The Ethics of Hunting

CAN WE HAVE OUR ANIMAL ETHICS AND EAT THEM TOO?

By Michael P. Nelson, Ph.D., and Kelly F. Millenbah, Ph.D.

A great challenge confronts the wildlife community. So does a great opportunity. In 1923, Aldo Leopold observed that "one cannot round out a real understanding [of conservation] without likewise considering its moral aspects" (Leopold 1923). The moral aspect, or ethics, of hunting is the subject of one of the most persistent debates within the conservation community. Eighty-six years after Leopold's writing, The Wildlife Society's leadership continues to call for a meaningful discussion on the moral aspects of hunting (Svedarsky *et al.* 2008, Hutchins 2008). In that interim, little serious work has been accomplished in the field of wildlife ethics (Vucetich and Nelson 2007). Apparently it is difficult to even begin.

To date, the literature on both sides of the stalemated dispute over whether hunting is ethical is dominated by sloppy reasoning and tired, Nugent-esque rhetoric (Dizard 2003). Those who actively oppose hunting seem, at times, to function in an ecological vacuum—either denying that life necessitates death or suggesting that humans are not natural beings. Those who actively support hunting sometimes do so by forwarding incomplete and unpersuasive arguments, or by denying living creatures the moral relevance demanded by the general public. In the debate over the ethics of hunting, dialogue has been replaced by dogmatism, honesty by hostility, and progress by platitudes.

A serious and rigorous conversation regarding the direct moral standing of non-human animals began in the mid-1970s (Singer 1975). When confronted with articulate and reasoned arguments from animal welfare ethicists, those interested in defending hunting have three choices (although normally only the first two are exercised). First, some individuals might acquiesce, admit that hunting is fundamentally incompatible with the direct moral standing of non-human animals, and stop hunting. Such conversions happen; this might explain some of the loss of active hunters and some of the difficulty recruiting new ones.

Second, some might fight to deny non-human animals direct moral standing. This route typically begins by mischaracterizing animal welfare arguments (e.g., suggesting animal welfarists believe all farm animals should be released into the wild) then readily swatting down a straw man. Along the way attacks focus on people or organizations instead of arguments; evoke false dichotomies between reason and emotion; and lazily brandish science as a shield, forgetting that the other side backs their arguments with science as well. Advocates of hunting may find themselves defending immoral hunters or employing arguments to defend hunting that the public does not accept and they themselves do not really believe.

This second option, of bolstering hunting supporters by tearing down animal welfare arguments, is perhaps the usual route, given that many individuals view animal welfare ethics as a major threat to hunting. Yet there are reasons to think this line of defense is not preferable, not the least of which might be that one may knowingly embrace an immoral position. More provocatively, the assumed tension between animal ethics and hunting might be false. There is, for instance, good reason to believe some of hunting's own codes of conduct—most notably the ethic of "clean kill"—presuppose that animals matter, that their moral standing is greater than zero.

There is, however, a third option. Wildlife professionals and hunters could recognize the direct moral standing of animals and work to unite this recognition with the possibility of hunting and eating animals. This route assumes that the idea of animals having direct moral standing is compatible with hunting. We are told repeatedly, and we seem to believe, that respect and killing are incompatible. But are they? There are reasons to be suspicious of this assumed conflict.

For one, those who defend hunting may not fully understand the objections of those we label "anti-hunter." When pressed, what many, though certainly not all, so-called anti-hunters oppose is not hunting *per se*, but what they see as a lack of humility and respect (Dizard 2003). They want the hunter to honestly signal that the taking of an animal's life is a serious matter. The desire for this recognition,

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and the objection to its perceived absence, is not the same as being anti-hunter. One arguably signals just the opposite if one proposes that the lives of animals are morally irrelevant. Additionally, many so-called anti-hunters are reluctant to reject certain hunting traditions, most notably aboriginal subsistence hunting. This suggests a belief that in certain circumstances hunting can be an ethical undertaking. Finally, many people can imagine instances where certain forms of human euthanasia in certain extreme circumstances would be an appropriate, perhaps even morally noble, action (although still very difficult and tragic). While no one is suggesting an equivalency between hunting and euthanasia, this willingness to meld respect with killing in the human realm demonstrates the raw possibility of such a melding.

Instead of digging in and doing battle with animal welfare ethicists, this third alternative suggests the challenge lies in articulating a position that unites hunting with respect for life in its many forms. A system where animals are respected but not hunted seems unacceptable to some in the wildlife community, while a system where animals are hunted but not respected seems unacceptable to nearly everyone. The challenge is to answer the question: Can we both respect and hunt animals? Can we have our animal ethics and eat them too?

Food for Thought

It seems at least plausible that hunters can grant animals direct moral standing and still hunt and eat them, at least hunt them in a certain way and eat them in certain circumstances. It also, however, seems clear that such a system would look different than what we have today. A serious discussion on the ethics of hunting would take up the question, "What would hunting look like if we granted animals direct moral standing?"

Such a discussion would have several pre-requisites. It requires honesty of a profound type: intellectual honesty, or the willingness to make up one's mind according to the facts and the rules of formal logic rather than according to what one believed prior to beginning rigorous ethical exploration. In any earnest conversation about the ethics of hunting, prior assumptions would always be negotiable. We would wonder and think hard about the role hunting might or might not play in wildlife management, we would wonder and think hard about our ideas of hunting's rewards and successes, we would wonder and think hard about the role of hunting in a society decently respectful of the environment.

A mature, rigorous, honest discussion on the ethics of hunting requires that we engage in a discourse well outside our range of experience, training, and, perhaps most important, comfort. Much natural resource training at the university and professional levels seems to avoid or gloss over ethical discourse. Leopold (1949) warned that such avoidance, "our attempt to make conservation easy," is precisely what can make it "trivial." To the degree the wildlife community begins to take philosophy and ethics more seriously, both as a realm of expertise that can be acquired and as a critical dimension of wildlife conservation, many elements of wildlife conservation and management would look different. One noticeable example would be a radical change in the education of young wildlife professionals. Undergraduate and graduate wildlife education would include courses and faculty specializing in environmental ethics. The wildlife community should welcome this, as has the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University. In 1954, on the pages of *The Journal of Wildlife Management*, noted conservationist Olaus Murie urged exactly this: "Our training in the universities should be such that we do not come out pretty good technicians but philosophical illiterates."

To elevate the level of discourse on the ethics of hunting, the task ahead is to meld the philosophers' sophisticated grasp of ethics with the wildlife ecologists' real-world and empirical knowledge. Certainly this conversation will be weird and uncomfortable at times. Wildlifers may have to think carefully and critically about sacred cows. Are animal welfare advocates really enemies or are they possibly allies? How and in what way does hunting really serve conservation and game management? How do wildlife professionals address the inherently normative concepts that are central to wildlife ecology—concepts such as overpopulation, health, carrying capacity, or terms that employ the word "significant" as in evolutionarily significant units or significant portion of its range? Given the limited progress in the debate over the ethics of hunting, we can no longer afford to avoid such discomfort. It is hard to imagine a more appropriate way to honor the legacy of Aldo Leopold and Olaus Murie. ■

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