



CONSERVATION MATTERS™

with Shane Mahoney

A LIFE UNCAGED

Shane Mahoney is considered to be one of the leading international authorities on wildlife conservation. A rare combination of historian, scientist, and philosopher, he brings a unique perspective to wildlife issues that has motivated and inspired audiences around the world. Named one of the 10 Most Influential Canadian Conservationists by Outdoor Canada Magazine and nominated for Person of the Year by Outdoor Life Magazine, he has received numerous awards including the Public Service Award of Excellence from the government of Newfoundland and Labrador and International Conservationist of the Year from Safari Club International. Born and raised in Newfoundland, he brings to his writings and lectures a profound commitment to rural societies and the sustainable use of natural resources, including fish and wildlife.

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We are all hunters at some level, requiring and taking, as we do, renewable living resources from the earth. Yet, as hunters, we frequently encounter friends and acquaintances who express genuine discomfort with the prospect of harvesting wild animals.

They are not, necessarily, anti-hunting in their views but they are often critical of the photographs hunters share; and they can find it difficult to understand how someone can find any satisfaction in an activity that results in the taking of an animal's life. While I understand and do not criticize friends, or anyone else, for feeling this way, nor for choosing not to participate in hunting, I believe it is important to engage in debate when such reactions lead to broader accusations that condemn hunting as cruel and without conservation or social value.

While many hunters I know prefer to avoid such discussions, I don't feel this way. I believe we should and must debate hunting's place in modern society and doing so requires challenging ourselves, certainly; but it also involves challenging erroneous assumptions the public may hold concerning conservation and about animal life and death...especially in the wild. The purpose of doing so is not to condemn the views of others but to ensure that our discussions of humanity's place in nature are based on some level of common understanding.

One argument I frequently encounter is that wild animals, as distinct from domestic species, presumably, should be left alone to experience a natural death, meaning one not mediated directly by a human being. Leaving aside that modern humans have been hunting to sustain themselves for some 60,000 years, that as many as 2.7 trillion(!) wild fish and as many as 167 billion farmed fish die to feed us every year and that over 52 billion domestic hogs, chickens, goats, sheep and cattle are slaughtered annually, this modern impression often conveys that death *in nature* is somehow less traumatic or more peaceful because it is "natural". So, compared to what, I ask? Domestic animal slaughter? International fisheries harvesting? It is all rather confusing.

This belief in the beauty of natural death can stem from a tenuous understanding of natural world realities, where one imagines an idyllic environment in which

animals live and die peacefully, undisturbed by the destructive and perverse forces of humanity. Such a view conveys the false impression that life and death in nature are peaceful undertakings. Having spent thirty years as a research biologist in a variety of natural settings to observe, track, and understand the dynamics of wildlife populations – and, yes, to hunt also - I can assure you that nature is anything but peaceful. On the contrary, nature is wild and chaotic, dangerous and uncertain in every regard, a place where animals constantly hunt for food, safety and reproductive opportunities. They must continually be on guard for predators, competitors and adverse weather. A rich experience no doubt; an extraordinary pageant of beauty no question; but it is neither Edenic nor safe, and peacefulness is, at best, a passing, tenuous thing.

When the end arrives for an animal in the wild, it is almost always a violent and painful process, often drawn out, agonizing, and difficult to watch. Predators are relentless, ruthless, and designed to inflict trauma on their prey. Concern for the suffering of their prey was not part of the carnivore's evolutionary menu and their feeding etiquette demonstrates this emphatically. Killing occurs in whatever fashion is possible. There are no criteria, no bad practices, no holds barred. For many others in the wild, death may come from wounds inflicted by a rival male or from a slow, drawn out ordeal due to accident or disease. Few in nature die of old age, in their sleep. There are no front porches and easy chairs in nature...ever.

When you compare this death to that experienced during most hunting expeditions, the difference is stark and

measurable. Just like many of our non-hunting neighbors, hunters, too, feel a fascination, empathy and respect for animals, and, unlike nature's predators, no responsible hunter wants or allows their prey to suffer. On the contrary, hunters take every possible measure to ensure that the hunted animal, often unaware of even our presence, dies a quick, humane death. When this does not occur, it is within our ethics and laws to not let the injured animal escape but to direct our energies to ensuring that we quickly end any and all suffering. Hunted animals, it may honestly be said, generally die very quickly, having lived a natural life, unconfined and free. And, in the vast, vast majority of cases, hunted animals are consumed as food. They are not wasted or frivolously taken.

When we assess it from this perspective, arguments regarding the inhuman(e) nature of human hunting fall somewhat short. Of all hunting species, surely, we are the most caring. So then, why do such arguments persist? At issue is a profound and far-reaching misconception; that humans somehow exist outside of nature. And it is this misunderstanding of human existence that perpetuates an idea of nature being something that requires unremitting protection from human influence. It's as though our species appeared only to shatter a perfectly balanced and harmonious natural world, of which we were never truly a part. Thus, it is not that animals die, nor that they may die horribly by other means, that is really in debate. It is the fact that humans are doing the harvesting. This is what hunting opponents really oppose.

Let us be frank and acknowledge that humans have seriously disrupted and disfigured this world and that we bear a unique



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responsibility to safeguard nature in responsible ways. This does not, however, I argue, require us to deny our own animal nature.

Humans are warm-blooded, omnivorous mammals. We and our hominid ancestors having been consuming meat for millions of years. True, modern humans differ from most other mammals in our use of symbolic thinking (as far as we know) but, otherwise, we have the same basic needs and urges as all animals. Our participation in the hunting odyssey is far from unnatural or an aberrant assault on the natural world. It is, instead, a natural expression of our legitimate role in the circle of life. Such direct engagement is not for everyone. And, it is true, of course, that unlike other meat-eating mammals, most humans today do not need to engage in hunting directly in order to meet our food requirements. Therefore, it is not so difficult to understand why non-hunters may view hunting as unnecessary and the death that results as frivolous. But let us explore why hunting is no longer essential for most human beings, because this certainly has not resulted in an end to animal death, though it undoubtedly has led to a different life for the animals which now replace the wild others we once more directly depended upon.

More than 90% of people in the US and Canada consume meat. The vast majority of us acquire this food by perusing the aisles of our local grocery store, where we can easily select from a variety of fresh or frozen cuts of meat that have been conveniently packaged and labeled. The plastic-wrapped morsel we present at the check-out is so far removed from the sentient life it once represented that we can almost forget we are eating meat at all. The animal has become a mere commodity, objectified to the point of being unrecognizable. In fact, many – if not most – people scarcely take the time to

consider what they are really purchasing and if they do, please notice, it is not cow, but beef; and not pig, but pork. These are commodity names that make it easier to forget that a living creature died to feed us. But, most importantly, if the grocery meat hunter peaked behind the curtain and traced how their cut of meat actually made its way into their basket, what would they see? Would it be the humane “alternative” to hunting reasonable critics would seek?

As in most countries, the majority of meat consumed in the US and Canada is produced through industrial farming practices, primarily focusing on chickens, pigs and cattle. These farms are usually filled to capacity, leaving little, if any, space for animals to roam or explore. For pigs and chickens, especially, their lives are often terribly confined with little or no contact at all with the outside world. The animals are typically fed a dull, fixed diet that little resembles what their wild counterparts would consume. This fare often includes a cocktail of antibiotics and growth hormones, designed to ensure quick, effective growth so that animals can be harvested at the earliest possible point in order to maximize economic yields. And, let me be quick to add the following. The sheer scale of production required to meet consumer demand for animal protein, which is increasing worldwide, severely constrains the options available to domestic meat producers. Nevertheless, if one wishes to speak of evidence of humans establishing and perpetuating dominance and control over other animal species and undertaking an unnatural role in animal death, our current domestic meat production systems would provide a much stronger example than our sustainable hunting practices.

We all understand that death is part of life, a reality each of us must face in our own lives, and in the lives of those individual

animals who have come to especially matter to us, such as the dogs, cats and others who share in our lives and homes. However, hopefully like most people, however, I am much more concerned with how I live day-to-day than I am about my eventual demise. This is also the lens I apply in my attitudes and empathy towards other animals, wild and domesticated. When I choose to consume meat, I want to know that the animal harvested benefited from a life that enabled them to roam free and enjoy the wild experiences to which they are adapted. Yes; that they have enjoyed their lives! We all revel in nature. Why would we think this different for other species? That this cannot always be the case is something we have to accept for many domesticated animals; striving to attain this, however, for even these species has been a major influence in revising and improving modern animal husbandry practices. But for wild animals...living wild *is* the case; and their death from hunting in no way impairs or imperils this reality. When we speak of animal welfare, wildness should be listed as the perfection we seek.

When I engage in hunting activities, I interact with nature in a manner that is not in any way inconsistent with my

evolutionary history. It is little wonder that it entails and delivers a sense of satisfaction on many different levels. I, too, am adapted to nature. Furthermore, my investment in hunting, and my interest in seeing it preserved for future generations helps to ensure the protection of those lands that wildlife, of all kinds, require. Through this, and my reliance, as far as possible, on wild meat, I am taking at least one small but effective step towards ensuring that even more wilderness is not lost to provide the animal protein we seek, through industrial processes that inevitably reduce the wildness of animal lives, as well as our own. And seeking wildness is a very human thing to do; losing it is a large part of the modern malaise.

Ultimately, I feel much more comfortable choosing the exceptional gift of a harvested wild animal, and in taking responsibility for its death, than lifting a disguised chunk of packaged meat from a grocery store freezer. I prefer this, not because I do not like domestic meats, but because I know the wild animal lived the kind of life I would have chosen: a life uncaged.

The Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia (GOABC) continues to foster a fundamental shift among hunters from caring about hunting to caring about all wildlife. Ranchers care about cattle and anglers care about fish, but hunters are concerned for all animals and their well-being. Hunters are committed to the responsible use of wildlife resources and passionate about preserving a diversity of wildlife species. GOABC is a strong supporter of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which stipulates that law and science should manage wildlife. This model is the result of hunters and anglers who were dedicated to conservation. As anti-hunting pressure becomes louder, it becomes increasingly important to continue and enhance the legacy of the hunter-conservationist.

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