truly matters: the hunted.

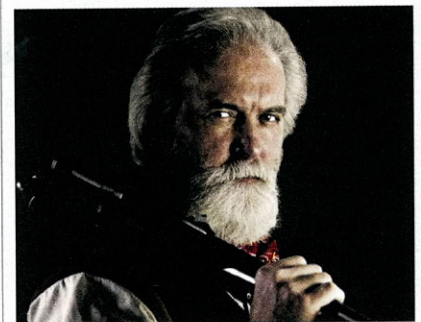
Mark Your Calendar!

The 2016 DSC convention and expo, one of the biggest showcases of hunting, shooting, and outdoor adventure in the country, returns to the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center and Omni Hotel Dallas January 7–10. Sportsmen and women are invited to be part of another record-breaking event to help support conservation, education, and hunter advocacy initiatives around the world. The convention theme this year is Conservation.

The event is one of America's premier fundraisers for conservation. Over the past six years, it has generated more than \$6.7 million for wildlife programs, public education, and hunter advocacy.

The expo offers 2016's first opportunity to shop for hunts with top outfitters from around the globe. Displays include world-class sporting gear, firearms, art, collectibles, and more. The attractions cover the space of nearly nine football fields.

The public is welcome. Daily admission is \$20 per person, with multi-day and family discounts available. See details at www.biggame.org.



Shane Mahoney

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.