

CONSERVATION COMPASS

Just What is Fair Chase? - Part 2



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In the last issue, I described how a group of graduate students in a university class began its struggle with the definition of the fair chase ethic. At the end of their first three-hour session they had defined fair chase and concluded that it was as much a concept as a set of rules. And, they concluded the standards of fair chase were a combination of adherence to rules and regulations, group mores, and individual standards. In their next session, they continued the examination of fair chase by considering if and why fair chase had bearing on the future of hunting in North America. This article completes the description of the struggle of a group of dedicated students to come to grips with the essence of fair chase.

Humans As Formidable Predators
Yet, when all is said and done, even hunters operating under fair chase standards are predators — and the most formidable of predators at that. What has made humans the most formidable predators of the last hundreds of thousands of years? Superficially, humans seem poorly equipped for the role, having neither claws nor fangs to speak of and are, relative to other large predators, weak and slow. Humans have become predators without peer due to the human brain, the ability to make and use tools (opposable thumbs help) including weapons, and the ability to learn and pass on that learning to others, even across generations, assuring that knowledge and skill are cumulative. Humans have become so proficient as predators and so numerous that hunting opportunities must be rationed, limited, and policed or the prey base to support hunting would quickly disappear.

Fair Chase – The Special “Something” That Makes the Difference
Clearly, few sport hunters in North America, or their families, will starve without the hunter’s success. Obviously, something else is at play for those who hunt. That some-

thing — which is fair chase — makes hunting more, much more, than simple predation or the mere killing of wild animals. That “something” is both legally and socially defined for a single purpose. That purpose is to introduce, partially define, and maintain the cultured mysteries of the age-old dance between hunters and the hunted, which has evolved into a love affair for hunters toward the animals they pursue and assures their continued welfare. That dance has existed as long as humans have been hunters and the steps have become more intricate and traditionalized over time as hunters increasingly became the dedicated caretakers, as well as exploiters, of the animals they pursue.

Without doubt, laws and regulations — and adherence by the vast majority of hunters — compose the basic means of rationing opportunities to hunt while assuring that vigorous populations of the hunted exist and persist in viable numbers and distribution. No doubt, in recent times at least, society at large must be assured that hunting is something more than killing and that hunting does not risk, but rather ensures the survival of the hunted. Through the concept and standard of fair chase, hunting transcends mere killing and becomes something more — much more — than that. That “something more” is a combination of societal definition, coupled with a binding contract on the part of the hunter to behave in a manner that honors both hunting and the animals pursued, and, conversely, does not shame the hunter, hunting, nor the hunted. The result is the social survival of hunting in a modern world and the continued survival of the hunted in the wild state.

Simply put, without the basic underlying presence, however defined, of a concept of fair chase, hunting seems likely to be deemed socially unacceptable. North America is home to democratic nations whose human populations are exploding in numbers that are, coincidentally, ever more urban and distant in time and space from the hunting fields of their ancestors, in actuality, philosophy, understanding, and relationship to the mystique of the hunt.

Fair Chase – Essential to the Survival of Hunting in Democratic Nations
Though difficult to define in absolute terms

and fine detail, fair chase is a critical concept and a binding contract that is essential to the long-term societal acceptance of hunting. Fair Chase has been the Boone and Crockett Club’s motto and creed since shortly after its inception in 1887. Even so, fair chase has been criticized as a “squishy” concept lacking in rigor. To a degree that criticism is justified — for the concept is as much a matter of the heart as it is a mental construct requiring rigid definition. Yet, fair chase retains meaning — deep meaning — for those who, both individually and collectively, know what it means, implies, and compels in individual and group behaviors.

There is a continuing, even accelerating, evolution in the equipment used in hunting that inexorably increases the efficiency of hunters and lessens the chances of prey animals to avoid or survive an encounter with a hunter. That, in turn, leads hunters and wildlife managers to perennially ponder what fair chase means relative to such developments. Aldo Leopold, the recognized “father of wildlife management” in North America, observed that the traditional values of hunting decline as the development and use of “gadgets” increases. Certainly, the balance shifts more and more toward the hunter with the adoption of each new gadget. Dealing with perceptions of fair chase will likely require continuous adjustments in rules and regulations, group mores, and personal standards to readjust the balance point as required.

Hunting Fares Badly as a “Spectator Sport” – Sensitivity to Public Opinion
Hunting fares poorly as a spectator sport, as it is, in its entirety, remarkably dull to all save the participant. Yet, hunting is increasingly featured on television and focused on killing — that “moment of truth” when the hunter deals the hunted a deathblow. Such masks the very essence of the hunt and of hunting. A stalker on an estate in Scotland told me, “The stalk (i.e., the pursuit) is everything, the shot, though necessary, is but a small part.” And, in terms of big game hunting, at least, catching that moment on film requires relatively controlled conditions and the deathblow comes across on the screen as simple, certain, and considerably less than “fair.” What is, in truth, an anticlimax to all that

makes up the hunting experience becomes the climax, the alpha and omega. That presents but a sad parody of what hunting is and should be. Maybe it is time to recall the adage from a Robert Burns poem, "Oh would some Power the gift give us to see ourselves as others see us. It would from many a blunder free us." Therein lies applicable wisdom.

Adherence to Fair Chase – Before, During, and After the Hunt

The fair chase concept reaches beyond the pursuit and killing of game. It is shorthand for an ethic that expresses the respect that should be accorded by the hunter to the chased — before, during, after the pursuit and, sometimes, the kill. "Before" entails assurance of the welfare of the prey population and the development of requisite skills and attitudes. "During" involves all the circumstances of the pursuit and, sometimes, the taking of the animal(s) pursued. "After" encompasses how the prey is treated after death — including dressing, transport, processing, and consumption — and the appreciation of experience in reverie and in the telling of tales.

Real Hunting and "Play-Like" Facsimiles

All of this begged a question in the minds of some of the students. They asked, why would one who professes to love the pursued, and who cherishes the chase, not be satisfied with a symbolic kill? Such a "kill" could be achieved by placing the crosshairs on the animal's vital spots, squeezing the trigger, hearing the click on an empty chamber, and whispering, "bang — you're dead!" Or, perhaps a photograph is snapped as proof of the achievement. After all, all the skills (or the luck) of the hunter have been employed and the pursuit terminated with a simulated kill, a contest in which all live to play another day.

However, simply put, such is not hunting. It is a charade and a parody of a time honored ritual. Therein lies no closing of the ancient circle, the ancient ritual, of life and death and life. The most intense of human/animal relationships is not, thereby, consummated. The Spanish philosopher Ortega Y'Gasset, in his book *Meditations on Hunting*, asked and answered this often asked question by say-

ing, "The true hunter does not hunt in order to kill but, rather, kills in order to have hunted." It is only when the hunter has killed, and then converted the animal to food, and then prepared and consumed that food, is the circle of life and death and life complete in the hunter's mind and heart.

Hunters and the Future of Hunting Depends on Public Image

If hunting is to continue in nations that are increasingly urbanized — and in which most citizens have no firsthand familiarity with hunting — it is critical that the public's perception of hunters and hunting be a positive one. The image of hunters and hunting is bound up in the development, continued evolution, and adherence to fair chase principles. And, it is there that the class ended its examination of the issues of fair chase. Most seemed pleased with the results of their efforts, as was I. I thought their efforts too good not to share with others who ponder fair chase.

What is Fair Chase – The Shorthand Definition?

I closed the class exercise with a story. Several years ago, I queried some old timers in the Boone and Crockett Club as to their understanding and concepts of fair chase. I received many thoughtful replies. One of the replies, the briefest and most straightforward of the lot, lodged in my memory. This old hunter, who had hunted much and all around the world, said that he had thought hard, over the years, about fair chase. He summed up his pondering with a story that he told his grandchildren as he taught them to hunt. The ultimate test of fair chase came when he knelt beside an animal that he had killed and stroked the hair, and asked, "Do I feel good about what I have done — and sad too?" When the answer was "yes," he knew fair chase. And, if the answer had been "no," he would have known it was time to cease hunting. He knew fair chase when he lived by the code. Most of the class nodded. They understood what he meant and what I meant in telling the tale. ■

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