

The Hunter Naturalist

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As the debate surrounding the future of hunting plows across social and political lines, those of us who have experienced the limitlessness of this engagement with nature search for a way to explain our identity. Having gathered from those glorious days afield impressions as full and layered as any great work of art, we are left struggling with how to explain honestly who and what we are. We recognize that such an explanation is important because, for people who do not wish to hunt, our activity is indeed hard to imagine and harder to understand. Perhaps the only way they can ever appreciate what we do is to understand clearly who we are. For us as hunters, explaining who we are can go a great distance towards explaining why we do the things we do. And surely nothing is more critical to the future of hunting than explaining to the public at large “why we hunt.” To be successful in this endeavor, however, we need a persona – a collective identity that is at once real and convincing.

Throughout evolutionary history, we humans have maintained an unimpressive array of physical features and talents. Imperfectly adapted to upright posture, weak and slow by the standards of other creatures our size, burnt by the sun and incapacitated by cold, we are the “just barely” species. Judged by the standards of almost any other wild creature, we are bland and bereft. Indeed we were probably destined for a short ride to oblivion but were salvaged by a fateful decision to invest in brain power. This allowed us to break free of the simple grind of plunder, procreate and perish, and to contemplate the world around us. Like all other predators, we sought life through death. Unlike all other predators, we understood the process. Far more important, though, we fell in love with knowledge and courted understanding.

It was through this process that man’s hunting culture developed. As each detail of his prey’s behavior became known, man’s prowess as a hunter improved. Sharpening his edge on an ecological stone, man understood not only the creatures themselves but eventually the web of life that sustained them all. Days and lifetimes spent studying the natural world eventually transform humanity into the dominant life form on the planet. Powered by his hunting technologies and empowered by his knowledge of the earth, man raced to the farthest reaches of the globe. And everywhere, in every hunter-gatherer group and around every evening fire, it was declared: Those who understand nature best will become our leaders, our elite. After all, it was not just who threw the spear the farthest that determined whether food was secured. It was also those who could predict when and where the prey would be found. The hunter naturalist was admired and valued above all others in society, for lives and longevity depended on this key provider. Eventually, those who communicated best with

nature were elevated to a priesthood, a class akin to God. Thus it was for ninety-nine percent of our existence.

But such pedigrees are not easily discarded. The motivations that valued them for so long are now embedded in the fabric of humanity. As we cannot but love nature, we have no alternative but to admire those who understand her. And all good hunters understand nature in a profound and practical way. It is imperative that we share this knowledge – not just for the hunt but for our everyday lives, and with people of all interests whether they are hunters or not. Indeed it is even more important to share it with non-hunters. Let them see how we have worked to understand animal sign and behavior. Let them appreciate how we take pleasure and pride in just knowing the ways of wild creatures, whether or not they are to be hunted. Let the public understand that the kill is one fierce second in an eon of peaceful pleasure, a purposeful intensity on a freedom voyage of self-discovery. How else are they to know? Who should we expect to explain the truth about hunters, if hunters themselves will not?

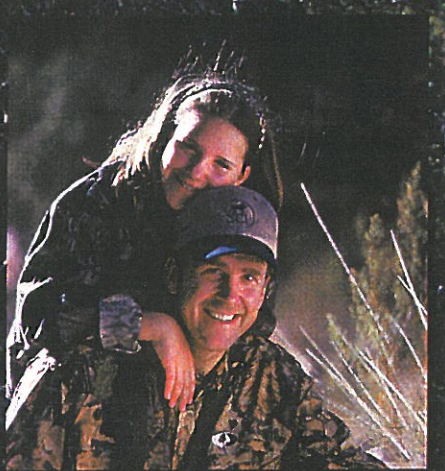
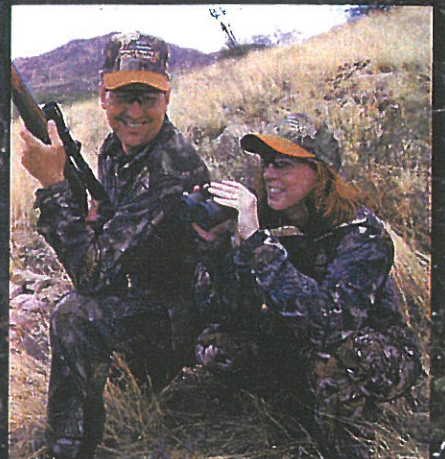
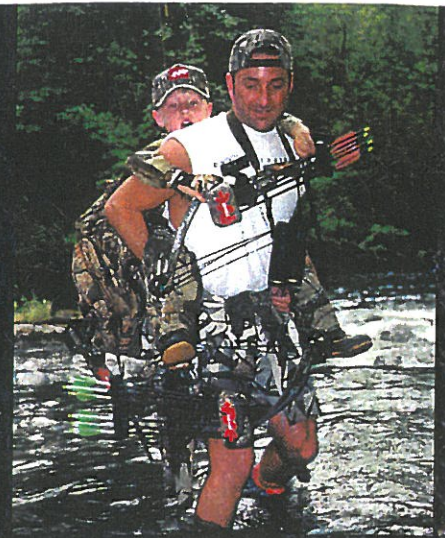
We have in our hunter souls that archetype – the first and truest image of successful man. We are all captives here – the hunter and the non-hunter, and we all exist because the hunter naturalist emerged. As a fraternity, we need to cultivate this image and this dialogue with the broad public and push ourselves to become better naturalists, and better hunters as our lives proceed. In the end, many people may never truly understand “why we hunt” but they can surely be led to appreciate the naturalist in us all. Indeed they have no choice. Time and tide have ordained it so.

Instead of the warrior side, we need to show the public the hunter who smiles at the antics of a squirrel, and records when plants bloom and die. Instead of constantly talking about our guns and ammunition, let's discuss how we love wild country. Instead of throwing slurs at those who are opposed to hunting, let's communicate to all who would listen to our fascination for wild creatures.

If we are true to our past and to ourselves, then we will be called hunter naturalists. I don't think the words should ever be separated, and in reality they never could be. In time we may discover that it is the naturalist in us that matters most. This, after all, is humanity's common ground.



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