

Hunters and Conservationists – Natural Partners!

Gerhard R Damm, President, SCI African Chapter
Email: gerhard@muskwa.co.za

Many human art forms – from times immemorial to the present – focus on hunting and the hunted. In the course of humanity’s evolution from hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturists on to industrial and post-industrial societies, the once all-encompassing values of hunting became successively less significant for the majority. Modern society continues to show a sporadic interest in hunting. The focus has changed, however. Hunting is today evaluated for its contribution to conserving a vibrant biodiversity. Hunters view hunting as a ancient tradition with a modern purpose and together with conservation biologists, indigenous communities, wildlife managers and the mainstream conservation organizations recognize its positive aspects. Other groups – in particular the animal rights movement – oppose hunting with a variety of means and despise hunters as anachronistic killers.

I am a passionate hunter and have been one my entire life. I also consider myself an ardent conservationist and with strong ethical commitments to nature. This later point is not obvious to the average non-hunter. In particular the anti-hunter negates the fact that every decent hunter is also a committed conservationist! This essay should bridge the information gap between non-hunters and hunters. Knowledge about the position of the “other side” is essential for dialogue. Therefore I want to give the non-hunter some insight into hunting.

The hunter has – because of uniquely human qualities – an entirely different relationship to the hunted animal as the non-human predator. This anthropocentric approach distinguishes the human hunter from a predator like a lion. The hunter consciously enters into this relationship for various historical and present-day reasons. These may be subsistence, spiritual sustenance, initiation rites, expression of political power, acquisition of a particular trophy, the maintenance of intact eco-systems, a particular experience, or a combination of some or all of these factors.

Hunting was not excluded from evolutionary change. Hunting methods, weapons, and purpose have changed and have been adapted to cultural and social scenarios. However, from distant times, when the human species was on nature’s “Red List”, to the present day, with over six billion humans occupying every conceivable niche on the planet, hunting has remained a particular human activity. It “evolved” from the archaic form of securing survival to the modern form of trophy hunting. Trophy hunting (*see box 1*) is inseparably connected with preservation, conservation and the concept of sustainable use of wild natural resources. This ecological motivation is of critical importance for the credibility of hunters in modern society.

Box 1

A hunting trophy remembers a particular experience, valuable and important to the individual hunter. It is all the more important to the hunter, if the difficulties associated with collecting the trophy are exceptional. Self-discipline is a key-factor in trophy hunting, since the trophy must be the result and not the ultimate objective of the hunt.

Today, recreational aspects, and the satisfaction of the hunter’s personal aspirations are additional aspects. In a world of increasingly scarce individualism, dominated by pervasive tameness and sameness, hunting has remained one of the few highly individualistic activities, providing unique challenges and rewards. The hunters’ perceived archaic pleasure in pursuing game in lonely and wild places, their voluntary flight from the mass-pleasures of modern society, and their passionate defence of biodiversity conservation make them rare specimens in today’s “fun-oriented-society”! The rejection of this cultural heritage and individual passion seems to be as misguided as indulging in hunting without ethics, unchecked by laws and personal restraints.

<http://www.iwmc.org/sustain/021017-1.htm>

Although hunting has been reduced to marginality in the priorities of society, it has nevertheless achieved controversial status. The animal rights movement mix the killing of animals, perceived privileges enjoyed by hunters, the frequently misinterpreted word “preservation” and the often cited species’ extinction (*see box 2*) with traces of social envy to successfully used stir emotions! Furthermore a political dimension entered, since the anti-hunting campaigns are attacks on the constitutional rights of private ownership, personal freedom and on our pluralistic structures.

Man is part of nature. Within nature man plays an important role as the only species capable of ethically motivated responsibility. Hunters have accepted that responsibility and subjected themselves to a framework of laws and informal guidelines. Reflective and experienced hunters will go beyond by applying self-imposed limitations. That does not rule out unethical and illegal behaviour of certain individuals, but it seems necessary to point out that people who knowingly act against written and unwritten laws occur in every group of society.

The culture of trophy hunting requires the hunter to be conscious of animal welfare and the well-being of the biosphere. Animal welfare does not only include effective and humane killing, but also the commitment to the maintenance of healthy animal populations within vibrant eco-systems. The later is impossible without adaptive management of animal populations within their finite habitats. Sustainability regarding the off-take and sustainability regarding the genetic vibrancy are of basic importance. Preservation – bringing endangered species back from the brink, and conservation – understood as adaptive management of biodiversity, are two fields, which are inseparably connected with hunting. The commitment of hunters to preservation and conservation of soil, plants and animals actually determines the role of hunting. Another aspect is the economic contribution of safari hunting to the development of African communities, national economies and the financing of conservation. Everything else, like tasty venison, hunting traditions and customs down the line to the open pleasure in hunting, etc. is secondary in importance for the non-hunting public, albeit of varying significance for the individual hunter.

The future of hunting in society is determined by obtaining the trust of the non-hunting citizens. They must be able to recognize that the hunters – as co-guardians of the world’s natural heritage - act within the common objectives of biodiversity conservation. Transparency is a key word. The core competence of the hunter-conservationist, namely the skilful and ethical pursuit of game and his conservation knowledge should be clearly visible. Hunting means and must mean far more than killing of animals. The hunter needs to have the self understanding of an all-encompassing ecological approach, whether in black rhino preservation, ivory trade, protection of Indian tigers and the wild sheep of Asia or combating the threats of desertification and soil erosion, etc.

Box 2

Human stone-age hunters were responsible for the extinction of 33 major families of mammals and birds around the last ice age. During the past 400 years the growing human population and the competition for space and resources has been the major cause of extinctions. All authors ascribed the “sixth mass extinction” to human activities and population growth, although their estimates regarding the absolute number of species going extinct vary widely. Wilson’s, Ehrlich’s and Myers’ estimates of between 27,000 and 100,000 species going extinct per year are painting the picture of a catastrophe, whereas Lomborg cites various sources with a rate of around 2,300 species being the more plausible one.

The concern for the loss of species is certainly also anthropocentric, since one naturally thinks of “larger and charismatic species” like the elephant, rhino, etc. and tends to “forget the millions of black beetles, flies, fungi, etc.”

Scientists from the many branches exploring nature's web of life have a professional interest, deep knowledge and a wide exposure in biodiversity conservation. The grand majority of society may also show an interest, but this rarely expands beyond the horizon of coffee-table books, nature television series, and occasional letters to media editors complaining about "insensitive" hunters. It actually has become fashionable to be "green", "vegan" or otherwise profess sensitivity for the environment. Many of these self-styled environmentalists, especially those residing in the urban centres, are simply nature-lovers, since an occasional walk through the bush, a membership in a conservation or animal rights organisation, a visit to a luxury game lodge, or the viewing of TV documentaries does neither constitute what makes a true environmentalist, nor does it give the essential knowledge to form an opinion! Instead, emotions based on half-truths and sensationalist reports are allowed to take over.

Most Africans are anyhow too occupied to scramble for daily survival. For those living in poverty, biodiversity conservation is far from the minds – unless biodiversity conservation produces tangible benefits, or infringes on their lifestyles, respectively damages their assets.

The hunters certainly have what one could call "selfish objectives" – the perpetuation of game to hunt! This statement is indeed true. "Selfishness" however is a genetic condition of all life on earth! The hunters' selfish objectives led to their core competence in conservation matters, although hunters are usually not professionally involved in wildlife conservation. They do it, because they love to hunt! Their knowledge and actions serve the human community and the entire biosphere. It follows that a hunter - in order to be able to pursue his quarry - has to ensure healthy eco-systems; only within vibrant habitats will there be game to hunt since "habitat can exist without animals, but animals cannot exist without habitat!"

Therefore properly regulated hunting and hunters following written laws and ethics of "Fair Chase" will be the most eager guardians of an intact biosphere. Hunters and non-hunters alike have to understand "Fair Chase" (*see box 3*) as a method of acting - as a normative set of formal and informal rules - which impose upon the hunter certain restraints. They ensure, that personal and communal objectives to enhance and protect nature as a whole, are safeguarded, and that the quality of the hunting experience is be enhanced.

Philosophical dissertations and subdued conversations around the campfire have dealt with hunting and how it should be practiced. There are many passionate advocates of hunting and nowadays at least as many passionate and sometimes hateful adversaries. The topics span a broad spectrum from economic and scientific considerations to religious, cultural and life-style aspects. These discussions are often burdened with emotions and intolerance.

Box 3

Some suggest that Fair Chase entails the same elements of chance and/or risk for the hunter and the hunted. Others maintain that Fair Chase is a consensual contest in which each participant has the rightful claim to be treated equally. According to these definitions, hunting, as it has been practiced for thousands of years, is inherently unfair towards the animal, due to the superior intelligence and methods of (and applied by) the human hunter!

Fair Chase Hunting cannot be interpreted as an equality of risk and chance, neither an informed and consensual contest. The human hunter consciously enters into a predator/prey relationship with the hunted animal, because the experience of the hunt important and valuable to the hunter. Unlike today's urbanized society, who has forgotten the life-death relationship which is the essence of food procurement, the hunter willingly experiences this relationship first hand. The understanding and the respect of the human hunter for his prey and the emphasis on sustainability are the main distinguishing factor from the non-human predator!

Ethical hunting is therefore neither immoral nor unfair.

Humanity's common objective of biodiversity conservation should actually dictate that hunters and non-hunters of today's global society enter into a civilized dialogue, and show tolerance and understanding for each other. Only a broad-based conservation alliance will be biodiversity's and ultimately humanity's salvation. Dialogue and compromise are essential! Although I would dearly like to include all sectors of society in this dialogue, it seems to be very difficult to engage into a democratic debate with certain minuscule sectors. These vociferous minorities are intolerantly bent to impose their views on society. Emotional and sensational news from this sector are unfortunately given high exposure in the media. Sensational news score better than dry scientific facts. It is unfortunate that the public uncritically consumes such news – and that the hunters, as a seriously affected party, react with too little, too late.

“Why do you hunt?” – This is usually the standard opening question in a conversation between a hunter and a non-hunter. This simple question hides some pitfalls. It is indeed a rare occasion that the hunter replies with, *“because it's fun!”* or *“because I enjoy it!”* Mountaineers or offroaders would be permitted to give that answer, in many cases even anglers would get by. Hunters certainly not - since one tacit agreement exists - hunting is neither fun nor play!

Why do you hunt? Why do you hunt? You hunt!? ... These are just some examples, where the non-hunter's emphasis will prescribe the course of the conversation. And the conversation could culminate – after the hunter's response – ... *“and that is why you kill animals?!”*

Of course the conversation could go into different directions – the hunter's tales about journeys to unfamiliar lands and experiences with people and nature far from the well-trodden paths of “normal” ecotourism could raise interest. Most likely, however, the hunter will be looked at as a representative of an unfathomable minority; in our urban environment, as an exotic specimen who kindles in the best case a lack of understanding or in the worst case open aversion.

The topic “hunting” polarizes! It arouses emotions and the “know-everything-better” representatives of varying pseudo-environmental and political denominations use it as fertile ground. Their contributions are usually not tempered by the most basic conservation knowledge. Conversations tend to end in open disagreement. Unfortunately the media in their reporting about hunting aim rather for sensationalism than for factual investigation. It follows that the “know-everything-better” representatives feel secure with a perceived broad moral back-up and the knowledge of an – albeit vague and purely emotional - disapproval of hunting. Quite often social envy also plays a role, since they portray hunting usually as a pastime of the more affluent sector of society.

The argumentation of animal rights activists is feeding on this variety of ethical, pseudo-environmental and political arguments. A favourite is the alleged guilt of hunters for the extinction of species. Female anti-hunters seem to ride often on a rather obscure mixture of sexism, machismo and bloodlust. The hunters' right to bear firearms is conveniently considered an anachronism at best or a provocation at worst. Feel-good-artists invoke the “large eyes and round face” syndrome, and deplore the insensitive killing of poor sentient animals, conveniently forgetting their last supper of roast beef, their latest car with leather upholstery, the lounge suite of rare mahogany and poached lobsters of their beach holiday! And, why do they exterminate rats in their houses ... maybe because rats are less sentient than elephants?

Furthermore, romanticized ecotourism despite of large scale commercialisation – along with the “Disneyization” of nature - have led the uncritical observer to overlook the hard necessities of conservation.

The ultimate consequence of all the arguments against hunting aims at the “act of killing”. Killing is considered a taboo in western culture – since society has successfully achieved to eliminate almost any association with it. Just look at the clinically clean presentation of animal protein at supermarkets! But, that society runs feature movies on prime time TV – with children watching – where killing, mutilation, blood and guts are main ingredients. Do I detect some hypocrisy here?

Fortunately, I perceive the “silent majority” of society neither for nor against hunting. However, the hunters must finally make concerted efforts to transform neutrality into informed tolerance. Hunting is yet surrounded too much by an aura of the inexplicable and even secrecy.

Hunters argue that hunting is as old as humanity – but in reality hunting is much older. It forms the instinctual basis of existence of many life forms past and present. In its uniquely anthropocentric form it is part of human nature and culture. Human hunters stood in the dawn of human existence and started the process of cultural development of the human race.

When he releases the deadly bullet and takes that final decision over life or death the hunter is always alone. In this decisive second nobody exercises control over him, nobody gives him advice and nobody can help! The hunter is obviously elated with the result of a successful hunt. This success is usually determined by the death of an animal. Without pursuing that final result, hunting would not be hunting, and without achieving it, its functions in conservation could not be fulfilled. But is game merely a target? Game deserves better, hunters deserve better and our culture demands better. The hunting experience is of essence - Ortega y Gasset aptly describes this as “we do not hunt to kill, but we kill to have hunted”. It is essential that we neither shame the hunter nor the hunted.

Box 4

There are some activities that are clearly unfair as well as unethical. At the top of the list is shooting captive or domesticated big game animals in commercial killing areas where a person with a gun is guaranteed an animal to shoot. These shooting grounds are alien to any consideration of ethical hunting

Fundamental to ethical hunting is the idea of Fair Chase addressing the balance between the hunter and the hunted. It is a balance that allows hunters to occasionally succeed while the animals generally avoid being taken

Aldo Leopold – a celebrated American hunter-conservationist – made a statement which I paraphrased into an African context. In connection with the “canned” lions, “put & take” shooting (*see box 4*), genetic and dietary manipulations to produce “trophies”, etc., Leopold’s statement becomes quite significant. “[They] are too busy to produce something to shoot at, to worry too much about the cultural values of the shooting”. Along that line of thought we can say that the hunter only thinking about the product (trophy) misses out on the process (hunting)!

In the 21st century untouched nature does not exist anymore; untold generations have altered natural patterns. A burgeoning African population has high demands for arable land and the remaining havens of wilderness are surrounded by a human sea, often enclosed by high fences. Soil, plants and wildlife in finite protected areas and on private land cannot survive without human management; any other notion will not hold up to scientific evidence and must be relegated into the realm of utopian dreams. Conservation organizations like WWF-SA and EWT, and most of the sovereign states have recognized this fact years ago. The *World Conservation Union (IUCN)* and its *Policy Statement on Sustainable Use of Wild Living Resources* provided the blueprint. Based on these premises, the sustainable consumptive and non-consumptive utilisation of nature has found entrance in our South African Constitution. Hunters should be proud in the knowledge that they recognized the importance of sustainable utilisation and wildlife management resources much earlier

The hunters' competent interactions (*see box 5*) with conservation organizations are of critical importance and will serve to measure the acceptance of hunting in society. There is no better way to convince the non-hunters, than to interact with them, showing commitment, dedication and competence. Hunters, as partners in wildlife conservation, can indeed contribute to the sustainable and ethical use of natural resources.

Box 5

The Basis for Hunting is Conservation

- Hunters harvest those species which permit sustainable utilisation
- Hunters strive for an equilibrium between wildlife and habitat
- Hunters accept responsibility for non-game animals and their habitat
- Hunters are actively engaged in nature conservation and if necessary, the protection of species

Hunters Observe a Code of Ethics

- Hunters respect the Rules of Fair Chase
- Hunters respect and obey all laws of the land
- Hunters set high ethical parameters and strive for excellence in the field
- Hunters ensure humane practises in the harvesting of wildlife
- Hunters constantly hone their skills

Hunters & Hunting Project a Positive Image

- Hunters are reliable and competent partners of the public and conservation organisations
- Hunters respect the needs and requirements of other citizens for enjoyment of nature
- Hunters cooperate with indigenous rural communities and support their right to the sustainable use of nature
- Hunters inform the public and the media of their objectives and about their problems, solutions and achievements