

# Why We Hunt: Two Important Perspectives

by Dr. Randall Eaton & Shane Mahoney

Note from the Editor: The following articles were published on the Conservation Force website ([www.consevationforce.org](http://www.consevationforce.org)), and are reprinted with permission. The articles were preceded by the following statement from it's Chairman and President, John J. Jackson, III:

You need to know why you hunt to protect your right to hunt. This is because the general public misperceives the motivation of hunters and the anti-hunters misrepresent it. At Conservation Force, we are focusing on this important issue worldwide. I am the President of the Pro-Chasse Task Force of the International Council of Game Conservation (CIC). Conservation Force brought America's two leading speakers to address "Why We Hunt" to the CIC Conference in Slovenia. The philosophical perspective and insight of either man would have been enough by itself. Combined, it was a dynamic and inspiring presentation. I cannot duplicate here that lengthy program, but I did ask both speakers to put part of their message in article form.

## Why We Hunt by Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D.

We hunt because we love it, but why do we love it so?

As an inherited instinct, hunting is deeply rooted in human nature. Around the world in all cultures the urge to hunt awakens in boys. They use rocks, make weapons or sneak an air gun out of the house to kill a bird or small mammal. In many cases the predatory instinct appears spontaneously without previous experience or coaching, and in the civilized world boys often hunt despite attempts to suppress their instinct.

The fundamental instinct to hunt may link up with the spiritual. An analogy is falling in love, in which eros, the sexual instinct, connects with agape or spiritual love. Initiation on the path of love changes our life irreversibly. Henceforth, we shall know the meaning of our authentic love experienced with the totality of our being.

When we fall in love, the instinctive or primal self merges with the spiritual. It is a vertical convergence of subconscious to superconscious, lower to higher.

Hunting is how we fall in love with nature. The basic instinct links up with the spiritual, and the result is that we become married to nature. Among nature pursuits, hunting and fishing connect us most profoundly with animals and nature. As Robert Bly said in his best-selling book, *Iron John*, only hunting expands us sideways, "into the glory of oaks, mountains, glaciers, horses, lions, grasses, waterfalls, deer."

Hunting is a basic aspect of a boy's initiation into manhood. It teaches him the intelligence, beauty and power of nature. The young man also learns at a deep emotional level his inseparable relationship with nature as well as his responsibility to fiercely protect it.

Essentially, hunting is a spiritual experience precisely because it submerges us in nature, and that experience teaches us that we are participants in something far greater than man. Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, described the hunter as the alert man. He could not have said it better. When we hunt we experience extreme alertness to the point of an altered state of consciousness. For the hunter everything is alive, and he is one with the animal and its environment.

Though the hunter may appear from the outside to be a staunch egotist dominating nature, on the inside he is exactly the opposite. He identifies with the animal as his kin, and he feels, as Ortega said, tied through the earth to it. The conscious and deliberate humbling of the hunter to the level of the animal is virtually a religious rite.

While the hunt is exhilarating and unsurpassed in intrinsic rewards and emotional satisfactions, no hunter revels in the death of the animal. Hunters know from first-hand experience that "life lives on life," as mythologist Joseph Campbell said. The hunter participates directly in the most fundamental processes of life, which is why the food chain is for him a love chain. And that is why hunters have been and still are, by far, the foremost conservationists of wildlife and wild places, to the benefit of everyone.

Today, as for countless millennia, proper initiation to hunting engenders respect for all life, responsibility to society, even social authority, and spiritual power. It develops authentic self-esteem, self-control, patience and personal knowledge of our place in the food chain. According to Dr. Don T. Jacobs, author of *Teaching Virtues*, "hunting is the ideal way to teach universal virtues," including humility, generosity, courage and fortitude. As I said in *The Sacred Hunt*, "Hunting teaches a person to think with his heart instead of his head. That is the secret of hunting."

Consequently, the most successful programs ever conducted for delinquent boys have focused on hunting. The taking of a life that sustains us is a transformative experience. It's not a video game. Hunting is good medicine for bad kids because it is good medicine for all kids.

Hunting is a model for living. When we hunt, we discover that we are more than the ego. That our life consists of our ego in a mutually interdependent and transcendent relationship with nature. We keep returning to the field because for us hunting is a dynamic ritual that honors the animals and the earth on which we depend both physically and spiritually. While interviewing Felix Ike, a Western Shoshone elder, I asked him, "What kind of country would this be if the majority of men in it had been properly initiated into hunting?" He replied, "It would be a totally different world."

In a world imperiled by egoism and disrespect for nature, hunting is morally good for men and women, boys and girls. Hunters understand the meaning in Lao Tzu's statement, The Earth is perfect,  
You cannot improve it.  
If you try to change it,  
You will ruin it.  
If you try to hold it,  
You will lose it.

Some aboriginal peoples believe that the Creator made us perfect, too, and that He made us to be hunters, dependent on nature and close to the earth. Like Narcissus, civilized humanity has fallen in love with itself and turned its back on its hunting companions and its animal kin. Beware the teaching of the ages summarized in this admonition from Loren Eiseley, "Do not forget your brethren, nor the green wood from which you sprang. To do so is to invite disaster." Disaster looms over us now as we wage endless battles with anti-hunters who do not understand that we are the tribe of wild men and women whose hearts hold the promise for recovery of proper relationship to the animals and earth. If we should lose hunting a far greater disaster will befall nature, society and the human spirit.

#### **Who Is Dr. Randall Eaton**

Dr. Randall Eaton is the foremost psychologist of hunting. He has taught Jose Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Hunting* in universities, written books and made documentaries on "Why We Hunt" and its extraordinary importance to mankind for itself. He has devoted his professional life to this important subject. He is also a member of Conservation Force's professional team trying to save hunting around the world. He is the author of *The Sacred Hunt, I and II*, and he produced *The Sacred Hunt*, an award-winning documentary.

#### ***Postscript:***

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## Why We Hunt "Hunting For Truth - Why Rationalizing The Ritual Must Fail" by Shane Mahoney

**A**cross the wide belt of the North American continent a profound debate surges. It is a collision of worldviews; a refinement of man's view of himself; a reinterpretation of Eden; a great contemplation of the future of mankind. Yet, despite this profound nature, the debate in question is delivered to the public as a clash of soft sentimentality and rigorous rationalism, the central theme portrayed by both sides as something so far removed from its essential self that it is at worst belittled, at best trivialized. The evisceration of man's greatest achievement, naturalness, is the work of two opposing forces, each wrapped in the cloak of conservation, striving for supremacy in a tournament of frauds and follies. The problem for hunting today is that nobody will tell the truth.

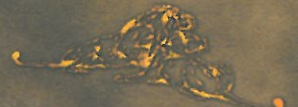
On the one side, there are those who are opposed to hunting, who obviously do not hunt, and who portray the activity as barbaric, unnecessary, and inappropriate to today's society, and mankind's future. They concentrate on the suffering of the individual animal and upon the behavior of persons who might inflict it. They portray nature as more benign, more right, without man than with him; and hunters as fermented juveniles who enjoy killing as a diversionary sport and who see animals as targets for their violence. To persons who argue for animal rights, hunting is a cruel

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wastefulness and the hunt an anachronism, something we should have put behind us, as we have bear baiting and cock fighting. Hunting is empty of merit, devoid of value and without deep meaning. Its adherents are therefore the same. The activity is personified and therein lies the target. The concept, the rich idea, of hunting, becomes displaced. For the public, the gruel is watered down until it can be bottled. The question is asked: "why (do you) hunt?"

On the other side, stand those who support hunting, primarily hunters themselves, but not exclusively so. They fall for the trap. Their arguments in support of hunting are that it helps manage wildlife populations, it provides healthful recreation, physically and socially, it provides meat, and it generates wealth, especially in rural economies. Supporters argue it is their right, and not the animal's rights, that are to prevail, and because their activity harms no one, but benefits many, they should not be interfered with. Hunters don't discuss animal suffering, but concentrate on the health of populations. They rightfully point out the contributions, financially and politically; hunters have made to conservation, often when other voices of support were not being raised. They trot out the balance of nature, without ever defining natural balance. They portray anti-hunters as misguided extremists whose views would have mankind being overrun with tick-infested deer, drowning in goose macaroni, or starving so other predators might thrive. Hunters argue simply, or simply don't argue. They too keep the debate easy...to digest.... or dismiss. One thing they conscientiously avoid however: they never, ever answer the question "why (do I) hunt".

Why is this? What is it about this short little question that is so ponderous, so daunting? What is it that hunters fear; what is it they do not comprehend? And, if they do comprehend, why won't they offer an explanation? Why so quick to identify the benefits of hunting but so reticent to at least try and describe their true motivation for engaging it? This is a conceptual divide that must be breached. We have been treating the two as though they were the same. They are not. Explaining the benefits of hunting does not in any way explain why we hunt, and why we hunt is the question, really, that society is asking. We confuse and avoid the issue...but we will either answer it, or we will be dismissed. The one thing we must protect and define for hunting is its relevance; notoriety and debate will not kill it. Fabrication and irrelevance will. Once deemed irrelevant, hunting will no longer be debated; nor will it be engaged in. If we want continuity and recruitment, if we want respect and tolerance for what we do, then we best get busy earning it...by explaining to the reasonable majority what hunting really is.

Hunting is not simple. It is the generator of our human condition, the crucible of intellect, and the fire of creativity. It is our mirror of the world, the image-maker of wild creation; it has defined how we see, literally and figuratively. It is the only absolute rediscovery mechanism available to human beings: the mind-body fusion of all meditative, spiritual experience is derived from its pasturage. Those who return there know full well the sense of universal intimacy it gives over. Explaining this odyssey is our greatest challenge; but succeeding will be our greatest achievement. The world remains perpetually absorbed by this search, yet hunters know the way. Why not celebrate the truth for

a change? Hunting is a deliberate journey to the union of birth and death; it cannot but create a deeper perspective and appreciation for the glorious importance of both. What society does not dream for such citizens?

Like it or not, we have to search deep within ourselves, journey to the place where the mind is floating free. We have to voice what is silent; capture what is shadow. The hunt is a universe of emotion that overwhelms, scatters all notions of other preoccupations and delivers the persona complete. Hunting is a love affair; turbulent, gnawing, and all possessing. It is composed of lives, but has a life of its own; a life held precious by the participant who, in part, creates it. But then there is the "other", unpredictable, honored. Yes! An affair of the heart; and like all such affairs it drags the mind along, a great force subjugated by the senses engaged to their fullest; but alive just the same, and capturing memories and creating fantasies that are nearly one and the same. Hunting is an immersion; a drowning in connectedness that squanders pride and privilege; the true hunter is the humble man, the enthralled child and the knowing prince. All is ready, nothing is restive; all is rhythm, nothing is in friction. Hunting knows why the senses were made! It displaces both the practical and the excess. It represents evenness, oneness and the knowledge of self. Hunting is a cataclysm of inward progress. We hunt for spiritual reasons; we hunt to find inner peace; we hunt to understand the world. Hunting is our first great myth! The true hunter is both the alert and the meditative man. Thought and action combined in purpose; a hymn for the unity of world and self. Hunting is a search for all.

Truth makes a great message; not an easy one! But saving the preciousness of life is never simple. We need remember, however, that if hunters are viewed as dopes, hunting is viewed as a pastime for the dim-witted; if hunters are viewed as slobs, hunting is a wasteful debauchery; if hunters are viewed as juvenile, hunting is deemed delinquent. Only hunters can change such stereotypes. The task at hand is to articulate the relevance of hunting; not its correctness, nor its practical service to human kind. Rationalizing the mythology is both a tactical error and a diminishment of pride. Lies and excuses usually are. - Shane Mahoney.

### **Who Is Shane Mahoney**

Shane Mahoney is the Head of Research for the Canadian provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador. He is considered the foremost philosopher of hunting today. He has been the keynote speaker at virtually every important conference in North America over the past several years, including the Outdoor Writers Association of America, The North American Wildlife Conference and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Conference. He was the moderator of the Premier's "Hunting Heritage Symposium" held in Ontario. Most recently, he led a two-day program on "Why We Hunt" at the North American Wildlife Conference in Washington, D.C., which was the first such program in decades. Shane serves on the CIC's Pro-Chasse Task Force as a professional member. He is also a member of Conservation Force's Think Tank and Board of Directors.

