

by Paul McCarney



Are There Species We Shouldn't Hunt?

Paul McCarney's personal exploration of this controversial question is an examination of utilitarian and technical issues, individual moral decision-making, and the emotional element to hunting. His conclusions may not sit well with all readers, but it is worthwhile to explore the gut feelings that might sometimes give us an aversion to pursuing certain species. Even if we are rationally uncomfortable with these feelings.

Among the many things that draw hunters into the field to pursue new species, curiosity is perhaps one of the simplest and most ancient. There is an exciting sense of curiosity that drives hunters to want to continue to experience new landscapes, natural phenomena, and species. While we are certainly driven but such primordial motivations to hunt, we also commonly express less practical, but equally human, reflections about the many considerations that impact our hunting decisions. Are there species we shouldn't hunt?

Hunting has allowed and forced me to interrogate my own sense of moral decision-making about

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wildlife. If hunting is defined by more than its utilitarian and technical motivations; if we engage with the complex range of ethical questions and decisions around hunting; and we acknowledge that there is an emotional element to hunting, it is worthwhile to reckon with the gut feelings that might sometimes give us an aversion to pursuing certain species. Even if we are rationally uncomfortable with these feelings.

Should we hunt all species?

I began thinking about this question more deliberately after a recent conversation with a good friend – a non-hunter and someone who cares deeply about wild places and has done a great deal to advocate for the conservation of these places and the wildlife in them.

With this particular friend I have the luxury of being able to debate complex topics productively and meaningfully. As a side note, this is somewhat rare in the days of social media keyboard warriorism, so if you don't have someone like this in your life, find one.

The topic arose out of a discussion about the British Columbia government's decision to cancel the province's grizzly bear hunt due to public pressure against the hunt, and whether or not this was the correct decision.

My opinion was that we should consider hunting seasons for any species, provided the population can sustain a hunt and we have the public resources to dedicate to manage it effectively.

To my friend, I highlighted the science around grizzly bear hunting, which has not demonstrated that the hunt was unsustainable or mismanaged. Therefore, from my perspective, the decision was likely not the correct one because it was based on the emotional whims of a mostly urban public.

As an ecologist, my friend understood and respected the science. He also lives in British Columbia and spends a great deal of time in backcountry areas that are likely home to grizzly bears. He understands the landscape and the issue through a direct connection to it.

Yet, he still felt the decision to cancel the hunt was acceptable from the perspective of a publicly managed resource. And not just any resource. In fact, he agreed with the decision. He suggested that grizzly bears are a species he doesn't think we should hunt at all.

A question of sustainability?

I take it for granted in this discussion that we should not hunt any species for which there are population or conservation concerns. I suspect it is unlikely that anyone with a semblance of conservation ethic will disagree with me on this point.

The success of conservation initiatives and wildlife management policies across North America provide us with hunting opportunities for a wide range of species. As we continue to grapple with difficult conservation issues, there are of course species we cannot hunt for legal and conservation reasons. In this discussion, I am interested in the considerations that are more difficult to define.

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My perspective on whether or not we should consider opening hunting seasons for a particular species has generally always boiled down to the question of sustainability: can we identify sustainable levels of harvest and do we have the resources to effectively manage that harvest? Any other considerations are purely personal and emotional and shouldn't factor in the decision.

But the conversation around grizzly bears forced me to think about this question more deeply. I also wanted to understand if I ever felt this way and if so, under which circumstances.

Which species?

The revelation for me was not that people have feelings against bear hunting. Bear hunting "controversies" crop up in the media with somewhat predictable regularity and bear hunting seems particularly effective at stirring public outrage over hunting. This is not what my friend was expressing.

What was interesting to me was the idea that there might be some species we shouldn't hunt simply because they shouldn't be hunted. Because the inherently emotional qualities embodied by the animal are valid in themselves.

The question is, if there are species we shouldn't hunt, how do we decide?

I don't presume to have an answer to that question. I suspect it is likely different for everyone and depends on the internal criteria we each use to evaluate our hunting decisions. I imagine it comes down to that great tangle of personal experience, individual ethics about what it means to hunt, and the deep cultural contexts we are surrounded by.

Characteristics of off-limits species

What is clear to me is that there are certain species that mobilize the kind of emotions that tend to lead people towards thinking those species shouldn't be hunted.

In many cases, the species that are commonly on this list are predators near the top of their food chains: bears, wolves, lions. In other cases, I think they tend to be species that humans identify with in some way: the deep memory of elephants, the biological familiarity of primates, the familial qualities of whales.

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Do these species possess some key trait that we associate with an essential morality that makes it a sin on some level to kill them? Is the aversion to killing them more ecological, based on their critical role in maintaining trophic interactions and ecosystem functions? Or is it simply that in the public imagination, these species are commonly represented in such resplendence that they just seem, somehow, off limits?

A personal perspective

On a more personal level, I think I tend to evaluate this question through a mixture of practical and philosophical lenses.

On a practical level, I have always been so motivated by the sheer enjoyment in hunting that I am interested in pursuing any species for which there are hunting opportunities. With regards to particular species, I have always been motivated first and foremost by food - if I'm not going to eat the animal, I'm not as interested in hunting it.

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More philosophically, I feel that positioning certain species outside or above consideration for hunting must be, at least in part, based on subjective social values. This kind of anthropomorphic valuation of wildlife is not only scientifically arbitrary but also ethically questionable in wildlife management.

Therefore, I am wary of considering some species exempt from hunting based on grounds other than considerations of sustainability because I believe our wildlife management decisions should be based on ecology and not emotion.

Further reflections

Having said all of this, I have found there is a positive relationship between the amount that I think about hunting and the number of contradictions I reveal about myself.

I will admit to feeling less intrinsically motivated to hunt certain species. I do not feel drawn to hunt wolves. I have worn coats with wolf fur around the hood and can attest to its warmth and effectiveness in the cold. I feel no ethical quandary in using their fur for these purposes.

My internal hesitation to hunt wolves may itself be a backlash against the same kind of cultural subjectivity I try to avoid when evaluating the morality of hunting certain species.

Predators have a long history of persecution in North America. The policies and programs that led to the near extinction of predators on this continent were designed to serve human needs far and above those of the landscape. These anti-predator programs cultivated some insidious cultural biases against predators that unfortunately continue to persist today.

So perhaps I feel hesitant to hunt species like wolves as a subconscious resistance to the misguided perceptions and representations about predators that circulate in parts of the hunting community.

It's not that I am opposed to managing predator populations as a resource through sustainable hunting just as we manage prey species. Rather, it may be that my perceptions around hunting certain species will shift alongside my interpretation of certain cultural perceptions.

Conclusions

We could try to identify some logical pattern to the idea that there are species we shouldn't hunt. However, this may be too complicated a task given the wide range of cultures and lifestyles that inform these perspectives.

It may also just be beside the point.

At the end of the day, maybe it's not important to find a logic to the idea that there are species we shouldn't hunt. Maybe these feelings are just an inevitable and shifting part of engaging with deep moral questions around hunting.

Whether, as hunters, we agree with the idea that there are certain species we shouldn't hunt, or

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whether we even feel that this idea is justified, it matters how we respond to it.

These feelings do exist in the public, and feelings manifest as public opinion. And since public opinion impacts decisions about wildlife management, perhaps the point is simply that we ought to take this phenomenon seriously and treat it with respect.

This is also a personal question. It is a question that we will likely continue to grapple with as a society as we face increasingly complex conservation challenges and is, therefore, a question worth asking ourselves.

I do believe that we should resist the idea that hunting should be removed from the table as a potential management tool for certain species when that idea is based strictly on emotion. When there is public resistance to hunt a certain species and this resistance is based on emotion alone, I believe we should remain committed to the idea of science-based wildlife management and focus on the wider context of the sustainability of a hunt for that species.

We also can't ignore the role of culture and changing cultural norms. As I mentioned above, we might need to re-examine and potentially challenge parts of hunting culture, such as the continued vilification of predators. We should remember that people are inherently emotional beings and working within these key traits of our own species will allow us to make further progress in communication and conservation.

Paul McCarney has a Ph.D in Environmental Studies; his thesis looked at the social and ecological dimensions of wildlife research and management in the Arctic. McCarney lives in Nain, Labrador, where he is creating a marine management and conservation plan for Nunatsiavut called Imappivut. This article was first published in Landscapes & Letters, a space created by McCarney to discuss issues and experiences in hunting and conservation.

Banner Photo: Bears are a highly politicized species when it comes to management. The B.C. government openly acknowledge that much of its decision to end the grizzly bear hunt was based on public emotion and pressure.

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