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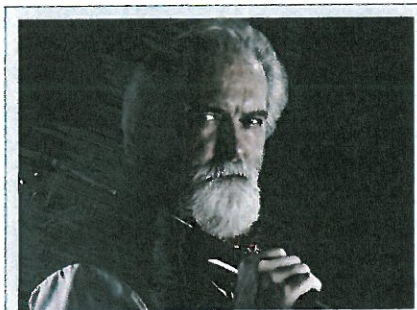
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THE HUNTING EXPERIENCE

In this second part of his series of articles on trophy hunting, the author examines several damaging misconceptions about trophy hunting.



Memories, not bragging rights, are why most people keep mementos of their hunts.



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.

Previously, I made the point that hunting activity is about more than the meat. I believe this is true. I know of no hunting culture where the only value of hunting was the meat. In a poignant example of this fact, we may recall that once the last remnants of the great Native American tribes had been rounded up and forced onto reservations, they would routinely ask that the domestic cattle they were provided as rations be set free from their corrals so they might pursue them on horseback and kill them in the same manner they once had the buffalo.

This sad image clearly shows that while the buffalo was a source of meat, the experience of its pursuit and lethal capture was in itself a matter of great significance to the lives and spirit of these cultures. There are so many lessons buried in this image of such unsurpassed horsemen pursuing lumbering cattle in the full view of those who deliberately destroyed their way of life, that it is tragic beyond belief. Yet such were the still vibrant memories of their hunts that nothing, not even destitution, could prevent them from tasting that unforgettable reality we hunters so intimately understand.

Yet, in society today, even among some of us who hunt, there is a belief that “trophy” hunting is different, being about one thing and one thing only; the head, horns, or cape. Trophy hunters are a different breed, it is suggested. They travel to foreign countries; care little or nothing for and waste the meat; desire and demand only the biggest and best specimens; and are all wealthy.

As I pointed out in the last issue, almost all of us collect mementos from our hunt, so I will not belabor this point further. But what of these other elements of trophy hunting so many believe to be true? Are they accurate? Are they true? Can they be used to separate “trophy” hunting from other forms of hunting? Not really, and certainly not significantly, in my opinion.

Regarding travel to foreign countries, while it is true that thousands of hunters from North America will travel to Europe, Asia, and Africa every year, far more North American hunters will hunt in the USA or Canada every year. Indeed the preferred destination of American hunters, by far, is Canada—hardly a “foreign” destination despite some cultural differences. The motivations of these hunters are really no different than those who travel to another continent—they are pursuing a new experience, a different landscape, different species, or more abundant or larger specimens. They are not wealthy (though some are, of course) but they do generally pay more, considerably more, for their out-of-state/province experience. In this way, they contribute significantly to the economies of other parts of the country or continent.

Certainly, given the opportunity, many will shoot the largest and most magnificent example of the animals they see. However, this does not mean that they are guaranteed a perfect specimen, or one of a certain size antler or horn. Nor does it mean that their primary motivation was to secure such a

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specimen. They were seeking a chance to acquire a good specimen, certainly, or they'd be daft to spend the time, energy, and money to travel. For these millions of hunters, taking home some part of the animal they have killed will be important to them. Thus the hide of a grizzly bear, the antlers of a caribou, or the skull and horns of a sheep will almost certainly travel home with these hunters, just like the cape of an eland, the tusks of an elephant, or the hide of a leopard with hunters who have traveled to Africa. So, I ask; "Who is the trophy hunter?"

When it comes to the matter of meat the lines are not at all clear. Certainly for hunters who travel a very long distance from home, the primary rationale for their hunt may not be the meat of the animal they pursue. However, just like resident hunters, a very large number of the North American hunters traveling to far destinations on this continent do in fact take meat home. Perhaps this is another "trophy"? Furthermore, in the vast majority of cases, edible meat must be recovered from the field by law, and legal hunters obey the law.

This situation pretty much parallels what happens when a hunter shoots an animal in many African destinations. No, the hunter does not transport the elephant


steaks home, but he does, by virtue of his successful hunt, make it available to willing people who will certainly not waste it. And, no, the meat was not the primary motivation of the North American hunter who pursued the elephant; nor is it for the mountain sheep hunter from Utah who travels to British Columbia in pursuit of an animal there. Nor for the hunter from Turkey who traveled to Spain in pursuit of ibex. So, I ask, again: "Who is the trophy hunter?" All of these people, or only those who travel to hunt the markhor of Pakistan or the elephants of Tanzania?

This, it seems to me, is an important question. While the term "trophy" is only a convenience, its widespread use serves to undermine support for hunting by encouraging misconceptions about what motivates the hunter and by appearing to differentiate various forms of hunting, and therefore inevitably leading to the notion that some forms are more, or less, acceptable. We see clear evidence for this in every poll taken: trophy hunting is the least supported, behind so-called sport/recreational and meat hunting. Those opposed to hunting know this very well and exploit it. Those who do not understand hunting are easy converts to this position

because such hunting is viewed as frivolous, wasteful, and self-aggrandizing.

Let's not suggest that terminology does not matter. It does, and we should drop it from our vocabulary. As I have argued in these last two articles, we cannot show that trophy is the distinction anyway, so why give the opponents of hunting an easy target when it is merely a term of convenience? By focusing on one aspect of the hunting experience—the taking of a memento or remembrance of the hunt—the classification of trophy hunting as a separate and distinct hunting engagement fails to recognize that hunters have always celebrated their success, and wish to remember the experience.

Hunting has many gradations and varieties and, in the end, it is a highly personal experience. What today must always separate the true from the false in hunting is fair chase and legality, not whether the tusks of a fallen elephant are taken home, or whether we hunt in a foreign country, pay a lot to do so, hunt relatively rare or unique beasts, or personally consume the meat.

There is not one of the true hunters among us who does not hunt for the experience, and not one among these who does not wish to remember it. In this, there is no distinction among hunters. We should not dare to create one. 

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