

Robert W. Loftin, "The Morality of Hunting,"  
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 Fall, 1984, pp. 241-250.

Loftin's main concern is to defend sports hunting on utilitarian grounds. He also discusses subsistence hunting and commercial hunting.

Commercial hunting is found to be objectionable because it often leads to the extinction or near-extinction of a species. There are numerous examples of this. The giant herds of bison were killed off by hide hunters; passenger pigeons were exterminated by hunters who sold them as hog feed, as feathers for bedding, or as live targets for trap shooting; ivory-billed woodpeckers were killed merely to produce taxidermical curiosities.

This objection does not apply to subsistence hunting or sports hunting. These practices do not usually lead to the extinction of a species; on the contrary, the sports hunter or subsistence hunter needs to preserve a species so that they can continue to kill individual members of the species.

Loftin agrees with Singer that subsistence hunting can be justified on utilitarian grounds. There are still a few Indians and Eskimos who live by hunting and fishing, and if they are not allowed to continue, they will lose their culture and their traditional way of life. But this loss of culture and way of life will cause more pain and suffering than the suffering of the animals killed. So from a utilitarian point of view, the subsistence hunting of Eskimos and others should be allowed.

Loftin's main concern, however, is with sports hunting. Unlike Singer, he thinks that it can be justified on utilitarian grounds. But he admits that there is a very serious moral objection to this practice, and that is

that there is an inevitable infliction of severe pain and prolonged suffering upon animals who are not immediately killed, but who are crippled by hunters and left to die. For example, consider this factual item cited by Loftin: "A biologist in Utah examined the bodies of 358 unrecovered deer. He found many more fawns and does than bucks. It is clear that there is a very strong tendency to let illegal or undesirable cripples go." (Footnote, p. 245)

Despite this very serious objection to sports hunting, Loftin thinks that it still can be justified by two arguments, an overpopulation argument and a replaceability argument. The overpopulation argument goes like this: "Unless animals are hunted they will breed to excess and overpopulate the range beyond its carrying capacity. This will degrade the habitat through overuse and the game will be subject to starvation, parasitism, and disease inflicting an equal or greater amount of suffering on the animals." (p. 243)

Loftin accepts this argument with two reservations. First, it does not apply to game species that will *not* overpopulate such as bears, wolves, cougar, lynx, and bobcat. On Loftin's view, predators (with the possible exception of the coyote) ought never to be hunted, except in rare cases where an individual rogue poses a genuine threat to human life. Second, sports hunting does not cull the herd in the right way. Instead of killing the old, the sick, and the weak, like natural predators, human hunters often select the dominant male in the herd, the one most fit to pass along the best genes. So Loftin is opposed to trophy hunting, where the

object is to obtain some record-setting animal, e.g., a bighorn sheep with a record-setting pair of horns.

Unfortunately, Loftin overlooks the most obvious objection to the overpopulation argument, namely that there are better ways to control overpopulation than hunting. Sterilization of selected animals would do the job without the enormous pain and suffering produced by hunting. Nobody advocates hunting in order to control the overpopulation of 600 million humans in India; almost everyone will agree that some kind of birth control would be better. Why doesn't the same point apply to animals such as deer, elk, bison, and moose who are likely to overpopulate in the absence of their natural predators?

The second argument used by Loftin is a version of Singer's "replaceability argument." In its original form, the argument was that the suffering and loss of life of one animal is morally acceptable if the animal killed is replaced by another animal. Loftin wants to apply this argument to hunting: "I want to extend the replaceability argument by pointing out that in ethical hunting, according to the best modern standards, not only are individual game animals replaced by others of their own species, but habitat set aside for them benefits other species which are not hunted." (p. 249)

But how does shooting an individual animal, say a duck, lead to the creation of another duck? The shooting itself does not do this, but according to Loftin it indirectly leads to the production of another duck because the hunter makes financial contributions for habitat preservation.

Even assuming that the replacement takes place as Loftin says it does, the argument is still unconvincing. In Singer's original version of the argument, happy chickens were *painlessly* killed and replaced by more happy chickens. But in Loftin's version, animals are painfully killed or crippled. (The so-called "ethical hunting" that Loftin has in mind involves obeying game laws, and not killing animals painlessly.) Instead of a cycle of happy lives, as in Singer's argument, we instead have a cycle of unhappy lives, lives cut short by a violent and painful death. Surely it would be better from a utilitarian point of view if the animals had normal lives and were not shot and killed.

But what about the alleged good side effect of a habitat being set aside for other animals who are not hunted? In the first place, it is not clear that this effect results solely from the contributions of hunters. After all, there are plenty of others who want to preserve natural habitats besides hunters, e.g., hikers and bird-watchers. Besides, the contribution that hunters make to environmental conservation has to be balanced against the bad side effects of hunting. There is the enormous pain and suffering of the animals. Every year many hunters are themselves killed or injured accidentally; they kill non-game animals such as cows; they trespass on private property; they accidentally shoot non-hunters; and so on. All things considered, it seems that an honest utilitarian ought to conclude that sports hunting is morally unacceptable because the bad consequences outweigh the good consequences.