

Hunters And Their Wild Harvest



For most of human history, and before large-scale farming, wild game made up a large portion of mankind's diet. Until about 10,000 years ago, domesticated animals did not exist and, throughout the preceding millennia, our ancestors had but one option to obtain essential proteins: They had to hunt wild animals. Meat from wild game provided the proteins that made us human.

"The primordial animal predator and the contemporary hunter have much in common", says Florian Asche in his article Remaking Hunting as Human; "the game, the hunter, the stalking, the flurry, the death, and the consumption of the prey. In both examples the million-year-old game of pursuit and death is rewarded by death renewing life."

According to Asche, *"it is not hunting that makes us human, but our consciousness to hunt ... humans are the only beings on this planet who can apprehend and review hunting in a logical way. As a result of our λόγος [logos]— not simply our speech but more generally our rational mind—hunting leads us from the mere existence of nature to moral and ethical issues in the trade-off between bondage and freedom,*

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and in the aesthetics and the meaning of becoming and passing.”

Today, says Asche, *“hunting still serves to defeat the oblivion of nature and to heal the soul of man in all cultures.”* And, I am inclined to add, hunting connects us to where it all began at the dawn of human history.

In modern society, eating healthy wild-harvest products seems to be increasingly important; wild game is a rising star in the health-conscious kitchen—the original organic, grass-fed, free-range and naturally sustainable meat source. It is free of hormones and antibiotics, it is not genetically modified and it does not contribute to the proliferation of super-bugs. It holds a healthy balance of omega-6 and omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids and is richer in iron, niacin and B vitamins than the meat from ordinary livestock. It typically contains fewer calories than commercially raised meat and has more protein.

Personal harvest of meat or plant foods from the wild involves no (or little) alteration of natural ecosystems. I dare to argue that it has an even lower ecological impact than a thoughtless vegan diet—especially if the wild meat is local and the vegan vegetables are imported, or—in the case of soybean products—come with a hefty cost of clear-cut forests, heavy fertilizing and proliferation of pesticides. Wild game is probably the eco-friendliest meat; and from a humane point of view, hunting involves no abattoirs and only minimal stress or suffering for animals.

Wild ungulates subsisting on a natural diet provide meat that is likely a bit tougher than that of a less active, farm-raised animal; these are also usually older animals, not industrially raised sub-adults. This is why wild game meat has substantially more and often better flavor.

When buying fresh game, as opposed to hunting it, basically the same rules apply as with other meat products: The meat must not have a blackish color or smell unpleasant. However, game meat is often comparatively darker in color. This is partly due to the higher content of iron, which colors muscle tissue, and partly because the game is not slaughtered but shot, and therefore the blood is not completely drained from the veins. Game meat tastes better if it is aged in the skin for some time to allow enzymes to break down proteins and improve tenderness and flavor.

Like hunting itself, butchering a wild animal is also an art. We have to know our cuts and how to follow the individual muscles with a knife; we need to know which cuts are best for different methods of preparation. Done properly, the result is the best organic meat available. And don't forget the organs—the heart, liver and kidneys—as ingredients for very tasty recipes. In fact, all cuts and parts of a game animal can be used by the visionary chef.

Many older North American recipes suggest that steaks, casseroles, pies or burgers are the best ways to serve game; or it is made into biltong (Southern Africa), jerky (North America) or some standard sausage form. These are all remnants of the pioneer kitchen. The Old World has a richer, centuries-old history of preparing wild meats, although some of the dishes served at the tables of feudal lords would hardly appeal to modern palates.

Today, chefs in Europe and North America no longer resort only to the traditional ways of serving the

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bounty of the hunt; they give us a constant stream of innovative creations, whether simple or complex.

We should all make a conscious effort to discover this new culinary universe, one where nothing is wasted from our wild harvest. Game processing and cooking books now flood the market, and the Internet provides access to thousands more recipes. *Conservation Frontlines* will also offer tried-and-tested recipes, and we have a continuously expanding section in our library dedicated to wild foods.

Wild game meat is unquestionably the all-around healthiest option for a diet containing meat. It is, therefore, not astonishing that game continues to surge in popularity, particularly among sophisticated and health-conscious foodies. However, we should note that there is a difference between hunted wild game meat and some commercial venison products.

The “wild” game or venison offered in most North American restaurants or supermarkets is, in fact, the comparatively flaccid flesh of captive-bred, farm-raised, formerly wild animals. It has the same culinary relationship to true wild meat as farmed salmon does to the genuine free-swimming creature from the northern regions of North America Europe and Britain.

Renowned wildlife conservationist Shane Mahoney recently wrote: *“the recreational wild harvest in North America should be viewed as one of the most sustainable, healthy, and environmentally friendly food procurement systems in existence. The harvest of wild protein by the approximately 40 million Canadians and Americans who hunt and fish every year recreationally provides an enormous amount of food. It’s organic food. It’s food that’s taken from landscapes that are maintained naturally and as functioning ecosystems. So, if you just consider whitetail deer: of the obvious multitudes between five and seven million a year are harvested; for very coarse estimation assume 100 pounds of meat per animal; we’re looking at 500 to 700 million pounds.”*

In the Wild Harvest Initiative, Mahoney and his partners assemble and evaluate data on the harvest of wildlife and fish in Canada and the United States; and from there they will estimate the amount of meat that comes from the harvested animals and work with economists to assign it a fair-market value.

Regulations in North America generally prohibit the sale of wild game meat. Luckily for the non-hunter, North American hunters often share their harvest with their extended families, friends and neighbors. One of Mahoney’s conclusions from the work done so far in the Wild Harvest Initiative *“puts the number of people that are engaged in some way, touched in some way, by our hunting traditions to maybe 200 million people, maybe 250 million people, out of approximately 360 million who live in Canada and the United States.”*

Encouraging as this is, hunters also need to be more proactive. We could work with professional chefs and restaurants, or hand out samples of expertly prepared venison together with factual information on hunting at local farmers’ markets. I am sure that we would find an attentive audience in non-hunting visitors. Taking to the taste buds can be a promising way to inform non-hunters about the benefits of sustainable hunting. Many non-hunting but environmentally conscious people could quickly become passionate about fresh, locally sourced wild products—once they have tried properly hunted and processed game meat. With our help, they might then see hunting with different eyes!

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The situation in Europe and Southern Africa is less altruistic and more commercial. Across Southern Africa, on regulation-fenced land, live animals are the property of the landowner and can be traded alive or, when hunted or culled, sold as meat. Game meat is regular fare on hunters' tables in Southern Africa, but it rarely appears in non-hunting kitchens—although most locals (and some visitors) will go miles for good biltong. Only a few enterprising African chefs feature game in their restaurants. This is a situation that Southern African game ranchers would do well to address with urgency.

In Europe, no one owns wildlife—landowners or leaseholders acquire ownership once the wildlife is legally harvested on their property. Game meat is routinely sold on the open market and has significant commercial value. Wild game is an important part of culinary culture across all of Europe. Especially during hunting season, many butcheries offer a great variety of cuts, and traditional and innovative restaurant menus alike are loaded with tasty wild game creations sourced from the regional harvest.

In Germany, for example, the meat from some 75,000 red deer, 63,000 fallow deer, 4,500 chamois, 7,000 mouflon, 835,000 wild boar and 1,190,000 roe deer reaches the kitchens and tables of aficionados every year. Add to these figures more than 180,000 brown hares, 100,000 wild rabbits, 76,000 pheasants, 95,000 wild geese, 273,000 wild ducks and 430,000 wild pigeons and you get an idea of the economic significance of game meat. In a country about half the size of Texas and with about three times its population, the annual wholesale value alone of wild harvested game meat approaches \$300 million US.

At Jagd & Hund, Europe's largest annual hunting fair, with more than 80,000 visitors, the culinary preparation of wild game has greatly increased in popularity. In January 2019 an entire exhibition hall was dedicated to the Wild Food Festival. This "show within a show" includes sample delicacies, fresh produce and ingredients, creative cooking ideas, exciting stage shows and workshops dedicated to game cooking that feature top chefs, and much more.

Hunters nowadays lack a lofty pedestal from which to defend their interests; as well, pro-hunting evidence is too scientific and complicated to be rendered in attention-grabbing tweets. Instead, we hunters could gain a great deal by refocusing the public debate on the benefits of a sustainable, healthy supply of game meats, both fresh or cured. Hunters can unequivocally state that fish, fowl and red meat, harvested sustainably from the wild, are naturally and even morally superior to industrially produced meats. And, done right, proper hunting provides healthy exercise in the outdoors!

Too many people grow obese and ill from eating industrially produced, chemical-drenched, fat-laden pseudo-meats. Livestock, fish and poultry "factories" often damage the Earth as well, taking a huge toll on our environment and climate. These costs include the proliferation of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, the death of aquatic ecosystems, and the pollution of soil, groundwater and air with heavy metals, phosphorus, nitrogen, pathogens, hormones, ammonia and methane.

The average meat-eater today is obsessed with tenderness and mild flavor. To that end, in North America and Europe, almost all commercial animals are slaughtered young or even as juveniles. This drive to produce more, and cheaper, tender meat leads to the historically high consumption of industrial meat we see today. Yet a growing number of "conscious consumers" are trending toward eating less but

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higher quality meat, and are willing to pay for this privilege. Wild game meat could play a small but significant role in this process.

For some, the moral question of hunting is the over-riding issue—but I suggest that the moral and environmental implications of factory farming are what we should be debating, not ethical hunting.

Our society has largely lost its connection to the food chain. Done right, hunting and killing of wild game is natural and moral. A hunter carries out the tracking, killing, eviscerating, skinning, butchering, preparing and cooking of a wild animal. These are sensory experiences far beyond the selection of a vacuum-sealed package of meat based on its weight, price and sell-by date!

The death of that wild animal is caused directly by the individual hunter. And once the trigger is pulled, or the arrow released, the real work begins. The animal must be gutted immediately. The carcass must be allowed to cool. During field-dressing, blood literally covers the hunter's hands. Hunting demands an incomparably greater connection to the reality of life and death than does a thoughtless trip to the supermarket. Hunting is a true interaction with the natural cycle, all the way from the preparations for the hunt to the point where the hunter takes the animal's life. This interaction continues from the processing to the cooking and consumption at table.

If you believe it is wrong to eat meat, you can become vegan; that decision is down to the individual, just like the decision to hunt. Globally, regionally and locally, it is impossible to prevent the killing of animals—but hunting makes it possible to ensure that animal deaths are natural and ethical. And there is no denying that a regulated wild harvest provides a sustainable supply of healthy, organic meat for the discriminating gourmet.

Whatever your position, let us exercise tolerance and have a civilized debate while agreeing on the need to live in harmony with nature.

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