Hunting and Environmentalism: Conflict or Misperceptions

IRENA KNEZEVIC

Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture, York University/Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

This work examined some assumptions that underpin the conflict between hunters and anti-hunting movement. The moral contradictions of anti-hunting activism are positioned in the complex context of consumer culture, managed environmental protection, and industrial food production. The assumption that environmental groups are by definition opposed to hunting is investigated. Given that both hunters and environmental groups are interested in land conservation, and given the rapid habitat loss around the globe, the question is asked whether joint conservation efforts would prove beneficial not only to both groups’ interests, but also to the fragile North American ecosystems and the species that reside in them.

Keywords hunting, conservation, food systems, anti-hunting morality

Introduction

There are two billion chickens that are being slaughtered. Why is the fuzzy seal photo-op the important one? Why aren’t you down in a slaughterhouse where cows are being killed or calves are being killed or lambs are being killed or chickens are being killed? (Williams, 2006, p. 10)

Danny Williams, the premier of Newfoundland and Labrador faced off with Paul and Heather McCartney on Larry King Live in March of 2006. The McCartneys were visiting to protest the annual harp seal hunt that for several years has been a favourite among activist celebrities. Photos of red pools of seal blood on white snow and celebrities posing with baby seals are usually meant to present the hunt as a practice of obtaining seal fur, frequently obscuring the fact that many residents of the Canadian east coast and the north consume seal meat on regular basis and that seal oil has a variety of medicinal and other uses, to say nothing of the local cultural and economic significance of the annual hunt. Harp seals are not endangered, and if anything they have in recent years seen higher competition for food due to the shrinking habitat that has resulted from global warming.

An earlier version of this article was presented to the Food and Culture meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Conference in Baltimore, MD, October 2006.

I wish to thank Dean Ware of the Southwest Outdoor Club in Wheatley, Ontario, for his support, insights, and the wealth of knowledge he has shared with me. This article is greatly inspired by his work and reflects many of the conversations we have had over the years. My sincere thanks also go to the members of the Southwest Outdoor Club for their feedback on the early drafts of this work.

Address correspondence to Irena Knezevic, Ph.D. Candidate, Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture, York University/Ryerson University, 1-240 Wilmington Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M3H 5K3, Canada. E-mail: iknez@yorku.ca
What Williams did that evening was what hunters, subsistence, recreational, and commercial hunters alike, have been doing for decades. He was trying to repel accusations of cruelty from environmental and animal rights groups by putting hunting into a broad-lens perspective.

This article examines some of the assumptions underpinning conflicts between hunters and anti-hunting movement. The moral contradictions of opposition to hunting are explored. The article argues that anti-hunting activism is positioned in an inherently problematic context of environmental protection and food production, and that this context, with all its complexities, renders such activism hypocritical and less than adequately informed.

The misconceptions that fuel this “activism” are portrayed in Anne Troake’s film, My Ancestors Were Rogues and Murderers, in which the filmmaker positions traditional east-coast hunters against organizations concerned more with raising money than creating change, and against the spectacle-loving media and urban middle-class moral pedestals. As one of her interviewees noted:

As a sealer, I don’t feel that I am asking for much. Just some good scientific advice, good government management, good accurate media coverage, and maybe a true environmental group who realizes that you won’t save the seals by destroying what I do any more than you’ll save the rainforests by destroying the native peoples. (Troake, 2006)

The greatest threat to all wildlife on our planet is not hunting but habitat loss. Habitat loss is responsible for more endangerment and extinction of species than all hunting combined (Bean, 1999; Venter et al., 2006; Youth, 2003). Today’s hunters, particularly recreational hunters, consider themselves conservationists and are often involved with land conservation efforts through various organizations. In 2006 alone, hunters in the United States contributed $280 million to groups like Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Fundation. Ducks Unlimited raised over $160 million that year, 82% of which went to conservation (Poole, 2007). Although such groups ultimately provide the space and the resources needed for hunters to pursue their passion, the overall results of their work have given us large properties of restored wildlife habitat, replenished wildlife populations, and protected and/or recovered wetland and other wildlife areas throughout North America. Virtually all of the early conservation efforts in North America were initiated by conservationists who were also avid hunters (e.g., Theodore Roosevelt, John James Audubon, Jack Miner). Today this work is subject to increasingly tight government regulations, requires intensive scientific research and planning, and has generally been a result of outstanding investment of time, knowledge, commitment, and financial resources.1

Hunting itself, whether commercial, subsistence, or recreational, has been regulated by rules (e.g., season, area restrictions), limitations on animals harvested (“bag limits”), and regulations concerning allowable guns and ammunition. In this context hunters, the vast majority of whom practice ethical hunting,2 are still demonized:

Hunting, while acknowledged as a necessary part of nonhuman carnivorous nature and part of human archaeological record (the two are not mutually exclusive), is an act noted by many or perhaps most urbanites as barbarism left over from our days in nature, and increasingly, as an act of destruction instead of a reasonable method for obtaining food. (Hochman, 1998, p. 84)

There are a number of reasons some see hunting as not distasteful. First, the identification of hunting with the National Riffle Association (NRA) in the United States has influenced
views in Canada. Unfortunately, the NRA has only added to the perceptions of hunting as violent. Poaching stories add to the perception of hunting as irresponsible. Occasionally, extreme stories appear, such as the 2003 Atlantic Monthly feature titled *Overkill* in which John Vaillant weaved a horrifying tale of Thomas Venezia, an American hunter busted for countless hunting violations. Venezia was arrested after hunting in Saskatchewan with a man who, unbeknownst to Venezia, was an undercover agent for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. After the trip, the agent would relate to Vaillant that he had watched:

. . . Venezia kill approximately 350 birds, ranging in size from pigeons to a sandhill crane. [Agent] Perry documented 230 potential hunting violations. The charges against Venezia included using illegal ammunition, shooting from a moving vehicle, killing protected species, and failing to recover downed birds. According to Perry, during the trip Venezia announced that he had the “K chromosome.” “I love to kill,” he said. “I have to kill.” (p. 1)

This story is exactly what Troake’s interviewee was addressing in his call for “good, accurate media coverage.” Stories like this make it into the public discourse, giving those who do not hunt a skewed image of hunting.

Violence and death associated with hunting is so overt and immediate that it makes hunting an easy target for criticism. That criticism in turn ignores the “great paradox of eating” (Kass, 1994). Death of living creatures is fundamental to continuation of life. Pete Dunne, the director of Cape May Bird Observatory and as avid a hunter as he is a bird-watcher writes, “Today, most people fail to recognize death as a natural part of life, to view hunting as a mechanism that makes people an integral part of that natural process” (2005, p. 662). Our detachment from our food sources has made it possible for us to eat meat and somehow pretend that killing is not a part of the process. Aldo Leopold noted that there are dangers in not owning a farm, one being “the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery” (1968, p. 6). This distancing from our food, the alienation from our nutrition, has been described by Kneen (1989) as a separation of “people from the sources of their food and nutrition with as many interventions as possible” (p. 11). Food is commodified and animals in the food system are referred to as “products.” To quote Wendell Berry (1990):

> The passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared or fast food, confronts a platter covered with inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any creature that ever lived. (p. 369)

Since 1990, we have become more conscious of where our food comes from. We seek out local producers and pay attention to the origins of our food. However, such consumers are still exceptions to the rule, and the media attention recently given to food movements is disproportionate to the actual changes that are happening in the food system. Organic food represented only 3% of all 2007 retail food sales in the United States (Organic Trade Association, 2007). Local food movement seems to be growing, but the definitions of local vary and Canadian government recently acknowledged “Canada’s food supply is increasingly global in nature” (Government of Canada, 2008, p. 3). The presence and profitability of large, industrial-type food stores in the cities testify to the style of food-related spending characteristic of most urban food consumption. Meat purchased in these
stores comes in disposable and clean-looking packaging, is cut and presented to look perfect, and offers no connection to the animal it came from. Most of us know that industrial food production, and especially the modern way of handling livestock, is a terrible, dehumanized, and dehumanizing practice, more concerned with cost-cutting and profit-boosting than with providing consumers with wholesome fresh food, let alone with well-being of the very animals they control.

Factory farms as the dominant mode of meat production are certainly infringing on animal rights far more than hunting. This kind of meat production is one of the most common reasons some North Americans choose to adopt vegetarian diets. In addition to health and religious reasons, many vegetarians simply make the decision to partially withdraw from the system. Being a vegetarian can be a responsible way of living in our society. But vegetarianism can only be treated as personal choice, not a standard. The food choices available to the average North American allow us the luxury of choosing what we eat. That choice is not global. Geographical conditions of some parts of the world have made many humans vegetarian by necessity, but we also have to look at the polar peoples, the majority of whose diet is meat—again, by necessity. There is little morally superior about just choosing to be a vegetarian. Given our contemporary food production, vegetarianism ends up being a truly responsible choice only if combined with myriad other food-purchasing decisions.

Industrial agriculture and the associated water table depletion, soil erosion and use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers is making non-animal food production significantly more damaging to wildlife and biodiversity than hunting (Czech, Krausman, & Devers, 2000). In their thorough assessment of the threat to the 488 imperilled species in Canada, Venter et al. (2006) did not even consider hunting to be a significant factor. Agriculture is found to be the most important threat to imperilled species, followed by urbanization (Venter et al., 2006). Processing, packaging, and distribution of agricultural products further endangers the environment (Norberg-Hodge, Merrifield, & Gorelick, 2002). Soy bean grown on an industrial farm, sprayed with pesticides and fed with petro-chemical fertilizers, then shipped hundreds of miles away for processing to be turned into the futuristic sounding textured-vegetable-protein (TVP), then shaped into a burger, wrapped in plastic and slipped into a cardboard sleeve, only to be shipped yet again and made to sit in energy-sucking open refrigerators under bright lights of suburban grocery stores. It is hard to believe that that veggie burger is better for mother Earth than taking down a deer during deer season. In North America we actually have to hunt deer because their habitat has shrunk and any deer overpopulation equals significant vegetation loss.

Opposition to hunting in North America is based on particular understandings of hunting. The immediacy of death associated with hunting makes hunting perceived as a practice that perpetuates the ideology of human domination over nature. The modern environmental movement has been a response to the industrialization of North America, which has resulted in devastating pollution and a rapid loss of wildlife habitat. The movement has called for increased corporate and government responsibility, stricter industry regulations, and land conservation. Land conservation has been paramount among environmental groups and associated efforts to protect remaining natural areas that are threatened by industrial, agricultural, and residential “development” projects. Organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Sierra Club, and Greenpeace have purchased land for conservation, submitted reports to governments, actively opposed deforestation and other “development” projects, and provided public education materials to mobilize wildlife habitat conservation.
These activities make environmental efforts sound similar to the work of Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl, and local outdoor clubs organized by hunting groups. The early conservation efforts in North America, dating back to the early 1900s, were largely driven by hunters. This overlap is still evident and the perceived conflict between hunters and environmental groups is little more than miscommunication. Despite the popular image of anti-hunting attitudes and media coverage (e.g., opposition to Canadian seal hunts), not all environmental groups oppose hunting. World Wildlife Fund (WWF), for example, has supported seal hunts in Canada. Their limited support emphasizes hunting of adult seals and particularly the hunting rights of the Inuit. WWF has expressly stated that they do not oppose a sustainable hunt (World Wildlife Fund, 2006). Although WWF is in opposition of commercial whaling and hunting of endangered species, they have also been supporters of subsistence hunting, particularly in parts of the world where other food sources are scarce.

Although it is unfashionable to suggest that government agencies have done something right, there is something to be learned from the work of government agencies in both Canada and the United States. Agencies do not shy away from hunters when environmental issues are on the table. As an illustration, Muddy Creek watershed, upstream from Wheatley Harbour in southwestern Ontario, has long been suffering water contamination, with high levels of phosphorus from industrial and agricultural runoff (Environment Canada, 2006). In October of 2005, in their efforts to alleviate contamination levels, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) and Environment Canada (EC) approached the Southwest Outdoor Club in Wheatley, a group largely consisting of hunters, for consultation and joint action. Both government bodies performed the challenging and difficult work of balancing ecological needs, economic demands, and broad ranges of citizen’s opinions. OMNR, in particular, governs both land conservation efforts and hunting practices in the province. Although OMNR’s procedures have been questioned, those who work for OMNR are likely to be better informed on both issues than the average citizen. Given their mandate and activities, OMNR does not see hunting and wildlife conservation as conflicting. Carefully managed hunting practices are not damaging to wildlife as a whole; they are considered beneficial in instances overpopulation of one species at the expense of others. Examples of this include deer culls at Point Pelee in Ontario to protect the vegetation of the park.

Most hunting stories that come to the attention of non-hunters have a journalistic “hook” and hence are stories of poaching (e.g., Vaillant’s story cited earlier) or political controversy (e.g., blood-on-snow photographs of Canadian seal hunts). Similarly, the stories of environmental activism that are most likely to come to the attention of hunters are the ones that portray a great deal of bias on behalf of environmentalist. Examples include the unfortunate 2006 photo of the McCartneys with a seal pup (although pups are not hunted, CTV, 2006) and the discourse of hunting magazines suggesting that hunters are “under siege” due to lack of public awareness regarding hunters’ conservation efforts (Bailey, 2008). Generalizations that result from these portrayals fuel mutual misperceptions and drive hunters and environmentalist apart, as if hunting and environmentalism were mutually exclusive. Disagreements over ways of conservation obscure that land conservation is the common ground for both groups. Opotow and Brook point out that environmental conflicts tend to make “environmental identities more pronounced” (2003, p. 251), which can emphasize the two groups’ view of each other as enemies and not co-conspirators.

The ultimate goal of both groups is the same: (a) protection of wildlife and its habitat, (b) conscious management of natural resources, and (c) a more complete re-connection
with our natural surroundings. Because of this strange harmony, many hunters environmentalists are not pursuing different agendas. Both groups must contend with land “development” and pollution. Habitat loss remains the single greatest threat to wildlife (Avery, 1997; Bean, 1999; Haynos, 2001; Venter et al., 2006; Watchman, Groom, & Perrine, 2001; Youth, 2003). Energy and time might be better spent joining forces and ensuring that wildlife habitat can be saved. Unfortunately, conservation work by both camps has relied on the idea of man dominating nature by emphasizing the idea of “managing” natural resources. Many environmental groups place “ecosystem-based management” at the center of their work (e.g., Greenpeace, 2006; Sierra Club, 2008), and “management” is a keyword that appears prominently in hunting groups’ materials (e.g., Hunting for Tomorrow Coalition, 2008; Ducks Unlimited Canada, 2006). This sense of domination, long criticized by a wide range of thinkers and activists (e.g., Berry, 1972; Livingston, 2006), is accompanied by a set of motivations that are also shared by the two groups of organizations. As noted by Grinnell (1925):

Game protection in North America has passed through three stages—has been influenced by three successive motives. The first of these was selfish—in which sportsmen wished to lessen the killing of game in order to that sufficient might be left alive to furnish abundant sport for themselves. This motive governed for nearly a generation. The second motive was sentimental, where a large and ever increasing number of people were interested in wild life protection because these living objects are beautiful to look at and ought to be preserved so that we and our successors may have the pleasure of seeing them. The third motive for protection is economic, and considers these wild things as assets which possess a tangible value to the community and so are worth preserving; with the further thought that they have been given to us as trustees to hold for those who are to come after us. (p. 201)

The motives of the contemporary environmental movement drives the three principles outlined above: (a) selfish motives (to be able to observe and consume nature), (b) sentimental reasons (to protect our fellow living creatures), and (c) economic justifications (the profitability of ecotourism). Ecotourism, for example, has grown in popularity in recent years and is described as the form of tourism with the goal to “make tourism a viable tool for conservation, poverty alleviation, protection of culture and bio-diversity, sustainable development and educational, as well as enjoyable, travel” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2006). Travel agencies and tour organizers promote ecotourism as environmentally friendly and some ecotourism activities are even organized by environmental groups, even though outdoor recreation and tourism are recognized as significant disturbances to wildlife and threats to imperiled species (Czech et al., 2000). “If we look at the practices that are defined as ecotourism, I see no reason for hunting not to be categorized as such. It would be difficult to show that hunting impacts the environment any more than ecotourism does” (Ed Reid, personal communication, April 2006).

The hypocrisy of sustainable ecotourism brings forth a relevant issue. Consumer attitudes toward nature have shaped the environment versus hunting debate as an issue of rights rather than responsibilities. Assuming that ecotourists’ attitudes are motivated solely by ethical values serves to obfuscate the patterns of consumerism as an essential aspect of watching nature. Conservation areas are sites of consumption and objectification, and the ethics associated with it are nothing if not a part of the consumer experience. Such experiences require little understanding of the interaction
between humans and the environment, and treat nature as little more than an occa-
sional curiosity.

Regulations surrounding the use of natural areas are not limiting to nature-watching, rather, they provide the watcher with a feel-good sense of righteousness in addition to allowing him or her to gaze at nature as a commodified curiosity. With respect to the spatial regulation of parks, “no trespassing” signs help “avoid the tension between ecological integrity and consumer penetration. . . . Preservation can be practiced alongside, and even on the back of, an enhanced commodity experience” (Sandilands, 2000, p. 49). Such superficial morality obscures the meaning of pursuing natural sightings. Sighting checklists, photography, and video cameras are often used to immortalize the conquering achievements of nature-watchers and eco-tourists (Sandilands, 2000; Wilson, 1991).

It used to be that animals were hunted and killed as a part of (male) tourist experience of the outdoors. While sport hunting is still practiced today, it has a deservedly bad name. Photographing animals has become the preferred trophy-taking activity, especially if the beasts can be “captured” on film in a wild setting. (Wilson, 1991, p. 45)

This trophy-taking attitude in itself is a product of colonial forces. Conquering, exploring, and taking evidence to prove it seems very much a colonial phenomenon. The “right” of environmentalists to conserve their own particular vision of nature suggests that their disconnection from nature need be examined. Participating in urban life dependent on fossil fuels and water and air contamination and then conserving only specific “natural” areas is little more than a manifestation of “imperialist nostalgia”:

A person kills somebody and then mourns the victim. In a more attenuated form, someone alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 69–70)

The underpinning disconnectedness from and objectification of nature is described in similar vein by McDonough and Braungart (2002):

Wild places are sacred, and even infrequent pilgrimages to see them can inspire a sense of wonder and a reverence for life. . . . Perhaps a distant wilderness, an idea of wild country, positions nature too far from our daily lives. . . . North Americans tend to think that true nature can only be found on the pristine, remote extremities of civilization and that these places have little to do with the everyday human world. Culture is here, nature far away. (p. 1–2)

Culture creates an atmosphere where: “Nature is viewed by the mechanism of social domination as a healthy contrast to society, and it is therefore denatured” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, p. 19). These understandings of nature misdirect energy and resources into a conflict rather than cooperation. Questioning our relationship with nature as well as our food system is more productive than the persistent questioning, by both hunters and environmentalists, of each other’s motives. That process can only benefit the population segment profits from stalled conservation efforts (i.e., land developers and corporate polluters).

Our general understanding of and relationship to nature needs to be re-examined lest our nostalgia continues to justify the commercial, utilitarian attitude that has become so
Hunting and Environmentalism

essential to how we treat our environment. For that task to be performed properly, prejudices against hunting must be re-examined. To critique hunting without comprehensively critiquing the larger context within which hunting exist is to gloss over more pressing social and environmental issues by picking an easy scapegoat issue.

Notes

1. These investments are at times recognized even by those who have traditionally opposed hunting—recently, Kay Charter, the Executive Director of Saving Birds Thru Habitat, invited American birdwatchers to purchase the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp explaining that $14.70 of the stamp’s $15 price goes to purchasing habitat restoration and preservation land (Charter, 2007).

2. Some of the hunters I know hardly ever purchase meat. Furthermore, I know at least one hunter who regularly delivers skins, furs, and antlers from his harvest to aboriginal artists at a Canadian reservation. In exchange, he claims, he receives insightful advice on how to incorporate traditional environmental knowledge into his hunting practices.

3. Of course, this harmony is not surprising given that many indigenous groups, prior to colonialism, never separated hunting from land stewardship practices. Their continuous and complex relationship with nature required both to be considered simultaneously.

4. The gendered form here is being used purposefully, as the dominant idea of our superiority over nature is embedded in race, gender, and colonial logic.

References


Troake, A. (2006). *My ancestors were rogues and murderers* [film]. National Film Board of Canada.


