

Protecting Hunting from the Hunters



Introduction

Remember the days when it seemed that everyone smoked, everywhere, all the time? In planes, in pubs, at the game, in restaurants, at the office - I mean everyone, doing it everywhere, morning noon and night. Then somewhere, sometime, someone got a bee in their bonnet about the practice and started protesting. Low key at first, then increasingly vociferously as the medical evidence mounted and despite the best PR and lobbying efforts of some of the biggest, most cash flush companies in the world, the ripple became a swell, which became a tsunami of negative opinion and voila, the anti-smoking lobby carried the day.

I mean today you are not even allowed to smoke in an Irish pub for goodness sake. I often wonder who that one person was that started it all and if they thought they had a hope in hell of being heard, let alone sweeping all before them.

Make no mistake hunting stands to go the same way, as more and more groups of people line up to see to it that hunting as we know it today is banned in its entirety. Whilst the anti-smoking campaign was bolstered with weighty medical evidence, it ultimately succeeded on account of smoking becoming

by Derek Carstens

socially unacceptable.

This is a powerful emotive force, especially today where we claim to be enlightened in our thinking and way of life and increasingly legislate to enforce so-called normative behavior. Witness further the elimination of traditional initiations and orientation at schools and total disregard for the bonding purpose they served. It seems in modern society that traditions are increasingly under threat and the tradition of hunting is right up there on the list of endangered practices.

So best we act and act now and it starts with ourselves, as to a large extent I believe we have created our own firestorm through our own behaviors and practices.

However, I am also aware that this is tricky terrain - as Peter Beard puts in his classic *The End of the Game*.... "Hunting is a difficult subject to discuss because it is a private, personal experience for the few who find it meaningful. As soon as it involves large numbers of people or even comes to their attention, its value is distorted. Hunting is for the individual." As such it's to us, as individual hunters, to initiate the change.

Perhaps a worthwhile place to start is by assessing what has changed over the years since hunting started and how our practices and behaviors today compare to the indigenous hunters of the past, in the belief that not only is there much to learn, but also that it can provide a foundation on which we can build a more resilient defense. If you find it harsh or a little extreme, then know that it has been done in the best interests of what we as hunters hold dear, lest we lose it. How unthinkable would that be?

Hunting for survival vs. killing for pleasure

It is a fact that hunting in the past was done more by the need to survive than anything else - one certainly does not sense that fun or recreation was high on their agenda when it came to survival. Meat, being the most protein rich food source and fat it's vital partner, was the obvious target. So, man hunted to survive and the more successful he became the more man thrived. However, it always seemed to have been done for that purpose alone and it was not as if they had a choice in the matter. Today it's different. Few of us need to hunt to survive. Therefore, we hunt because we choose to and typically we do it for recreational purposes and often defend it on the grounds of it being "something man has always done", forgetting that early man did it then out of necessity, not choice. So, it's a spurious defense. It is also an unfortunate fact that this recreational activity has become increasingly bedeviled by unethical practices, ranging from bait shooting from hides, to an obsession with trophies that meet all kinds of scoring criteria. So, whilst we may like to think of ourselves as conservationist and upholding some kind of time-honored tradition, we are increasingly viewed as ego-driven killers. People who consciously violate nature and its animals and we need to recognize that fairly and squarely. As smoking is harmful to humans so hunting is now seen as being harmful to animals as well-being socially unacceptable.

Honoring the animal vs. triumphing with the trophy

On successfully completing a Giant Eland hunt the hunter is rewarded with a wonderful welcome in camp and a ceremonial dance in honor of the hunting party and the animal. One feels special as the hunt and the animal have been made to feel special which of course they are. Above all you sense huge respect for the Eland, which has been recognized in the memorable and moving ritual and it makes you

by Derek Carstens

feel humble and privileged.

Compare this to the recent photos pasted on their Facebook site by the two Trump brothers clutching their leopards – the epitome of ignominy, from both an animal and human point of view. No honor, no respect, nothing remotely humble. A brash shocker in every sense of the word and it went around the world in a flash and not surprisingly fueled the flames which threaten to devour us. But they were just doing the traditional thing of sporting their trophies as you see in every hunting magazine – in a sense following the example of their elders who collect so-called Grand Slam trophies at SCI Conventions and the like. Rather call them check book awards and be done with it, than delude ourselves that the recipients are hunters of stature in the true sense. Perhaps we can take a leaf out of the German's and Scot's books who seem to maintain high standards when it comes to ethical and honorable traditions as a result of which I venture to say they find their sport under less pressure.

Africa is the nub of the problem, but regrettably it is the yardstick against which we are judged and where most of the malpractice happens.

Hunting vs. shooting

Traditionally a hunter defined himself by his ability to read the signs and use the elements to get close and efficiently dispatch his quarry to the happy hunting grounds, using fairly crude weaponry. Increasingly today you hear talk of head shots at 400m and the like – seldom however, is mention ever made of the ghastly jaw hits. In fact it seems the further you are from your target the better and the more accomplished you are as a hunter. Shooter maybe – hunter no way.

Test of skill vs. proof of wallet

Skilled hunters of the past were not just proficient with their weapons, but they were also knowledgeable about the entire eco-system, tracking, feeding, drinking, sleeping and breeding habits of the animals. Witness Ndende of whom Beard says, "He learned the ways of elephant early in childhood. He read their spoor as he might read writing, interpreted their rumblings and shuffling as one might hear conversation."

Ask your typical hunter of today what he really knows about a buffalo in terms of its life and the conditions within which he is hunting it, or a sable or elephant or any other. I suspect a low pass rate, but one that doesn't interfere with his ability to pay and desire to kill. How often do you not hear PH's complaining about the pressure they operate under so the client can fill his quota? Pound the roads, pound the baits, pound the beat, all to pound the animals.

Why not hunt on foot and enjoy the experience by learning from the likes of Ndende.

Succeeding with the animal of your mission should be a bonus not a contrived given. So what if you go home without the animal in the salt. You will have had a much more fulfilling bush experience and come back a more fulfilled person, a better hunter and yes, you would also have got much better value for your hard-earned dollar. But no, it's a case of "get that animal which I have paid for and if we get it early can I please leave"!

by Derek Carstens

Proof of manhood vs. testosterone fuelled chauvinism.

In the past we know that attaining manhood was a defining moment in the life of the community for many reasons, not the least being the candidate's ability to attract the maiden of his choice or not. As such one was tested to see if the threshold had been crossed. Today, in the increasing absence of time honored rituals and accelerating urbanization, males still seek to assert their masculinity and so-called hunting of animals is one way out. So, more ego-centric stories prevail about the hardships endured and challenges faced. In fact, virtually every story you read written by hunters, places themselves and their deed firmly in the middle - look at me, look what I have achieved, as I fend off that mid-life crisis.

Animal has a chance vs. animal has no chance.

As a lion, facing down a Masai warrior with a spear and shield is one thing - try escaping from a high-science projectile, hurtling towards you at 2800 ft. per second, guided on its way by a 10-power scope set atop a modern-day rifle, from the safety of a blind.

In particular I am bothered by shooting animals from a hide on a bait - no one will ever convince me that it constitutes hunting. Tell me in all honesty how does it qualify? Exciting, yes, I am sure to hear a lion roaring near you as you sit in the blind - but hunting, no. And remember it is the big cats, who are most commonly shot like this, that will be next on the anti-hunting brigade's agenda and how do we possibly defend this practice as ethical hunting. I say it again - lions will be the next to be outlawed unless we change. Rather go after them on foot for a real sphincter tightening experience and test of courage.

Physical prowess vs. diesel stalker

Heaving his not inconsiderable bulk off the Land Cruiser, the average hunter stares vacantly around as the trackers set about their business. The fact that he has wounded the animal whilst shooting from the truck is more of an inconvenience than anything else, and so the chore of follow up ensues, with the PH typically finishing the animal off. Maybe that's harsh but again it is a conclusion after seeing many hunters, either in the bush or at airports, that few are well physically conditioned. Long hikes after fresh buffalo tracks is not their idea of a hunt and listening to PH's and their staff over the years, it is surprising to learn just how prevalent diesel-stalking is. Sadly, physical prowess seems to be on the wane whilst diesel powers ahead.

Social necessity vs. socially unacceptable

Here it is about killing out of necessity as opposed to for sport. With all the focus on the trophy, the wider context within which hunting occurs has become lost. All people see are dead animals killed for sport. Problem - big problem. The fact that owners of hunting concessions have invested in anti-poaching squads and all manner of environment and community improvement initiatives goes unnoticed, or is overwhelmed by pictures of dead animals and grinning hunters. As the saying goes "a picture tells a thousand words". So let's show different pictures which depict us and what we do in a different light. Whilst we all know that the facts largely support hunting in terms of the ultimate survival of the various species, the fact is that people will not listen to reason when their emotions prevail.



Lioness catching Warthog. Photo Credit: Conny Damm

Stories of the hunt vs. photos of dead animals

Bushmen, Inuit, Aborigines, Plains Indians and the like, all have a folklore richly embellished with stories of the animals that sustained them, the legendary hunters and their hunts. Little of that today - too little. Instead we focus on ourselves and our heroic deeds rather than on the animal and its life. Time me thinks to change or we will be changed - are we naturalists or killers.

Time also for the various media involved in hunting to change their editorial stance and to demonstrate that they too get it, lest they find advertising revenues declining as circulations come under pressure. Let the emphasis shift from the gallery of death to more about hunting in its entirety - I mean how many more stories can you read about "wounded buffalo at dawn" or "leopard at last light (from a blind)" written by well-meaning amateurs.

Not exactly going to further the cause of hunting or the wellbeing of the animals. Let's rather become

by Derek Carstens

as proficient with our cameras as we hopefully are with our rifles. What about pictures of the animal before it was taken, full of life and challenge? Pictures of life.

Professional hunters all vs. PH and “clients”

Truth is that whilst hunters of the past were invariably all pros, many today venture into the bush as rank amateurs under the protective wing of a veteran PH. Ridiculous, if you really think about it. I mean how can you possibly have any respect for something which seemingly seems to require so little in terms of skill or preparation. Hence the arrogance and the callousness. Consider this, that to undertake a simple 30ft underwater scuba dive, requires proper training and certification. Yet to take the life of a 46-inch Zambian sable or 55-inch kudu bull requires no formal training or certification - just a chequebook. How can you possibly honour something you have not worked for or earned the right to hunt?

Respectful behaviour vs. disrespectful behaviour

Early to bed, early to rise, early to hunt, practice, practice, practice vs. late to bed, early to rise possibly with a hangover, a couple of sighting shots off a dead rest at a stationary target at 100 yards. Then off we go in the truck to attempt to shoot any number of animals from a list, many of which we have never seen let alone know anything about. Then back well before the heat of the day gets too much, to flop exhausted into a camp stool, ready to be waited on by the ever attentive camp staff.

“Primitive” man vs. “modern” man

Primitive man is respected for his deeds in terms of survival because the odds were so stacked against him and yet he thrived. He had no choice, made the most of his talents and basically got on with it. He was also relatively simple by nature, mentally undeveloped and socially unsophisticated (so we are told). His was a physical world.

Today we see ourselves as educated, evolved and sophisticated. Ironic isn't it that this social accolade called “sophisticated” comes from the word “sophism”, which means a “plausibly deceptive fallacy” and a “sophist” is an “intentionally fallacious reasoner”. And it is these fallacious reasoners who hold us to ransom on the grounds we are no longer living in a physical world but one filled with knowledge and wisdom.

Where the need to hunt has long been intellectually superseded and people who indulge in it are boorish and socially unacceptable. Relics of a bygone era who society will increasingly marginalize. Thoughtless people in an increasingly thoughtful world. Time to expose their fallacious reasoning, is it not? As mentioned earlier, it starts with us behaving differently and only when we do this will we have a chance of allowing the facts to speak for themselves.

Hunting vs. photographic safaris.

As evidenced by the recent ban on hunting in Botswana in favour of photographic safaris we face a formidable alternative. One that ticks all the boxes in terms of social acceptability, conservation, sophistication, nature loving, eco-friendly, animal respect, community involvement, revenue generation and the like. Expect more of it, not less, at the expense of hunting as the twain shall never meet.

by Derek Carstens

Unless of course we respond differently to the currently thoughtless norm and also start ticking some boxes, instead of annihilating canned lions. Seems the only photos we are interested in are the inevitable – what about everything else that we are privileged to see and observe in some of the magnificent places we are so fortunate to visit whilst on safari? Or have our powers of observation become blinded by the quest for the trophy?

What a waste when you consider that one of the great joys of hunting is that you get to hunt in really remote areas. Where there is a real possibility to get involved with your surroundings and in fact experience sights and sounds way better than sitting on the game viewing truck of a photographic safari could ever deliver. But do we capitalise on that? No – invariably we default to the “trophy pic”, instead of being more reflective about the special experience we have been privileged to enjoy.

Focus on life vs. focus on death

The inescapable fact of the matter is that we are seen as purveyors of death, not propagators of life. Our hunting forefathers respected life and it seems we worship at the shrine of death. Think about it – hard and honestly.

Conclusion

Hunting and hunters are increasingly under fire not just on account of what we do, but how we do it. The “what” does not concern me as it is a personal choice one makes and that is one’s right (at least for now). It is the “how” that is the problem and which makes it increasingly difficult to defend the what and which gets in the way of the facts.

For the record I am not saying all of us do this all of the time. Most, I am sure, endeavour to hunt fairly and ethically. However, the inconvenient truth of the matter is that we are all guilty, to a greater or lesser extent, of transgressing one or more of the above boundaries at one time or another and it’s the transgressions that create the perceptions, which in turn become reality in the minds of the nay sayers.

We are as strong as the weakest link in the chain. So that is why I say it is up to us as individual hunters to protect our sport – not committees, organizations or societies. I mean have you ever seen a statue erected to a committee?

Let’s use the public platforms available to us and our industry media to put a different face on hunting based on different practices. No longer natural born killers a la Oliver Stone, rather knowledgeable conservationists, who lead by example and consequently are able to stand up to the emotive attacks of the anti-brigade whose voices will become a cacophony lest we still them through example.

The good news of course is that we are talking about attitudes and behaviours which we can chose to change for the better ... if we have the will. That is the question and depending on how you answer you will either become part of the solution, or continue to exacerbate the problem.