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WHAT IS TROPHY HUNTING?

In the first in a series of articles, Shane Mahoney explores the complicated and often conflicting views of trophy hunting held by hunters and nonhunters alike.



This hunter went home from her British Columbia elk hunt with coolers full of elk roasts, memories of bugling bulls and unmatched mountain scenery, and a set of antlers that hangs on her office wall and reminds her daily of the incredible experience she had. So was this a “trophy” hunt?

DSC and DEF

Organizations such as Dallas Safari Club and Dallas Ecological Foundation are actively engaged in restoring and protecting wild places and wildlife through various conservation, education, and advocacy programs. Dallas Ecological Foundation has developed and administers the Outdoor Adventures education program, reaching more than 12,500 students annually. Outdoor Adventures makes outdoor skills an integral part of physical education curricula. Learn more about both organizations at www.biggame.org and www.dallasecologicalfoundation.org

While hunting in general is a controversial issue, there can be little doubt that much of the harshest criticism is directed toward trophy hunting. Even among hunters who readily pursue animals and harvest them, trophy hunting is sometimes criticized. To the general public, it is often portrayed as a distortion of the original activity, and one that has entered a self-indulgent and frivolous domain. But are such characterizations and criticisms justified? Can we really define trophy hunting in such distinct terms that it truly stands apart from other forms of hunting, or are all of us, to one extent or another, pursuing the same thing when we hunt (or fish)? Indeed, has our use of the term “trophy” simply served to confuse both hunters and nonhunters alike about this issue?

I was born into a hunting and fishing culture—one that relied upon wild animals for food in a very fundamental sense. The hunters I came to know in Newfoundland all hunted for meat, certainly, because that meat was nutritious, wild, and abundant. In this sense, I have always considered myself a meat hunter, but anyone who has hunted knows that hunting is more than lethal shopping. It is the pursuit of something that can only be gained in the wild chase, something far less tangible than the muscle and blood of the animal. This was as true for those Newfoundland hunters in their rough clothing and lifestyle as for any wealthy adventurer. Even for indigenous peoples, hunting has always meant more than the procurement of food, regardless of how critical this was to their survival.

Regardless of whether food is the primary or secondary motivation, hunting will always be about more than meat.

This is an important point and calls into question the clear distinction some

like to draw between meat hunters and those who hunt for “trophies” or “sport” (another term I have problems with). Hunting is very complex, and, like many fundamental human engagements, it is greater than the sum of its parts. Despite this reality, the term “trophy hunting” has been used and interpreted by some to imply a distinct form of hunting where only one thing matters, that being some part of the animal collected as a memento or simply the record of its having been killed. From this misguided perspective, the animal dies to satisfy a bloated ego concerned only with the taking and not the pursuit; and one that can pay its way to success by travelling far, buying access to the rare, and hiring the talent required to find and bring the animal within range. Cast in this distasteful image, the trophy hunter is really a collector, more than a hunter; the pursuit of the animal is unimportant and the meat of the animal taken is routinely discarded. But how true is this? Does the picture match reality? I don’t think so, and I firmly believe we need to set the record straight.

Certainly, at times, any of the elements above may apply to trophy hunting. Let’s be honest: There is no form of hunting (or perhaps any human undertaking) that is always and altogether consistent and pure. Individual hunters are just that: individuals. This means that their motivations will not all be the same, nor their standards of living, nor their approach to their activity. What I find particularly true of trophy hunting, however, are the many misconceptions that apply to it and that those who oppose it seem most preoccupied with the nature of the trophy hunter, rather than the impact of trophy hunting on nature. In this regard, the criticism of trophy hunting by hunters and nonhunters alike resembles the more widely encompassing opposition

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to hunting by the anti-hunting community. It is centered upon the hunter's motivations and rationale for hunting, not on the animals themselves. This, it seems to me, should make all hunters—even those who criticize trophy hunting—nervous.

The basic problem may lie in the word "trophy" itself. Clearly, most evaluations of public attitudes toward hunting will immediately draw a distinction between hunting for meat and recreation, and hunting for the so-called trophy. Yet, what do we mean or understand by that word? Placed in a negative context by its critics, "trophy" refers to the biggest and the best, the rare, the exquisite, acquired for the purpose of returning with some part of the animal to hang on a wall and boast. In this sense, trophy implies elitism and something similar to an award in sports, signifying victory in a competitive exercise. The thing is, hunters are not playing a sport and they only compete with themselves. Furthermore, very few are solely concerned with what they bring back, meat or otherwise, and their so-called trophies are really tokens of remembrance: the mount or horns or tusks are the touchstones by which the hunter returns to the experience of the hunt and

through which he can communicate his experience to others. In this regard, they are no more "trophies" than a wedding picture or the bronzed boots of a child.

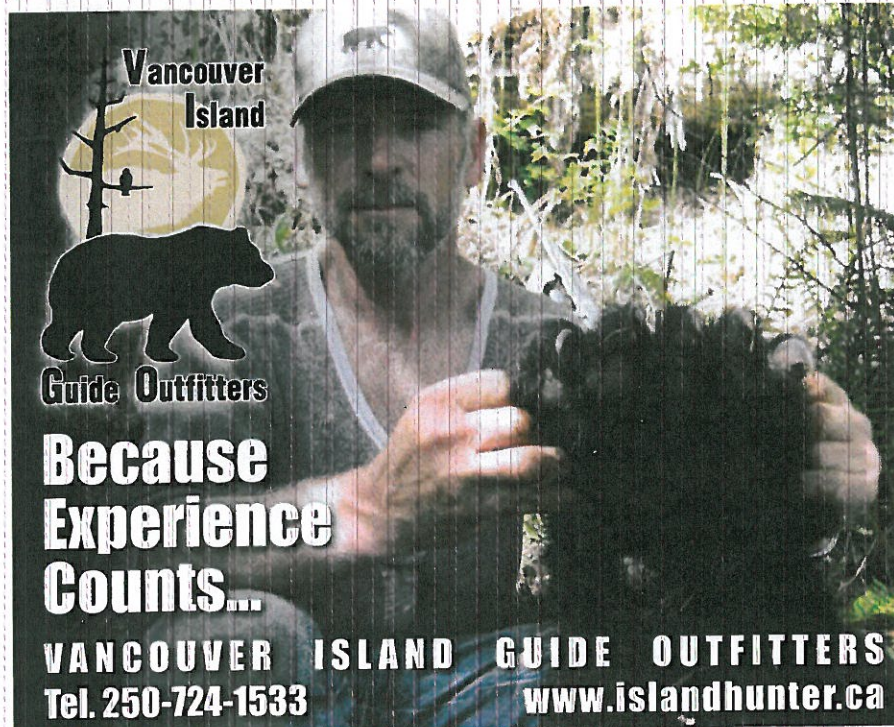
However, it is because of this desire for remembrance that so many hunters collect some tangible evidence of their days afield and particularly of hunts that end with the death of an animal. These mementos can take many forms, and are often inconspicuous and always highly personal—just like everything about hunting. Above many a fisherman's shed in Newfoundland, you can see the weathered antlers of moose displayed, nailed firmly to rough-hewn boards. These wind- and salt-whitened specimens are no less "trophies" than the fully mounted gemsbok in a wealthy man's collection. They are the subjects of conversation and the visible manifestation of a great animal—respected and remembered.

How many times have I looked upward or touched the antlers of a long-dead moose and been spurred to ask about where and when it was taken? How many times have I witnessed the effect that relating their past hunts had on the men who would stop their work of mending nets and boats and describe

the day, the location, and the animal they had pursued, killed, and brought home? These were not glory seekers or competitors in any sense—just hunters who sometimes looked up at those antlers and remembered, and who were glad that someone else was interested in the animal that had died. So, are they "trophy" hunters? If we insist on keeping this word in our vocabulary, then the answer is yes, at least in part because they took a trophy, a memento, home. Just like hunters who keep some turkey feathers, or the rack of a spike bull, or the tooth or pelt of an animal they have killed, or for that matter, those who take photographs of their hunts—so many of us are collectors of trophies from our hunts.

Thus, it is impossible to differentiate hunters on the basis of whether they are motivated to return home with a physical remembrance of their days afield. In this sense, the issue may be far more about deciding who is not a "trophy" hunter than deciding who is. Furthermore, many so-called trophies are from animals that are neither rare, exquisite representatives of their kind, or expensive to hunt.

As my future articles will address, many other misconceptions about trophy hunting also need to be challenged and, as the evidence will show, they can be. 🐾



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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.